

Maid ORDER BRIDE

HOME IS WHERE
THE HEART IS
COLLECTION
16 BOOK BOX SET

Emma Ashwood

THE CHARMED BRIDE

A BRIDE FULL OF KINDNESS

ANGEL'S HEART

GRACE'S HEART

FATHER'S HEART

THE SCOUNDREL'S BRIDE

FINDING A BROTHER FOR JESSICA

ALWAYS AND FOREVER

THE WIDOW'S FATE

THE ORPHAN'S TALE

BLESSINGS FOR THE NEW BRIDE

THE UNWANTED BRIDES SAVOR

THE CHARITABLE BRIDE

CLEMENTINE'S CHOICE

FINDING A BRIDE FOR THE COWBOY

THE FROXYNISS

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS
COLLECTION



OceanofPDF.com

EMMA ASHWOOD

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

The Charmed Bride
A Bride Full of Kindness
Angel's Heart
Grace's Heart
Faith's Heart
The Scoundrel's Bride
Finding a Brother for Jessica
Always & Forever
The Widow's Fate
The Orphan's Tale
Blessings for the New Bride
The Unwanted Bride's Savior
The Charitable Bride
Clementine's Choice
Finding a bride for the cowboy
The Frozen Kiss

Also by Emma Ashwood

OceanofPDF.com

THE CHARMED BRIDE



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



“*Y*our beauty and grace charms them all,” Matthew Burns whispered into Isabella’s ear.

A blush colored her cheeks as she batted her lashes at her fiancé. “Matthew, you’re too kind.”

Isabella Grace tilted her face slightly, just enough for her jawbone to appear elegant and her eyes mysterious yet engaging. As a socialite of Boston society, she had been trained to charm, entertain, delight and engage with society since she could remember.

She had long since mastered the art of conversation, subdued flattery and, of course, gossip. Few people understood the importance of gossip in the high circles of society. Isabella didn’t think of it as gossip, she thought of it as staying well informed.

Heaven forbid she join someone for afternoon tea who had just been excommunicated from society the week before. It would harm her reputation and definitely force her down on the rungs of the social ladder.

Matthew smiled at her with pride in his eyes. Their courtship had started off as a strategic move by both, but it no longer was. Instead, Isabella had fallen head over heels in love with her fiancé.

With Matthew the sole inheritor of the Burns fortune and Isabella the only daughter of David and Elizabeth Grace, it was a match that made society

envious.

Together they had come to be the most beautiful and most powerful couple in the rings of young Boston society. They were invited to every important dinner, tea and luncheon. Their opinions were sought after and their company highly valued.

It was all Isabella had dreamed of for as long as she could remember.

While she had attended finishing school she had prepared herself for this. The few times she had complained about the rigid schedule of music, language and finishing lessons, her mother had reminded her that her hard work would one day pay off.

As she stood in the drawing room of the wealthiest family in Boston, with the elite of society mulling about after an exquisite dinner, Isabella smiled knowing that her hard work had definitely paid off.

“I actually feel sorry for them,” Matthew mumbled under his breath.

Isabella turned to him with a frown. “Matthew, why would you say that? To whom are you referring?”

Matthew shrugged. “Most of them, perhaps all of them. We’re young, wealthy, in love, and we have the world at our feet.”

Isabella chuckled softly. “We do have the world at our feet, don’t we?”

“Definitely, my sweet. Now we just need to convince Mother to give her blessing for a wedding.” Matthew sighed and shook his head.

Isabella frowned. “Convince? I thought your mother liked me?”

Matthew laughed. “Isabella, the look of insecurity on your face, it’s priceless. Of course Mother adores you, it’s all about timing. Mother wants to make sure our wedding is the social event of the decade. Before she will give her blessing for us to set a date she wants to make sure that everyone who is anyone is available to attend. She wants to invite the mayor, perhaps even the governor. Then of course there is her niece who is sister to the president...”

Isabella felt her smile broaden all the more. “With a guestlist like that, it is going to be the wedding of a decade indeed. Just be sure to give me enough

time to secure my wedding dress. Gabrielle mentioned a designer in Paris who makes wedding dresses unlike any you've ever seen."

"A wedding dress from Paris. Seems to me my future bride is going to be the envy of every bride for the rest of the year." Matthew smiled approvingly.

"Of course. My mother didn't raise me to be anything less," Isabella said with a smile.

"Then of course there is the venue. Would we be hosting the occasion in town or at your estate in the country?" Isabella asked curiously.

"The estate, definitely. We'll make a weekend of it. There is more than enough room on the estate for all our guests. We'll spoil them with delicacies from around the world and enchant them with our true love," Matthew said dramatically.

Isabella's cheeks hurt from smiling, but how could she not smile when it was all so exciting. It didn't for one second occur to her that she was more excited about the wedding than, spending the rest of her life with Matthew.

"Matthew, Isabella. How good of you to come. Have you set a date for the wedding yet?" their host asked as he approached.

Matthew shook his head. "Not just yet. We're debating on a weekend over the summer, but you know how it is, business comes first."

"Of course, of course. But if I were you, I'd hurry. Saw more than one man here tonight wishing he was in your place by Isabella's side," the man warned with a teasing smile.

Matthew nodded. "In that case, I think it's best if I whisk her away before she's charmed by someone else."

"Thank you for dinner. It was truly wonderful and the dinner party, unlike any I've been before." Isabella held out her hand for her host to kiss before she turned to Matthew with a smile.

"Thank you, for everything. Have a good evening," Matthew greeted their host before he slipped Isabella's arm through his elbow and led her towards the door. When they climbed into the black coach, Matthew turned to her

with a curious look. “You do realize you always say that?”

Isabella laughed and smiled at her fiancé. “That’s what keeps them issuing invitations. Charm the host, compliment the hostess and flatter the cook.” Isabella shrugged as if it was common knowledge.

“Your mother did raise you to know everything, didn’t she?” Matthew chuckled.

Isabella thought of her mother, Elizabeth Grace, and smiled. “Everything important.”

Isabella knew that wealth couldn’t buy you everything, but her family didn’t want for anything.

Not even love.

Because Isabella had learned early on that if you had enough money and a high standing in society, love would follow.

Which is how Matthew Burns had followed her home one night and asked her to join him for lunch the following day.

It was a charmed life.

It was here.

CHAPTER 2



“*Y*ou must be very excited?” Gabrielle Petit asked with her bubbly French accent.

Isabella nodded eagerly. “Very much so. Matthew’s mother has chosen the perfect date. There will be no society weddings in the weeks before or after our wedding. More than enough time for the guests to become excited and the bask in the afterglow of our wedding.”

“Your wedding is going to be the conversation of every luncheon and dinner for years to come. I just know it.” Gabrielle’s smile lit up the room, just like her vibrant personality.

When the French socialite had first arrived in Boston with her family, most of the ladies of society had ignored her. Just to be different, Isabella had invited Gabrielle over for tea. Soon they had become the best of friends. Isabella loved that Gabrielle had insights into European fashion, European aristocracy, and if she had to be honest, she loved that her friendship with the French socialite helped her up another few rungs on the social ladder.

“I hope so, but that’s not why you’re here. We have serious business to discuss. If I don’t get this right I’m sure it will ruin my entire future,” Isabella said heavily, as if world hunger was on the table.

“Of course.” Gabrielle nodded with serious attention. “I have written to my friend, and he says if you send him your measurements by telegram, he

will make sure you have the most exquisite gown Boston has ever seen by the time of your wedding.”

“What about fittings and discussing the fabric I’d like?” Isabella asked a little hesitantly.

“Cherie,” Gabrielle gushed. “When it comes to fashion you don’t care about fabric and fittings. Franco knows what he’s doing. Just trust in his gift and you will be the belle of the ball at your own wedding. Ah, and there is one more thing, your father isn’t going to pay for it.”

“What?” Isabella asked, confused. “A dress from Paris made by a French designer, of course he’ll have to pay. I can’t imagine Franco works for free.”

Gabrielle blushed slightly and shook her head. “Let’s just say, Franco and I have history. He sees it as a gift to me.”

“Gabrielle, if you and Franco were courting why did you move to Boston?” Isabella asked confused.

“Who said anything about courtship. My dearest Isabella, in France love is like the air that you breathe. It’s free and doesn’t always come with commitment.”

Isabella blushed and quickly changed the subject. “There is another favor I need to ask you. Would you be my bridesmaid?”

Gabrielle jumped out of her chair and clapped her hands with glee. “Of course, it would be my honor.”

Isabella pretended to let out a sigh of relief. “Good, then everything is going to plan. I can’t believe I’m marrying Matthew Burns in five months. It’s going to be the perfect wedding and then we’re going to have the perfect life. I’m going to host dinner parties and luncheons, raise my beautiful, perfect children and keep a stylish home. I’m finally taking my place in society as the wife of a successful businessman. I never imagined it would feel this wonderful.”

Gabrielle laughed. “Or that it would make you glow with joy. Now, what color am I to wear? While Franco is at it, he might as well make me

something as well.”

Isabella thought for a moment before a smile curved her mouth. “Something peach and soft. It will complement the tone of your skin and it’s different to all the blues and pinks we’ve seen in the last few years, don’t you think?”

“Peach is perfect. As soon as I get the dress we’ll go shopping for a hat. You’ll need a veil as well,” Gabrielle reminded her.

Isabella nodded. “I will indeed. Talking about shopping, I need to start acquiring more dresses. As a wife I’ll need a wider variety of dresses for evening wear, luncheons and business dinners with Matthew. You know how the gossips begin to stammer when there is a slight chance that I might wear the same dress twice.”

“We can’t have that. Then, have you and your Mrs. Burns discussed who will be taking over managing the house staff?”

“No, not yet. I expect she’ll continue managing the staff at the brownstone here in town, but I’d like to take over the staff at the mansion. She hardly ever goes there, and I’d like it to be perfect should Matthew and I decide to escape for a weekend and perhaps invite friends.”

“How lucky you are. If only I could find myself a wealthy handsome man, I would marry him right on the spot.” Gabrielle sighed with envy.

Isabella reached for her friend’s hand. “There is always Franco.”

Both women laughed as the dust motes danced in the afternoon sun drifting through the window. Neither had ever known anything but a charmed life. Their friendship had been cemented by their wealth and had grown with their social status.

It didn’t even occur to Isabella in that moment that their friendship would ever come to an end.

Gabrielle’s expression darkened. “Did you hear about Louisa Persimmon?”

“Goodness, I know, it’s simply dreadful.” Isabella let out a heavy sigh.

“To take up employment, it’s a travesty.”

“I know. When her grandfather passed away, her father had expected the family fortune to fall to him, instead everything was bequeathed to the other brother.” Gabrielle cocked a brow of condescence. “We shouldn’t invite her to luncheons anymore.”

“Goodness, no!” Isabella smirked. “She couldn’t contribute anything to the conversation anymore. Spending her days serving other people...”

“Travesty, I tell you. And she had such a bright future ahead of her.” Gabrielle shook her head.

For a moment Isabella sympathized with their long-time friend. “I know. Like you say, it’s a travesty, but luckily not one that has befallen us.”

“And never will,” Gabrielle said firmly. “I’m my grandpapa’s favorite granddaughter.”

Isabella laughed, wondering where her friend found such confidence. Because Gabrielle Petit had it in spades.

CHAPTER 3



Isabella had never heard her parents argue.

Differences had always been discussed behind closed doors and neither Isabella nor her brother, John, had ever witnessed an argument.

That was why when Isabella heard loud voices coming from downstairs, she knew something was wrong.

Something was dreadfully wrong.

She put her book away, promising herself to return to Mr. Darcy shortly, and then she headed downstairs.

“What do you mean you invested everything?” Elizabeth asked with a horrified expression.

“I mean, that it was a good investment. The returns promised to be better than any investment before. The projections were amazing. I thought I was doing the right thing,” Davis said heavily.

Isabella stood in the door of the drawing room, wondering what was going on. Her mother stood in front of her father, her body language screaming that she was upset. Almost the way she had stood in front of Isabella and her brother when they were young and had been up to mischief.

Her father sat on the chair, his elbows on his knees and his eyes on the floor.

Isabella had never seen her parents like this and an eerie feeling crawled

up her spine.

Her father looked up and noticed her standing in the doorway. “Isabella, go to your room. Your mother and I are talking.”

Before Isabella could turn and do as she was told, her mother snapped. “No! She’ll stay. Your decision affects this whole family. I’d rather her learn the truth of what you’ve done before she hears of it through the gossip mill.”

Isabella froze in the spot, feeling uncertain and a little afraid of the situation.

“Your father lost all our money,” her mother huffed impatiently.

“I didn’t lose it, I just... The mine’s proceeds were extraordinary. How was I supposed to know it was a shallow dig? How was I supposed to know that it would dry up within months of its opening?” Davis asked irritably.

“You didn’t, that’s why you should’ve made a small investment until you knew more. Instead, you gambled all our money away on a gold mine that has run dry and we have no way to recover from it.”

“I’ll find a way. Perhaps I can sell the shafts, the buildings and the other equipment to another mine. At least that way could recuperate some of the funds I invested.”

Isabella felt her heart begin to race. She wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, except that they had lost all their money. From what she could tell her father had made a bad investment, a very bad one.

“Do we have anything left?” Isabella asked in a small voice. She suddenly remembered Louisa Persimmon and feared she would need to find gainful employment.

“We have the house, a few other small stocks and bonds, but the rest... I freed up all our investments to invest in the mine,” her father admitted heavily.

Her mother cried out with anguish, “You freed up *all* our other investments. Davis! How could you?”

“It was going to be the investment of a lifetime, Elizabeth. I honestly

thought I was doing the right thing. I thought..."

Her mother cut her father off mid-sentence. "You thought about investing *all* our money in a mine that you didn't even know much about. You didn't even discuss this with me, Davis."

"I've never discussed my investments with you. You've always been too grateful just to spend the money rather than ask where it came from," her father snapped back.

Isabella retreated.

Now that she knew the details of the argument, she couldn't stand to hear another word. Their family had always been wealthy; wealthier than most. Most of their wealth had been accumulated through her father's ruthless investments and talent for spotting new opportunities. She didn't know much about it but had overheard other men talk in the past.

Most investors admired her father.

Now he had lost everything.

She ran upstairs and closed her door behind her. Her heart was racing even as fear caused a chill down her spine. Without money, what were they going to do?

Isabella walked over to the window and saw the beautiful trees budding to life on the streets outside. A smile curved her mouth realizing that her mother was probably overreacting. Her mother had a way of overreacting unnecessarily.

A bubble of laughter escaped her when she remembered how she and her brother had once swapped out the sugar in the sugar bowl for salt. Neither had known their mother was expecting company for tea.

Their mother had scolded them about manners and the dangers of salt and how they had been irresponsible. She had gone as far as to convince them that they might have killed the unwitting guest.

That was all this was now, she convinced herself.

Her mother was overreacting, and her poor father was the one to bear the

weight of her overreaction. By tomorrow her father would have recuperated his losses and invested in a new market or mine and then all would be forgiven.

As easy as pie.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



Isabella's naïve optimism had held up for the first few weeks after her father had lost their money. She had lived in denial about the severity of their situation. She had continued to believe that her father would find a way to fix their financial problems.

It was for this reason that she didn't see any reason to change her way of life or her spending habits. She still attended luncheons with Gabrielle and dinners with Matthew.

The first time she realized her mother hadn't been overexaggerating was when Isabella had gone to the tailor to order undergarments and the proprietor had told her that their account had been suspended.

Isabella would never forget the humiliation of that moment.

The only saving grace had been that she had gone alone. If one of her shopping friends from high society had been with her, news would've reached the entire Boston by the next day.

Little by little Isabella noticed changes at home; changes that brought home just how much money they had lost. Their house servants had been reduced from twelve to only six. Their suppers no longer boasted leg of lamb and an assortment of meat dishes, instead only one protein was served per meal.

Breakfast had been reduced to fresh bread and eggs with a few

condiments.

Isabella didn't mind these changes because they weren't evident to the outside world, only to their family.

But regardless of keeping their troubles secret, Isabella had come to understand that their financial troubles weren't going to just pass in the night like a sailboat on the sea. Instead it was the topic of conversation for every meal.

Debts were discussed as well as where they could save. Isabella didn't even have the courage to tell her father about the tailor. Instead she would learn about the other bills piling up faster than her father could pay them.

There was no money for coal or for wood for the fireplaces. Isabella and her mother had taken to lap blankets like old ladies.

Her father, a once handsome man with an air of authority, had become an old man overnight, with lines fanning from his eyes. Isabella wasn't sure if it was her imagination but her father also seemed to have grayed at an unusual pace.

Her brother, John, had offered to help them with their mounting debts but John hadn't realized the severity of their debts. Even if he offered them every spare penny, they would still be in trouble.

It was for that reason that her father had refused his offer of help.

Not even Mr. Darcy could give Isabella a brief reprieve from the constant worry that had become her life.

After spending most of the day in her room, trying to think of ways to save more money, Isabella headed downstairs for dinner. As she descended the staircase, she noticed how dark the house was. A brief glance around the foyer, drawing room and dining room, revealed that they had cut down on the use of candles and lanterns as well. The chandeliers only hosted half the usual candles.

Another way to cut down on spending, Isabella thought as she joined her parents at the dining room table.

Her father sat with a glass of scotch and a pile of letters in front of him. Isabella didn't have to ask to know that those weren't letters of a good nature but rather letters of demand. They had started arriving over the last week, and every day the mail man brought a few more.

Her mother wore a worried look although she summoned a smile at the sight of Isabella. "Isabella, how was your day?"

"Good, thank you, Mother." Isabella pretended nothing was wrong as she took a seat, but the frown and gray expression on her father's face told another story altogether.

Isabella reached for her father's hand, empathizing with him. Although her mother blamed him for the bad investment, Isabella couldn't help but see how much that decision was haunting her father. He didn't need reminders of the mistake he had made; he was suffering enough.

"We'll find a way through this, Father," Isabella promised him with a hopeful smile.

Her father smiled sadly and shook his head. "If there is a way, I haven't found it."

"You will," Isabella assured him.

They dined in silence, but Isabella noticed that her father didn't touch his plate. He sat with a pen and a sheet of paper, writing down numbers. Every now and then he would scratch out a number and start a new calculation.

Isabella finished her meal and glanced at her mother who seemed just as worried as her father. "Mother, Father will fix this."

Her mother shook her head. "I don't see how, Isabella. Even if I wanted to take up employment to help your father financially, no one would hire me. I was raised to host, dress and entertain, not to work. I don't have a single skill; I can't even cook..."

"It won't come to that," her father said with a promising smile.

For a moment Isabella felt a warm calm settle over her. The Lord would help them get through this; she was sure of it.

Suddenly her father reached for his chest and cried out with pain.

“Father!” Isabella shouted rushing to his side.

His face turned red even as he struggled to gasp for a breath of air. It didn't last more than a few seconds at most before her father let out a huff and his head fell forward onto the bills on the table.

Her mother's cries filled the room, even as Isabella tried to revive her father.

An hour later the doctor declared her father dead.

Cause of death, a heart attack due to undue stress.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



Isabella stood over her father's grave dressed head to toe in black. She refused to let a single tear fall as the pastor spoke about her father's life. In the back of her mind she couldn't help but feel relieved for her father. She had seen how his bad investment had taken its toll on his health.

At least he didn't have to face the shame when news reached the rooms of society.

Her father now rested in heaven, where money, health and reputation would never affect him ever again.

But that wasn't why Isabella refused to cry over the death of her father. A single glance at her mother reminded her that she needed to remain strong. Since her father's body was removed from their home, her mother had yet to speak a single word.

It was as if her soul had completely retreated into her grief, refusing to let the world in. Her mother stood dry-eyed with a dark veil covering her face. If it hadn't been for the veil, the funeral goers might have questioned her mother's dry eyes.

John and his wife Tess stood on the other side of the grave with their baby daughter. Isabella met John's gaze briefly and saw the concern in his eyes.

Before the funeral an attorney had asked to meet with them at their home afterwards. He hadn't said much, only that there were matters to be discussed.

Isabella didn't understand John's concern, her father had passed away, surely his debts would be forgiven now?

One by one the funeral goers expressed their condolences to the Grace family before they left to continue with their day. Isabella reached for her mother's hand and found it cold and stiff. Her mother was completely unresponsive. If Isabella had cause for concern, it was for her mother. No amount of pleading had enticed her mother to speak.

Together, they all returned to the family brownstone to meet with the lawyer.

The lawyer met with them in her father's study. Tess and her daughter waited in the drawing room to give the family a little privacy.

John took the lead once the door closed behind them. "Mr. Kinney, could you tell us what this meeting is about?"

"Of course. Firstly, let me begin by expressing my condolences for your loss," Mr. Kinney said opening his leather satchel. "However, it is not good news I bring."

"What news do you bring?" John asked a little impatiently.

Mr. Kinney sighed heavily. "I'm sure you all know about the investment your father lost a little more than a month ago?"

"Yes, we know." Isabella nodded.

"Good, that will make this easier to explain. After your father lost the investment, he came to me for help. We discussed that the best option would be to borrow money against the few smaller bonds he still owned. Once those bonds showed a return, he would've paid me back. But now as your father is no longer with us, I have no choice but to call in on that loan," Mr. Kinney explained handing John a document.

"John, can he do that?" Isabella asked, horrified.

John nodded slowly. “Yes, Father signed a clause that gives Mr. Kinney permission to call in on the loan in the event of his death.”

“What does that mean?” Isabella asked fearing that they would lose more than their father today.

“It means that Father’s debts will be paid but there will be no income ever again.” John sighed and shook his head. “How do you expect my mother and sister to run a house, to live... without an income?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m sure you understand that isn’t my responsibility. Perhaps if your father had taken better care with his investments, we wouldn’t be in this situation,” Mr. Kinney shrugged. “But as it is now, all I can offer to settle all outstanding debts out of goodwill. But from today forward, your mother and sister will need to pay their own way.”

Isabella gasped. “How? We don’t have an income?”

“I’m sure you’ll find a suitable means to earn an income. The employment market is booming at the moment.”

“You expect me to get a job?” Isabella shrieked.

“I don’t see another way, I’m afraid. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have another meeting to attend.” Mr. Kinney left just as quickly as he had arrived, leaving John, Isabella and their mother alone in the study.

“Mother, what do you think you should do?” John asked.

Their mother didn’t speak or even acknowledge John. Instead she just stared straight ahead.

Isabella felt tears begin to burn her eyes, but she bit them back. “John, what are we going to do? Mother refuses to talk and I can’t work? What will I do?”

John sighed and shook his head. “We’ll figure something out. Let us not panic”

Isabella shook her head. “I’ve been not panicking since Father lost the money, I’m not sure how much longer I cannot panic.” Isabella glanced at her mother before she nodded for John to follow her out of the study.

Once they were in the hallway, Isabella stepped closer to her brother and whispered low enough for the few remaining house servants not to hear. “I’m worried about Mother, John. She’s pretending to be deaf, blind and mute. I’ve asked the doctor to see her, and he said that she’s suffering from grief.”

“She doesn’t speak at all?” John asked, surprised.

“Not a word since that night.” Isabella shook her head. She lowered her voice even more. “The doctor dared to say that grief could cause a person to become an *idiot*.”

“Nonsense! I’ll get another doctor to come by,” John insisted.

“Thank you. As for the money, the house, the servants... what will we live on?”

John sighed. “I’ll help. As much as I possibly can.”

“Thank you. Father would be proud of you,” Isabella said with a sad smile.

“I didn’t see Matthew at the funeral?” John asked curiously.

Isabella shook her head. “He had an important meeting to attend.”

“Right, we just have to tide you and Mother over until the wedding. Then you will have Matthew to care for you and I can take Mother in.” John seemed to be calculating the number of days in his mind.

“You’re right, it’s just a few months.” Isabella smiled feeling a little relieved. Once she and Matthew were married, they could sell the house and be rid of all the expenses.

CHAPTER 6



*M*atthew was coming over for dinner.

Isabella was excited to see her fiancé. It would be the first time since her father had passed. Matthew had been in meetings for the last few days and tonight was the first time he was free for her. Isabella didn't mind; she understood that when you wanted to be wealthy, business always came first.

For the occasion, she had made sure her mother was settled in her room and had enjoyed an early dinner. The last thing she needed Matthew to see tonight was how her mother had withdrawn into herself. Matthew needed to be assured that her father's passing hadn't changed anything in their relationship at all.

She wanted to enjoy a private dinner with him and dream about their future together. If anything could get her through the next few months of living sparingly, it was the hope of a bright future.

One that only Matthew could provide her with now.

She had sold one of her best dresses this morning to make sure the cook had everything she needed for an extraordinary dinner. One that would give Matthew no reason to suspect they were having financial difficulties.

No one knew better than Isabella that financial troubles could have you expelled from society faster than a wart on your face.

When the brass knocker sounded, Isabella glanced at herself one last time in the mirror before she answered the door.

“Matthew, how lovely to see you.” Isabella welcomed him with a smile.

Matthew frowned curiously. “Where is your butler, Isabella. Surely it isn’t appropriate for you to open the door.”

Isabella waved the comment away. “He is down with the flu; besides, I was excited to see you.”

Matthew shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the coat hook by the door.

Isabella led him to the dining room where a feast was waiting for them on the table. She had even insisted that all the candles in the chandelier be lit for the occasion.

While they enjoyed dinner, Matthew entertained her with recent gossip, understanding she hadn’t been very social over the last few weeks. For a short while Isabella felt as if everything would truly be alright.

Once the coffee was served they moved to the drawing room. Matthew poured himself a scotch and drank it down in one swallow before he turned to Isabella with a strange expression.

“Matthew, is something wrong?” Isabella asked, concerned.

Matthew let out a heavy sigh. “I know, Isabella. Everyone knows.”

Isabella’s heart skipped a beat as fear coursed through her veins. She summoned a quick smile and laughed. “Of course everyone knows about the wedding. The invitations are going out next month.”

“Not the wedding, Isabella, your family’s.... troubles.” Matthew poured himself another scotch.

Isabella’s eyes widened even as she feigned confusion. “What troubles?”

“Isabella, stop pretending. I know about your father’s investment, everyone in the business knows about it. I know about the lands with the lawyer, and I know that you and your mother are as good as destitute.” Matthew took a seat across from her.

Isabella let out a heavy sigh. “Matthew, it’s been such a travesty. But I know once you and I are married, this trouble will all be something of the past.”

Matthew shook his head. “Isabella, there isn’t going to be a wedding.”

“What?” Isabella was now truly confused.

“My mother insists that a wedding would be a mistake. Your family’s name has been tarnished; your reputation diminished. If we were to wed, surely you understand it would affect my place in society.”

Isabella felt anger begin to course through her veins. “Is that what your mother says? That I’m now too poor to be your wife?”

“I agree with her. Marriage should be a union of mutual benefit, not a sympathy transaction.” Matthew shrugged taking a sip of his scotch.

Isabella was on her feet, ready to defend herself. “A sympathy transaction, a union of mutual benefit. How stupid was I to believe it was a partnership of love? Do you really not have any feelings for me?”

“Isabella, please don’t be theatrical. Of course I’m fond of you, but fondness won’t repair your family’s name. The sooner I distance myself from the Grace family name, the better. I’ve been in two meetings this week in which I was questioned about our relationship. I can’t have our relationship affecting my business.”

“Then tell them to mind their own business. None of this was my fault. Why I am being punished for it?” Isabella cried out with emotion.

Matthew stood up with a look of sympathy. “Unfortunately the sins of the fathers do carry over to their children. I’m sorry it had to end this way. I’m sure you understand.”

“I don’t. In fact I don’t understand at all. Does this mean that all those pretty words and expressions of love were just an act?”

“We all do what we have to.” Matthew sighed irritably. “Go on, blow out the candles, I know you can’t afford to leave them burning, I’ll show myself out.”

Isabella nearly screamed with frustration and humiliation. “Your mother has already picked someone else for you to court, hasn’t she?”

Guilt flushed over Matthew’s face. “If you must know, I’m taking Gabrielle Petit to lunch next week.”

It was as if he had slapped her.

Over the course of dinner Isabella had not only been humiliated, insulted and betrayed, but also lost her fiancé and her best friend.

She wouldn’t even bother to ask Gabrielle’s opinion; it was clear she had already chosen which side she was going to support.

Because in Boston, society always had and always would come first.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



“Come on, Mother, we need to leave now.”

Isabella stood beside her mother in the foyer. Her heart was heavy and tears welled in her eyes, but they needed to leave.

Her mother was unmoving as she ignored Isabella’s prompt. She hadn’t yet said a word. Apart from going through the daily motions of bathing, eating and sleeping, her mother had truly become a slave to her grief.

Over the last month Isabella had tried to minimize their costs, tried to sell what she could to make up for the living costs, but the costs were simply too high. Even after letting go of all their house servants except for the cook, Isabella still couldn’t cover the costs.

The cook was necessary because neither Isabella nor her mother had ever learned to cook. Both being raised in affluent families, cooking had never been a requirement for either to learn.

The house was completely empty except for a few heirloom pieces and the beds on which they slept. Everything else had been sold.

Until there was nothing left to sell.

A week before, Isabella had gone to speak to John about her predicament. Even with the financial help John had been offering them since her father’s passing, the large brownstone with seven rooms and large grounds was simply too expensive to hold onto.

Her only choice was to let the house go.

If Isabella had thought letting go of the house would ease their financial difficulties, she had been wrong. More debts had come to light, debts that needed to be paid by the sale of the house.

It was hard to believe that a few months ago Isabella didn't have a care in the world.

She had lost her father, her wealth, her standing in society, her fiancé and her best friend and now she was losing her home as well. She didn't dare say things couldn't get worse, because these last couple of months had taught Isabella that things could always get worse.

Her saving grace was that John had invited them to stay with him and Tess. Although moving in with her brother and his family wasn't a solution in Isabella's mind, she didn't really have a choice.

Just as she had predicted, her social circle had turned their backs on her. She had seen Gabrielle and Matthew riding in his coach one afternoon and had been silly enough to wave. When they both looked the other way, Isabella had been made painfully aware that she was no longer seen as a member of the social circle.

Now she was just a poor little rich girl, with no skills or talent to gain employment, and with a mother to care for.

"Mother, we really need to go. The new owners will be arriving soon," Isabella repeated.

Her mother turned to her with a look reminiscent of the look she had looked at her father on the night he had revealed that he had lost their money. Her mother was blaming her for losing the house.

With a heavy sigh, Isabella walked out of her childhood home and climbed into the coach John had sent for them. She wouldn't let her mother blame her, not for this. There was nothing she could've done to keep the house. Perhaps if her mother had bothered to speak or to give her advice, things might have been different.

A few moments later her mother came out of the house, still wearing her grieving robes, and climbed into the coach. She cast Isabella another firm look before she looked out the window and a tear slipped over her cheek.

“I’m sorry, Mother, I just... I didn’t know what else to do,” Isabella apologized softly.

The drive to John’s brownstone across town took almost thirty-five minutes. Although her brother’s Brownstown boasted five bedrooms and a small yard, it was still much smaller than the home Isabella had just bid farewell.

John had followed in their father’s footsteps and had become an investor and stockbroker in his own right. He had made a very good life for himself and his wife, and Isabella couldn’t help but feel that she was now imposing.

Not only would John have Isabella and his mother to take care of now, but also his wife and his daughter. It wasn’t fair on John, just as it wasn’t fair on Isabella to have had to endure this change.

“Welcome!” John said waiting for them in front of his house. “Just in time for afternoon tea.”

Isabella shook her head with a sad smile. “Thank you, but I’d like to lie down. It’s been a... difficult day.”

John nodded with understanding. “I’ll have Tess show you and Mother to your rooms. The butler will take care of the luggage.”

Isabella felt relieved that at least they would again have the services of a butler, a cook and maids. It wasn’t that she minded tending to certain chores around the house, she just felt more assured when someone capable of the task attended to them instead.

She stopped in front of John and met his gaze. “Thank you, John. This won’t be permanent. I’ll find a way to contribute and to make a living for myself. I don’t expect you to care for me for the rest of your life.”

John’s eyes softened. “You’re welcome to stay for the rest of your life, as is mother. Has she...”

Isabella shook her head. “Not even a word. She’s been giving me angry looks as if it’s my fault that we lost the house.”

“It’s not your fault, Isabella. Father made a bad investment that has led to a series of events no one could’ve foreseen. Remember that. Don’t let her make you think otherwise,” John assured her.

Isabella nodded. “Maybe in time, I’ll believe that.”

She walked into her brother’s house and although she was welcomed by the servants and John’s wife, Isabella couldn’t help but feel as if she were imposing. She wasn’t a visiting guest, but a leech on her brother’s kindness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



“*D*octor?” Isabella asked the moment the doctor came out of her mother’s room.

For the last week her mother refused to leave her bed. She didn’t bathe or eat unless forced. She spent all her time staring up at the ceiling.

“Isabella, be patient, he’ll talk to us in a moment,” John quickly chastened her.

John had sent for a doctor who treated diseases of the mind. The man charged more than John could afford, but John had insisted it was time they got their mother the appropriate medical attention.

“Is there somewhere we can speak privately? I also need to talk to the maid that has been tending to your mother’s room?” the doctor asked.

“Of course, I’ll have my wife fetch the maid. We can talk in the drawing room.”

John led the way downstairs. The maid and Tess joined them in the drawing room.

The doctor turned to the maid with a curious look. “Has Mrs. Grace given you any trouble when you enter the room.”

“No, Doctor.” The maid shook her head.

“And have you ever offered to help her eat or bathe?”

“Yes, Doctor. Once Miss Grace asked me to bathe her, and on another

occasion I helped feed her when she refused Miss Grace's help," the maid explained.

The doctor nodded. "I see, that will be all, thank you."

The maid left and John and Isabella turned to the doctor, waiting for his diagnosis.

"I'm afraid it's my opinion that your mother has fallen into a deep melancholia. It's very rare for someone to return once they have reached this point," the doctor stated heavily.

"What? That's absurd. People with melancholia belong in asylums," John snapped irritably.

"Yes, when they don't have family to care for them. It seems the events of the last few months have broken your mother's mind. She's unresponsive and completely incoherent. It's as if she has become a shell and her mind is locked up so deep that I can't reach it."

"Is there something you can do? Some kind of treatment?" Isabella asked hopefully.

"I can give something to ease her burden, but it won't bring her back so to speak. Here," the doctor handed them a small bottle with what looked like an eye dropper. "It's Laudanum. It's known to ease the pain for those suffering from melancholia."

He gave them instructions on when and how to administer it to their mother before he turned to Tess, ignoring both Isabella and John. "It appears to me that Mrs. Grace is more cooperative with the maid than she is with her daughter. I'm not sure what has caused her ignorance when it comes to Miss Grace, but I feel it would be better if someone else took over her care. Perhaps the maid that I just spoke to might be willing."

"And what would her *care* entail?" John asked carefully.

"Feeding, bathing, keeping her company and administering her medicine. I'm afraid all I can do is make her comfortable and to make it easier for you to care for her here. Of course there are asylums I can suggest if you'd rather

consider that option.”

“No! She’s not going to an asylum,” Isabella cried out, horrified. “We’ll care for her here.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t your decision to make, Miss Grace. It’s the lady of the house who needs to decide.”

Both John and Isabella turned to Tess with pleading looks.

Tess finally shrugged with a sigh. “I guess Lavinia can hand over her other duties and take care of my mother-in-law. If that’s what you think is best.”

John sighed heavily and shook his head. “We can’t afford to hire another servant.”

“Then I’ll help,” Isabella said before thinking it through. “I mean I can learn to help.”

“We won’t expect that of you,” Tess said quickly.

“It’s my mother and since I can’t take care of her, I can take over some of Lavinia’s chores. Right, John?”

John nodded heavily. “I guess it’s the only solution there is.”

“Very well. I will come to check on Mrs. Grace every week, but if her condition improves or worsens, please send for me right away. In melancholia cases it’s hard to predict where the disease will lead.”

John showed the doctor out and returned with a look of bereavement. “It’s as if we’ve lost her too.”

Isabella nodded. “We have.”

Together they sat in the drawing room mourning not only the loss of their father but the loss of their mother. Melancholia was a disease that stole the mind. The few cases of melancholia that Isabella had heard of saw the patients never recover.

They lived a pointless life in solitude until the disease finally stole their lives as well.

Tess took a seat beside Isabella and reached for her hand. “You can help

with the baby; you don't have to cook or clean. Neither John nor I expect that of you."

"I just... I feel so hopeless. I don't know what to do," Isabella admitted tearfully.

Tess wrapped an arm around Isabella's shoulder and hugged her tightly. "Pray for guidance, that's all you can do. John and I will pray as well, right, John?"

John met them with a doubtful gaze. "I've been praying, and everything has just gone from bad to worse, perhaps not praying is the answer."

"For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you," Tess quoted from the bible. "God never said that we won't have challenges, He only promises to help us through them."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



While Isabella stirred the gravy she thought about all the events that had led to this moment. If Matthew hadn't broken their engagement, they would've been married in less than a month. Isabella couldn't even comprehend how excited she would've been had her father not made that one single mistake.

One mistake that had led to his death, her mother's melancholia and the loss of their family home.

She felt like a failure for not being able to save the house. She felt ostracized for having Matthew break off the engagement. She felt humiliated that her best friend had stepped into her place without even bothering to talk to her about it.

Gabrielle would be the bride on Matthew's arm planned for Isabella. They would move to his Estate, which would've belonged to Isabella.

Now she had nothing to look forward to except mastering how to dust the chandeliers, polish the foyer floor and to learning to cook.

When the doctor had diagnosed their mother, Isabella hadn't thought that a full-time nurse would be necessary. But with every day that passed she had come to realize that her mother had become completely dependent on Lavinia.

She still didn't speak, but whenever Isabella went to spend time with her

in the afternoon, she would point to the door until Lavinia returned with her medicine.

Feeling lost and as if she was leeching on her brother's kindness, Isabella had taken to cleaning and cooking along with helping to care for her niece. As Tess was a very involved mother, there wasn't much to do when it came to the baby.

"Quit your moping, nothing sours a gravy like a bad mood," the cook said firmly as she came to stand by Isabella's side.

"I'm not moping," Isabella argued.

Cook cocked a brow and put her hands on her hips. "I was raised in a tenement apartment with a father who worked on the railways. He died in a railway accident when I was fifteen. I had to earn an income to care for my mother and my younger brother. Then I met and married the love of my life, a dock worker. He too met an early end on the docks by which time I had three children to care for. I've never had anyone look out for me or feel sorry for me. So I did some moping myself, do you know where moping gets you?"

Isabella shook her head, surprised at the many challenges Cook had faced over the years.

"It gets you nowhere. It ruins your mood, makes you bad company and drains you of energy. If you want to get yourself out of this situation you're in, shake off that bad mood, become good company and use your energy to find a way out of it," Cook said firmly.

Isabella had never been chastened by anyone but her mother. She felt slightly offended that a servant would talk to her that way. But then it dawned on her that Cook was the first one to tell her to face her challenges and move on. A smile curved her mouth as she searched Cook's gaze. "Might I ask your name, Cook?"

"It's Agatha, now keep stirring so that gravy can thicken. You still need to peel a dozen potatoes and knead the dough for the bread," Agatha said with a hint of smile.

Isabella did as she was told and realized Agatha was right. She might not have a future of wealth ahead of her but instead of wasting energy dwelling on what could've been, she would use her energy to learn everything she could.

She would embrace learning housekeeping and cooking and even cleaning. At least then when she met a man that showed an interest, she would have something to offer. Wealth might not be on the table, but at least she would be able to keep a home.

“What do you want to learn tomorrow?” Agatha asked while decorating a cake for dessert.

“I don't know. I've learned how to make gravy and roast a leg of lamb, but I've never baked...” Isabella admitted.

“Then tomorrow you'll be on dessert, and I'll be on dinner. A woman needs to know how to bake.”

Isabella nodded, feeling a little spark of hope in her chest. She knew the skills she was learning wouldn't help her find a husband or become wealthy, but at least she was learning and getting ahead.

For the first time since her life had been turned upside down, Isabella realized that she had spent her life wasting time, never learning anything but the latest gossip. Now as she stood by the stove, sweat beading her forehead from the heat, she wondered if that hadn't been a shallow life.

Of course she could converse with anyone from a pauper to a Duke and she could dress to catch the eye of any person present, but these were real skills. Skills that might just help her forget about her horrid situation and help her look towards the future.

She squared her shoulders and refused to think of herself as a leech on her brother's goodwill for another moment. Instead she would see herself as a contributing member of the family. She might not bring in an income to help cover expenses, but she would make sure she did the work of one paid servant. That way at least her brother wouldn't blame her if she had to stay

there forever.

The thought sent a chill down her spine. She didn't want to live on her brother's grace for the rest of her life, but right now it didn't seem as if she had any other choice.

"I'd like to learn how to bake very much. Do you think I can bake a chocolate cake?"

"That's your brother's favorite,56666tgk," Agatha said with a smile.

Isabella nodded. "A small gesture of gratitude from me to him."

"See, I can smell that gravy sweetening from here already."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



“*A*bel, get off that railing!” Cooper Turner shouted, rushing for the two-year-old about to climb into the corral with a wild stallion.

His heart was racing a mile a minute even as he reminded himself what it blessing it was to be a father. He grabbed Abel just in time as the boy was about to climb over to the other side. Relief washed over him as he set Abel down outside the railing. “Don’t do that again, that horse will kill ya.”

As Cooper looked up, grateful that disaster had been averted, he noticed his other son throwing sticks at a snake. Once again his heart stopped even as his legs began to move. “Aaron, don’t!”

Aaron turned to him, laughter bubbling from his throat. “Ssssnake!” Aaron picked up another stone and threw it at the snake which was preparing to strike.

Cooper felt the blood rush from his head, knowing that a rattlesnake bite would be fatal. Without hesitation he drew his pistol from his belt and took the stance of a shooter. “Aaron, go that way,” Cooper called out and gestured for Aaron to move to the left.

Aaron thought it was a game and wobbled in an awkward run to his left while the snake kept its striking pose. With Aaron out of the way, Cooper squeezed the trigger. The snake fell into the dirt, its head blown clear from its body which writhed in the throes of death.

Cooper let out a sigh of relief as he holstered his weapon. “Boys, inside, now!”

When Cooper had been told his wife had birthed two sons instead of one, he had felt as if he had found gold in the desert. A double blessing!

He hadn’t once considered that his double blessing might turn into double the amount of trouble or anguish for him later.

No one had known that Hannah would pass away before the boys celebrated their first birthday and Cooper hadn’t been prepared to be a single parent. Managing Haven Ranch and all the ranch hands was enough of a headache, and now with the twins to run after, he was finally coming to his wits end.

Over the last year and a half Cooper had hired more than ten nursemaids and housekeepers. It wasn’t that the twins were naughty or unruly, they were just busy. And being busy on a ranch in the wild west meant keeping them alive more than keeping them cared for.

His boys were curious about everything and anything. They were up for any challenge and often egged each other on to explore. That was the problem.

No nursemaid or housekeeper could be expected to run after two little boys on a ranch the size of a small town, while having to keep mustangs, cattle, wolves and mountain lions in mind, never mind the snakes.

His last nursemaid resigned the week before.

“You got to put those two on a leash, boss,” one of his ranch hands called out from the corral where he was busy breaking in a stallion.

If that wild stallion could sire a foal, Cooper knew he would have a bloodline worth gold on his hands in the foals that would come after. But first they had to be able to manage the stallion.

“You stick to taming that stallion and I’ll stick to tamin’ my boys,” Cooper called out although he couldn’t help but wonder if a leash would not be the answer to his problem.

He walked into the house to find both boys on the mat with their toys. Just then they seemed as sweet as angels, but Cooper knew they wouldn't play quietly for long.

“Boys, we've gotta talk. You know you shouldn't be throwin' rocks at snakes, Aaron. And Abel, as for you, what we're ya thinking trying to climb into the corral with a stallion?”

The boys looked at him in confusion. They were barely two and didn't yet comprehend danger or his anger about their actions. Cooper couldn't help but feel as if he was failing Hannah in the way he was raising their sons.

He still missed her every single day, with every single breath and still blamed the Lord for snatching her away. Cooper hadn't thought it was anything more than a cough, but before long the doctor had diagnosed her with consumption.

Not the kind that you could live with, the kind that killed. For the last month of her life, Cooper had abided by her wishes and had kept the twins away from her. Her greatest fear had been to pass it on to the boys.

The consumption might have left his sons well enough, but it had stolen his wife.

Cooper let out a heavy sigh and dropped his elbows onto his knees. He rested his head on his hands and closed his eyes. *“Lord, send me some help, guidance or simply a solution. I can't do this, Lord. If I continue tryin' to raise these boys alone, I'm either going to lose them or destroy them. I need help.”*

When Cooper opened his eyes both Abel and Aaron were looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Sometin' wrong, Dada?” Abel asked in his broken toddler language.

Cooper shook his head and summoned a smile. “Not today, Buddy, not today. We're still all alive and kicking.”

Even as Cooper spoke the words he silently prayed that that would be the case tomorrow as well. Unless he built a pen from which his boys couldn't

escape, he had no idea how he could raise them safely and still run a ranch.

He quickly pushed that idea from his mind, knowing that one of the boys would find a way to escape. His only option was to advertise for a nursemaid.

Again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



The following day Cooper saddled up to take on the momentous task of heading into town.

In the past going into town had been a welcome break from the demands of the ranch. He used to enjoy catching up with the townsfolk and maybe even stop by the local watering hole for a drink with a friend before heading back to Haven Ranch.

But ever since the twins, that hadn't been the case.

Instead, going into town had become an uphill battle. One where the nagging and complaining would start the moment they left the ranch. Once they were in town, things would get even worse. Abel and Aaron were both curious and had no desire to visit the places Cooper intended to go. If he planned on going to the post office, the boys would run off to the livery. If he planned on stopping by the barber's, his boys would disappear into the candy shop next door, or more concerning, attempt to cut each other's hair.

Cooper loved his boys more than life itself but raising them was proving to be more difficult than he could've ever imagined. He loved their wild curious spirits, their braveness, and their confidence to attempt anything they set their mind to. He just hoped he knew how to rein them in enough to raise them right.

This morning he had the general merchant and the feedstore on his list of

places to go. The general merchant proved to be less of a challenge since Cooper promised the boys they could each have a stick of candy if they behaved.

Instead of running through the general merchant, wreaking havoc, they stood in front of the candy and debated for almost the entire time Cooper was there, the candy they wanted to get.

Next stop, the feedstore.

Mabel Johnson had been running the feedstore since Cooper started his ranch. She was a dear old woman who had taken over the business from her husband after a rattlesnake got him a few years back. But just because she was kind, didn't mean she couldn't be ruthless. Everyone in town knew not to get on Mabel's wrong side.

"Now you two be quiet and stay beside me, 'ya hear. I can't have 'ya runnin' through the feedstore and screamin' like banshees while I'm talkin' to Mabel," Cooper warned the boys as they stopped in front of the feedstore.

They smiled up at him like two little angels as if they had never set a foot wrong. Cooper sighed and shook his head before he walked into the feedstore.

"Mornin', Mabel. How's life treatin' ya?" Cooper asked, smiling at the older woman.

"Cooper Turner, what a nice surprise to see you in here. Those boys are growing faster than bamboo shoots," Mabel said, smiling at the boys who had wandered a few feet away.

"Yeah, you're telling me. Wilder than mustangs and more unruly than a bunch of robbers," Cooper stated with a fond smile.

"I'm comin' after you, you red skin!" Aaron's voice cried out.

Cooper turned just in time to see that Abel had found a feather and was holding it over his head, taunting his brother. Aaron reached for a bag of open corn on display, grabbed a hand full and tossed it at his brother.

Before Cooper could stop Abel from starting a full-scale war in the

feedstore, Abel grabbed a hand full of candles and began to throw them at his brother.

“Boys!” Cooper shouted, already knowing that today was the day that Mabel banned him from the feedstore for good.

Both boys turned and looked at Cooper for a brief second before they continued.

Mabel stepped out from behind the counter and whistled so loudly that Cooper swore trains could hire her to announce their arrival. Both boys stopped mid-war and turned to look at Mabel with terrified expressions.

“This isn’t a battlefield, this is a feedstore, am I right?” Mabel asked with a firm air of authority.

Both boys nodded sullenly. “Right, I thought so. Now, until the both of you learn how to behave in a feedstore, you’re no longer welcome. You can sit outside on the boardwalk and wait for your pa, and don’t you dare standing up and be running off. I’ll come after you.”

Cooper wasn’t sure if he should be embarrassed or grateful that Mabel had got the situation under control.

“Go on, I don’t see you walkin’,” Mabel said quietly but with a voice that could scare raccoons,

Cooper watched his boys fall into line as they walked out of the feedstore. They sat down on the boardwalk just as they were told. Cooper turned to Mabel with admiration and awe.

“Please, Mabel, you must teach me how you do that? Or even better, come and be their nursemaid. I’ll pay you double what you’re earning now. Heck, I’ll even throw in the ranch if it will make the deal sweeter.”

Mabel smiled at Cooper with fondness and humor. “Cooper, what will I do with a ranch? Besides, practice, that’s all there is to it. I raised five boys, and I learned early on if you don’t lay down the law, they’re goin’ to run all over you.”

“I know.... I just... Mabel, I’m tryin’ to run a ranch, keep a house and

raise two boys. I'll be honest and say that I don't have too much time for layin' down the law. I've had five housekeepers and as many maids in the last two years. No one is up to raisin' two free-spirited boys." Cooper sighed. "I need to find a new nursemaid; I just don't know how long this one's gonna last."

Mabel smiled sympathetically. "It's harder to raise someone else's young 'un than to raise your own. That's where you're makin' the mistake. Cooper, isn't it time you found yourself a wife? Someone that can be a mama to those boys. Someone that could shower them with love and discipline them while you run your ranch?"

Cooper's eyes widened with horror. "It's only been two years, Mabel; besides, I don't want another wife."

"Want and need are two different things. You need someone to help you with them boys. Nurse maids just want an easy job. Here, take this and send them your information; they'll find you a wife. One who will stay and fall in love with those boys. And who knows, maybe you'll even fall in love with her too."

Cooper frowned at the newspaper, *The Matrimonial Times*. "What is this?"

"This the answer to your troubles, that's what this is," Mabel said patting the newspaper. "I've heard of a few men out West finding themselves brides in this newspaper. Women out east with challenges of their own often find it appealing to come out west for only the promise of room and board. It's a win-win and my bet is it'll cost you a lot less than all these nursemaids and housekeepers you keep hiring from all over the country."

Cooper really didn't think a wife was the answer, but just perhaps Mabel was right. If he could find someone who wanted to escape their own life in exchange for room and board and helping him with the boys, it might just be the perfect solution.

He glanced out onto the boardwalk where both boys were still sitting

quietly. They were sulking as good as Cooper had ever seen them sulk. But just like Cooper knew that his boys needed to have fun and explore, he knew they needed a firm hand to teach them wrong from right.

“Fine,” he finally said to Mabel. “I’ll give it a chance.”

Mabel smiled broadly. “That’s a good man.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



Isabella sipped on her tea at the kitchen table.

If her brother and her mother could see her now, they would have something to say about Isabella interacting with the help. But over the last few weeks, Agatha had become more like her favorite aunt than the cook.

With Agatha's help she had learned how to cook and due to Agatha's insistence, Isabella had spent quite some time with the maids to learn how to clean and keep a house.

She no longer felt as if she was a dead weight on her brother's bank account and kindness. It felt good to be contributing especially now that her mother required so much care. Isabella couldn't help but be concerned about her mother's health. She had honestly believed that the doctor would be able to help her mother but since the doctor's involvement, her mother had become even more dependent on help.

"What are you thinking about, girl?" Agatha asked as she took a seat at the table.

It was just after breakfast and with the kitchen was cleaned and the meat was thawing for lunch, which meant that it was a quiet time of day for Agatha.

"I'm not thinking, really, I'm just wondering what will become of me. I can't live here indefinitely. With John and Tess expecting another child, it's

just not fair of them to have me here as well. They need the extra room.” Isabella sighed with a shrug.

“I’m sure your brother loves having you here,” Agatha assured her.

But Agatha didn’t know that the financial pressure was beginning to weigh on her brother’s shoulders. The last thing Isabella wanted was for her brother to downscale his family’s lifestyle because he had to care for her and her mother.

“I’m sure he does. But I want a future, possibly a family of my own. My situation now... it makes it hard. Without a dime to my name, no man of social standing will court me and yet if I court outside of social circles, it will still be frowned upon,” Isabella confessed. It had been weighing heavily on her mind for quite some time now.

She had long since given up on Matthew. His wedding to Gabrielle was only a week away and since moving in with John and Tess, Isabella hadn’t heard from either of the two.

“Perhaps you should consider this.” Agatha got up and collected a newspaper before she returned to the table. “The maids are always looking through it.”

“What is it?” Isabella asked curiously.

“It’s a newspaper advertising men all over the country. Men looking for love, wives, or simply companionship. Most of them are isolated or in small towns where the pickings are slim,” Agatha explained. “My niece found her husband this way.”

Isabella reached for the newspaper and began to laugh as she read the first advertisement that caught her eye.

HANDSOME BANK MANAGER Seeking Wife

ROSS PETTY IS a man of wealthy means that is tired of celebrating his achievements alone. Ross is looking for an appealing partner to share his life in the small town of Woodburn, Arizona. If you are of childbearing age, attractive and interested in having a family then Ross is eager to hear from you.

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS!” Isabella cried out with laughter. “It’s like a cattle auction for men.”

“Don’t count your chickens just yet, not all of them are obnoxious and only want a pretty wife on their arm. Some of them are lonely, others merely want companionship. Besides, how it works is that you write to the man you’re interested in. The unwritten rule is that he will only respond to one letter. Once you correspond you can get to know him better and perhaps even fall in love.”

“Through letters, I doubt that very much.” Isabella shook her head. “Thank you, but I really don’t think this is an option for me.”

“If you say so.” Agatha shrugged. “But I firmly believe that love doesn’t land in your lap, neither does a blessed future. Sometimes you must find a window when the door’s been shut in your face.”

Isabella thought for a moment and turned the page. “Perhaps. But what will I write to a man I know nothing about? I don’t know him; he doesn’t know me? He might be a liar, a cheat, or worse, a highwayman.”

“He might be, or he might be honest, kind and the man you have been praying for?” Agatha argued.

Isabella wasn’t sure that becoming a mail order bride was the answer to her question, but the idea of leaving Boston, the awful memories and the humiliation behind did appeal to her. The idea of beginning afresh in a new town where no one knew of her father’s financial troubles or her mother’s illness might be just what she needed.

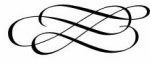
And from what she could tell, none of the men advertising in *The Matrimonial Times* were hoping for a match with a wealthy wife.

“I’ll consider it,” Isabella finally agreed before leaving the kitchen with the newspaper in hand, feeling like a fool.

But at least she felt like a hopeful fool.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



Mabel's words kept resounding in Cooper's mind.

Finally, the only way to get Mabel's voice and reminders about what his sons needed out of his mind; he had done what he had vowed he wouldn't.

He had placed an advertisement in *The Matrimonial Times*.

In the weeks that followed, Cooper had been certain it had been a fool's errand. One that wouldn't reap any rewards.

But with every day that passed he noticed more and more how the lack of having a mother affected his boys. Cooper could remember how Hannah had always chastened him for not revealing his emotions and now he could see how that affected his parenting.

He hardly had any patience with them, and interactions usually involved Cooper scolding them, protecting them or tending only to their basic needs. They needed a mother to show them kindness, to play with them and to teach them how to be kind to each other, instead of incessantly picking on each other.

Finding a new wife wasn't among Cooper's wants in life. Even less, was finding a new mother for his boys. They had a mother; a wonderful mother and Cooper couldn't imagine anyone ever replacing Hannah in their lives.

He sat on the porch watching the boys play as he made a silent vow to

himself. If nothing came of the advertisement by the end of the week, he would need to send for another nurse maid for the boys. Or perhaps a nanny.

Jacob Tanner rode into the yard on his palomino after running an errand in town. Cooper's right-hand man waved to him from the saddle. "I got you somethin'."

Cooper frowned as he stood up. "What?"

"A letter from a dame up in Boston," Jacob taunted him.

Cooper couldn't hide his surprise as Jacob handed him the letter a short while later. The writing was neat, legible and inexcusably feminine.

"Must be 'bout that advertisement you placed," Jacob teased.

Cooper sighed and stuffed the letter into his pocket. "Just decided to hire a nanny by the end of the week."

Jacob cocked a brow. "Look, I hate to agree with Mabel, but she's right. Those boys don't need a nanny and you don't need a strange woman hanging around until she decides to find a family of her own. You need a wife, boss. Read the darn letter, maybe you just found her."

Jacob left Cooper on the porch. Cooper glanced at the boys and sighed heavily. Jacob and Mabel were right, but how did he know if a woman was the right fit through simply reading a letter? Curiosity finally got the better of him. Cooper tore open the letter and began to read.

DEAR MR. TURNER

I WANT to apologize right away if you find this letter awkward or in bad form. This is the first time I've ever considered writing to a stranger and if you don't respond, I will understand.

You must be wondering why I wrote to you?

At first when I came across the Matrimonial Times, I considered it

nothing but a laughing matter. Most of the men whose advertisements I read seemed either desperate, lonely or merely seeking someone to bear their heir.

And then I read yours...

I'm so sorry to learn about your wife's passing. I too lost someone close to me in the past year and I can understand the grief and the longing that comes with it. It must be terribly hard for you to raise your twins without your wife.

I can't comprehend finding love through letters, and that is not what I expect.

I understand from that you need someone to help you care for your twins, someone to keep your home, provide companionship and perhaps in future possibly a mutually respectful friendship.

I appreciate your honesty and the clarity surrounding your expectations and so I'll share my reasons for responding and what I hope to find.

I come from a wealthy family, one of the wealthiest families in Boston, if I were to be honest. A bad investment caused my father to lose all our money. You can imagine how terribly hard that was for my father. The weight of that mistake weighed so heavily on him that it finally took him from us. I tried to salvage what I could after my father's passing, but the debts were too high and the income little to nothing at all.

My mother became unresponsive since my father's passing.

When we lost the family house, my brother insisted we move in with him. This was the best choice at the time, especially for my mother who now depends on a caretaker to assist her all hours of the day. But I, being healthy and able, feel that I have become a burden to my brother's family especially with their second child due soon.

I have no means to redeem my financial situation or to resume my place in society to be courted.

I hope to find peace away from the gossips and loss that haunt me in Boston. I wish to find a home that I can call my own. Regardless of my

upbringing, I have learned everything required to keep a home, to cook and to clean.

Although I have never cared for children, I can assure you that I simply adore children. I believe that with all the education I received growing up, I can pass a lot of that knowledge onto them. I will love them as if they were my own and I will make sure to respect the time you spend running your cattle ranch.

I know that this probably isn't the type of letter you were hoping to receive, but I believe that honesty is the first step towards happiness. I do not expect you to love me as you loved your wife, nor do I want to replace her in your or your children's lives. But I would like to try my best to give the boys the love and discipline they need and to be a friend to you.

If you feel that my skills and companionship are what you are searching for in a future wife, then I'll look forward to hearing from you.

If I don't, then I wish you all the best of luck and I will pray that God blesses you and your boys.

*KINDEST REGARDS,
Isabella Grace*

COOPER FROWNED AT THE LETTER. Isabella Grace was right. The last thing he had expected was such brutal honesty, especially about her circumstances and her reasons for wanting to leave Boston.

He read the letter again and realized that Isabella hadn't just written to him out of desperation, she understood his situation and for some reason she wanted to help him.

An eerie feeling ran down his spine at the thought of getting married again. Couldn't he just hire Isabella as a nanny? He pushed the thought aside

even as it occurred to him. Isabella was looking for the security of a marriage, just like Cooper was looking to give his children a long-term caretaker.

Marriage would be the best option.

He hadn't thought he would ever respond to a woman he'd never met before, but Isabella seemed the perfect solution to all his problems. He called the boys inside and headed to his writing desk where he penned a letter, just as honest as the one he had received. He prayed that Isabella would read it with kindness and understanding.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



“*I*sabella, I didn’t know you knew anyone in Montana?” John walked into the drawing room holding an envelope. “This came for you just now.”

Isabella’s eyes widened with surprise. “It’s from Montana?”

“Yes.” John shrugged. “What is it?”

“I... I’ll tell you as soon as I read it.” Isabella jumped up from reading poems before snatching the letter from her brother’s hand. She all but raced upstairs to the privacy of her bedroom and locked herself inside.

She hadn’t expected Cooper Turner to respond to her letter, but the fact that he did...

Isabella wasn’t sure if she should be excited or fear that he had only written to tell her he wasn’t interested in hearing from her again.

She carefully opened the letter and drew in a deep breath before she began to read.

DEAR Isabella

YOUR HONESTY WAS REFRESHING.

I honestly didn't believe that anything would come of that advertisement. It was my belief that if someone did indeed correspond with me, that they would seek love and try to replace Hannah in our lives. I appreciate that you understand that to lose someone is harder than anyone can imagine, and that one simply cannot replace a lost relative, wife, or mother.

It is for that reason I believe that asking you to marry me would be wiser than hiring another nanny or nursemaid. My sons need someone in their lives who will not leave when they are unruly or the moment she receives a better offer elsewhere.

Through the commitment of marriage, not only will you know that you have a home and security, but I will know that my sons will have a constant caretaker for years to come, and I will finally have a little help keeping my home.

If you wish to wait or correspond longer before accepting my proposal, I will understand. But it is my hope that you will accept my proposal and leave for Montana without undue delay. I have enclosed funds enough to cover your train fare as well as the cost of a telegram to notify me of the date of your arrival.

As soon as I know the date of your arrival, arrangements will be made for the pastor to wed us before we leave town after you disembark.

I look forward to hearing from you and more so to a mutually beneficial friendship that will solve both our problems.

I was sorry to learn about your mother's state of unresponsiveness, if there is anything I can do to assist with either your mother or your brother's expenses for her, I would be happy to do so.

I will ensure that you have your own private quarters in my home. Please understand that nothing will be expected of you as a wife, except to help with the chores around the home and to care for my twins.

YOURS KINDLY,
Cooper

ISABELLA HADN'T EVEN REALIZED she was hyperventilating. She slowed her breathing to draw in oxygen before she read the letter again.

Wasn't this what she had been hoping for? An uncomplicated marriage, security, and a home to call her own?

Instead of going to her brother, Isabella took the servant's passageway to the kitchen in search of Agatha. If anyone was going to be honest with her about the decision she was about to make, it would be Agatha.

Hope swelled in her chest as she stepped into the kitchen. It didn't make sense to look forward to a marriage of convenience and yet Isabella was doing just that.

It was an escape, a safe haven, and the chance for her to finally have a family of her own, even if that meant embracing another woman's children as her own.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



“*I*sabella, surely you realize how ridiculous this all sounds?”

Isabella squared her shoulders at her brother’s words. She had waited all day to share the news of her engagement with John and Tess and her plans to move to Montana. For some reason she had thought they would be happy for her, but John seemed completely horrified at the thought.

“Why is it ridiculous?” Isabella asked tilting her head. “Because I haven’t met him, because you haven’t met him?”

“Because... just because.” John sighed and shook his head. “Tess and I said you were welcome to stay here. Why the sudden urge to leave? To marry a stranger, become a mother and leave!”

“Stay until when, John? You and I both know my chances of courting disappeared the moment father lost his investment. If I look to court outside of the social circle, you will also not approve. I want a life and as grateful I am to you and Tess for taking me in, you both know it was never supposed to be permanent.” Isabella found herself quite out of breath.

“Isabella, this man could be a liar, a murderer or a thief; have you even considered that? He might simply be luring you to Montana as prey,” John sounded exasperated.

Isabella smiled, remembering Agatha’s words when she had spoken just those words “Or he could be kind, generous and my soulmate. I won’t know

if I don't go, and I'm going."

"You're not going anywhere!" John shouted slamming his fists on the dining room table.

Before Isabella could plead for his understanding, Tess laid a hand on her husband to calm him. "John, I know this isn't conventional, but from what Isabella tells us I can't see why you're so against it. Isabella will make a wonderful mother to those twins, and it won't be a union of love, it will be union of convenience."

"Shouldn't she hold out for love instead?" John took a seat and let out a heavy sigh.

Tess smiled kindly at Isabella before she turned to her husband. "Who will court her, John? No one of whom you might approve. And it's true what Isabella said, right now she is the subject of the gossip. After Matthew's disgraceful ending of their engagement and his marrying Gabrielle... surely you don't want your sister to be reminded of that every day for the rest of her life?"

"That's not what I want, but nor do I want her to run away from her problems."

"I'm not running away from my problems, John. I'm running towards my future," Isabella explained. "I'll write to you as often as I can. I'll send you a telegram the moment I arrive and if things aren't to my liking, I'll get right back on the train and come back to Boston..." Isabella trailed off heavily. "John... Father's failed investments, the loss of the house... none of that really affected you. In a matter of weeks my reputation, my future and my past were wiped away. I don't blame Father, I never have, but I can't rest on my laurels hoping for better days."

"You can't even cook, Isabella." John shook his head.

"I beg to differ," Agatha said, serving their meal personally. "I had a feeling you might react this way, Mr. Grace, so I took the liberty of asking Isabella to prepare dinner. Not a single morsel of your meal tonight was

prepared by me.”

John looked at the beef wellington surrounded by vegetables and frowned. “Isabella cooked this?”

“I did,” Isabella acknowledged. “I’ve also been polishing the silver, scrubbing the floors and making the beds.”

“You didn’t!” Tess cried out horrified. “Isabella we don’t expect you to work like a servant.”

“You don’t, I do. I’m dependent on you just like they are, and I wanted to learn. I think I knew that I probably wouldn’t be blessed with help again. Besides, I enjoy it. It gives me a feeling of achievement to know that I can cook, clean and even do laundry.”

“If I had known you felt this way...” John trailed off, searching Isabella’s face. “Is this really what you want?”

“It is, John. Those twins need a mother and I need to find a life for myself. You and Tess have your next baby on the way and with Mother already demanding so much care, it just isn’t fair for me to rely on you,” Isabella explained with a pleading smile. “You’re not losing me, John. You’re simply going to see me a little less. I’ll expect you to come and visit, of course.”

John chuckled. “If you last on a ranch in the West. The conditions are brutal out there, the wild people are still wreaking havoc and there are numerous other dangers besides. It’s not civilized.”

“It might not be civilized, but I still want to go.” Isabella smiled. “Now eat your dinner and tell me if you think I’ll be competent enough to cook for my husband.”

Isabella could see the hesitation and concern in her brother’s eyes, but what she had said was right. She needed to do this. She needed to prepare a future for herself. One where the eyes of Boston weren’t on her, where the weight of their family’s humiliation didn’t lie on her shoulders. She wanted a future where she could make a difference and with Cooper and the twins, she

knew she would be doing just that.

“Here’s to Montana,” Isabella said holding up her glass.

Tess smiled encouragingly. “And here’s to Cooper Turner realizing that he might just fall in love for a second time.”

Isabella laughed simply because she knew that wasn’t on the cards.

She had experienced love and it had left her broken and humiliated. She had no desire to experience it again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



“*I*sabella Grace?”

Isabella had barely stepped off the train when she was approached by an older man. After travelling for so many days, she was exhausted and more than a little disappointed to find that her future husband was of an age to be her father.

She summoned a smile, reminding herself that this was what she had wanted. “Hello, yes I am. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Turner.”

The man frowned, confused for a moment before he began to laugh. “I’ve never thought of him as Mr. Turner, but I guess you’re right. He is Mr. Turner. But I ain’t Cooper, young lady. I’m Jacob Tanner, ranch hand, friend and today your escort to the local church.”

Isabella wasn’t sure if she should sigh with relief that Jacob wasn’t her future husband or bristle with frustration that her future husband hadn’t so much as bothered to welcome her personally.

“And is... Cooper at the local church?”

“He is, ma’am.” Jacob nodded. “Let me take your luggage.”

She hadn’t been sure what to expect on arrival in Haven Falls, so she accepted the unexpected and followed Jacob to a waiting wagon. Once she climbed in Isabella couldn’t help but doubt her decision to be married right away but before she could change her mind, Jacob stopped in front of a

wooden church with a tall steeple.

“Here you are, ma’am.”

“Please, it’s Isabella,” Isabella insisted, waiting a moment before she climbed out.

A few minutes later she was standing in front of a pastor with a handsome man beside him. Her heart skipped a beat, either with fear or attraction, she couldn’t be sure which.

“Isabella? I’m Cooper, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He held out a calloused hand, tanned from all the time spent in the sun.

“Hello, Cooper. It’s nice to meet you.” Isabella’s tone of voice was as formal as if she was meeting a foreign dignitary or the president.

“Shall we begin?” the pastor asked.

Isabella’s eyes widened with fear. Her heart began to race, wondering if she was making the mistake of a lifetime. But when the clergyman began to speak, her eyes met Cooper’s and calm washed over her. He seemed just as terrified as she was, just as unsure.

At least they were in this together, she assured herself when the occasion arrived to say I do.

Before Isabella knew it she was a married woman. Mrs. Cooper Turner.

The pastor wished them well before he left to give them some privacy.

The last thing she expected was for Cooper to start to laugh.

“Is something funny?” Isabella asked confused.

Cooper shook his head. “Just that we actually went through with it. Thank you for coming, I was beginning to doubt you would.”

Isabella returned his smile. “I said I would come.”

“I have a few things to attend to in town before I head back to the ranch. I’ve arranged for Jacob to drive you home. You must be exhausted after all the travelling.”

“I am, yes,” Isabella agreed. “Where are the boys?”

“Jacob asked his wife to keep an eye on them. They’re on the ranch just

waiting to meet you.” Cooper flashed her a smile. It seemed as if the smile had caught even him by surprise. “I’ll be home as soon I’ve attended to my business.”

He followed her out and made sure she was in Jacob’s care before he had a quick word with his ranch hand and headed for the thoroughfare.

Isabella watched him walk away and couldn’t help but wonder about the nature of the business that could be more important than accompanying her home. She shook her head and quickly reminded herself what this really was; it was an arrangement of convenience, not love.

The drive to the ranch took almost thirty minutes. Jacob entertained her with stories of the landscape, the different trees and plants and even pointed out spots where she would probably find snakes at this time of year.

By the time they arrived at the ranch, Isabella was relieved they hadn’t encountered any of the snakes mentioned.

Jacob carried her luggage inside before introducing her to his wife who seemed even older than Jacob. The look of relief on her face at the sight of her made Isabella wonder if the twins were human or pure evil.

“Thank heavens you’re back. They’re a hand full, but you look young enough to handle them.”

They showed Isabella to her room before they left for their own cottage on the homestead of the ranch.

Isabella found the boys in the kitchen. She couldn’t help but be slightly terrified of them but also excited to get to know them.

“Hello, I’m Isabella.”

“Pa’s wife?” one asked scrunching up his nose.

Isabella nodded even as she assessed the boys’ faces. It was evident they were twins, identical even. But there were a few tell-tale differences that would help her to tell them apart. Aaron had a few freckles on his nose and Abel seemed to have slightly darker eyes.

“So you’re our new ma?” Abel asked.

“Or I can just be your friend?” Isabella lowered herself to meet their gazes. “I can’t wait to get to know both of you.”

“You already do?” Aaron asked tilting his head slightly. “We just met.”

Isabella smiled; her heart already warmed. “That’s right but getting to know someone means you learn about their likes and dislikes and their interests. What do you dislike, Aaron?”

Aaron thought for a moment before he scrunched up his freckled nose. “Peas. Pa made us eat them last time the nursemaid cooked them for us. It’s disgusting!”

A chuckle escaped Isabella. “I never liked peas myself until I tasted them in a stew. They’re actually quite delicious.” She turned to Abel with a curious look. “How about you, any dislikes?”

Abel crossed his arms firmly. “My pa’s new wife.”

Abel ran out of the kitchen to his room, with Aaron following on his heels.

Isabella stood up feeling as if she had been slapped. She had known that it wouldn’t be easy to just step into the twins’ lives, but she hadn’t expected direct opposition from the get-go.

She cast her eyes to the roof. “God, please help me. I want to help them; I want to make a life here. Open their hearts to my love, Lord. Amen.”

Not knowing what to do besides taking care of the boys, Isabella decided to unpack before she started on dinner. She might not add peas to the stew tonight, but she would in the near future.

For tonight she wanted to spoil the boys and get to know them a little better. Her thoughts went to Cooper who was yet to return; perhaps she might even get an opportunity to get to know him a little better as well.

CHAPTER 17



Isabella had always been an early riser.

Ever since she could remember she had been the first person in her house up and in search of coffee. During the last weeks at her brother's home she had taken to brewing the coffee in the mornings even before Agatha arrived to start on breakfast.

But after two weeks of living on Haven Ranch with Cooper, she had yet to wake up before him. Once or twice she had heard him leave in the morning, but every other morning he had already been out on the range by the time she awoke.

Isabella didn't mind that her new husband was an early riser or that he began his day the moment the sun's rays touched the horizon, but she was beginning to become concerned about the little time he spent at home.

In the two tweaks since she had moved to Haven Ranch as Mrs. Turner the second, she had learned much that she would never have had the opportunity to learn in Boston.

She had learned that planning to do chores with two busy boys in her care was almost as useless as wearing society dresses in the dusty environment that was a working ranch. She had learned that simple meals were more appreciated than the fancier versions she had learned to cook under Agatha's guidance. Isabella had come to appreciate the space and the coziness of a log

cabin instead of the expanse of a large brownstone in Boston, and she had learned to look for snakes before walking.

But most importantly, Isabella had learned that falling in love with children was almost as easy as smiling at a flower in bloom.

Both Abel and Aaron were busy, curious and sometimes frighteningly daring, but they were also kind, adorable and so desperate for a little attention that they thrived on it.

Apart from the necessary daily chores that needed to be done, Isabella allowed herself some flexibility when it came to scrubbing floors, doing laundry and sweeping the porch, vowing to give the boys her attention when they sought it.

It had only taken her a few days to realize that Aaron and Abel became unruly when they felt ignored or lacked attention. She had quickly picked up on the changes in their demeanor and now when she noticed the merest sign of either acting out, she would round them up for an activity to do with her.

Isabella had played with them in the dirt, she had drawn with them and had already spent hours reading them stories from the books she had brought with her from Boston.

Her greatest concern since arriving on Haven Ranch was the little time Cooper spent with his children. She didn't expect him to spend his evenings with her or even to make an effort to have a conversation with her, but she did expect him to share that with his sons.

Tonight, she hoped to coax Cooper to spend some time with his children.

She wasn't sure if he was simply busy or if he just didn't want to spend time at home, but change was required. When he had written, he had expressed the need his children had for a mother, but now Isabella was more concerned for the need they had for a father.

A father who was alive and well and yet hardly ever took the time to read to his sons. He didn't involve them in the daily activities of the ranch and hadn't once praised them for their achievements. Instead he was always ready

to chastise when they were naughty.

Cooper needed to realize that being a father was more than just discipline, it meant expressing love as well.

When he walked into the cabin over lunch time, Isabella was ready to fight for some of his precious time.

“Here is your lunch. I hope you don’t mind sausage and grits.”

“Thanks,” Cooper said, immediately tucking in. Saying he was a man of few words was an understatement, he hardly ever spoke. Or perhaps he just didn’t speak to her.

“I was wondering if you might return in time for dinner tonight. The boys and I have a surprise we’d like to share with you.”

The surprise was baking cookies that afternoon so that the boys could show their treats off over dinner.

Cooper frowned up at her and shook his head. “We’re moving the herd. Taking shifts to get them down to the lower pastures before winter sets in. I need to be there to make sure there is a man on shift before they stop for the night.”

“Then perhaps the boys can wait up for you?” Isabella suggested hopefully.

Again, Cooper shook his head. “Won’t be worth it, don’t know what time I’ll be back.”

Isabella tried to hide her disappointment.

How much longer was she going to have to watch Cooper Turner neglect his sons?

CHAPTER 18



“*I*’ve never seen a black sheep before,” Aaron said crunching up his nose in a way that Isabella had come to realize was more out of habit than an intention.

“Now that you mention it, neither have I.” Isabella laughed ruffling his hair.

“What will they make with all the wool?” Abel asked.

Isabella had spent the afternoon teaching the twins the children’s nursery rhyme. In no time at all they had sang along and even created gestures and moves to go along with the words. Isabella was surprised to have enjoyed it almost as much as the boys had.

“Well you can make all types of things with wool. Clothes, for one, then there are socks and hats and gloves... all types of things,” Isabella explained.

Abel frowned curiously before he surprised Isabella by climbing onto her lap. “Was this made of wool?” he asked touching the scarf around her neck.

Isabella’s heart swelled even as tears welled in her eyes. If she could send every single nursemaid, nanny and housekeeper who had ever refused to take care of these boys a photograph of this moment, they wouldn’t believe their eyes.

These twins had never needed a nursemaid or a nanny; they had needed the stability of a mother.

Someone who would not leave.

Isabella swallowed past the emotions welling in her throat and shook her head. “No, that’s silk. It was a gift from my mother on my sixteenth birthday.”

“It’s pretty,” Aaron said, moving closer to inspect it as well.

“Thank you. You’re real pretty, too,” Isabella said pulling Aaron closer as Abel remained on her lap.

“Boys aren’t pretty, they’re handsome.” Aaron laughed.

“Perhaps, but handsome is just a boy- way of saying pretty.” Isabella smiled wholeheartedly.

After losing everything and even Matthew’s devotion, she had never realized she could feel happy or fulfilled again and yet it was not a man who had returned this to her but two little boys.

Isabella’s heart skipped a beat realizing that these boys were no longer just her wards, they were her children. She loved them as her own. It was fascinating to know that she had come to love them so completely in so short a time.

If only their father was as easy to love, she thought with an inward sigh as Cooper frowned at them from the horse corral.

Their eyes met for a moment and Isabella wondered if she would ever feel about Cooper the way she had felt about Matthew. When Cooper’s expression hardened, she realized the answer was no. To Cooper she would always just be the woman who cared for his children.

Anger bubbled through her joy, wondering if Cooper even knew what love was. She had not seen him express it to his children during the time she’d been there. But then.. he mourned for his wife. Surely he knew what it was to love if he grieved for someone he had lost?

“Can we learn another song?” Aaron asked snuggling even closer to her.

Isabella laughed as she lifted him onto the arm of the rocking chair. “How about we learn the alphabet song?”

“Alfalfa song?” Abel asked confused.

“No, alphabet. Here, let me sing it to you first.” Isabella began to sing the song and the boys watched her with such wonderment that she didn’t even notice Cooper approach the porch.

“Shouldn’t they do something more practical than riding a rocking chair and singing songs?” Cooper snapped.

Isabella felt the boys stiffen against her. She wouldn’t let Cooper diminish how much quality time mattered to the boys. Especially feeling loved as they sat with her on the rocking chair. She smiled at Cooper with enough sweetness to poison someone with sugar sickness. “We will... later. Right now, we’re singing and cuddling. Aren’t we, boys?”

Aaron and Abel both eagerly nodded. “We’re cuddling.”

Isabella couldn’t help but chuckle at their eager answer that clearly didn’t please their father.

Usually Isabella would use her brief interactions with Cooper to encourage him to spend time with the children, but in that moment she didn’t want Cooper to sour the special bond they had forged. “Don’t you have cattle to run after?”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed with ill humor as he looked up at her from beneath the porch. Isabella would not back down. She had faced down some of the wealthiest men in Boston and wouldn’t be perturbed by a man that believed himself to always be right.

He spoke a gruff word under his breath that Isabella couldn’t hear before he left them in peace.

Isabella retrieved her smile and began to sing again. When she felt Abel grow heavy against her shoulder, she realized he’d fallen asleep.

Nothing had ever made Isabella feel more special than knowing that Abel trusted her enough to fall asleep on her shoulder. While Abel softly snored, she and Aaron continued to sing.

It was easy to forget that although they were twins, they each had their

own personalities and their own needs.

They each needed personal attention and right now Isabella was determined to give that to Aaron in abundance. For the next hour they sang and laughed while Abel slept. When Abel finally woke up, it was time to start on dinner.

Instead of asking the boys to keep themselves busy while she cooked, she encouraged them to help her. Those first few days on the ranch saw the boys try everything within their power to challenge her authority, but Isabella had quickly learned that every bit of attention she gave brought a measure of obedience.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



“*T*hat was delicious!” Aaron said rubbing his tummy.
“Yummy!” Abel agreed. “Can we have that again soon, Isa?”

Isabella nodded. “Of course we can.” Isabella wasn’t exactly sure when, but both boys had taken to calling her Isa instead of Isabella. The shortened version of her name would have made her mother wince, but it warmed Isabella’s heart. “Now, why don’t you two clear the table like I taught you before you get ready for bed.”

Isabella had taken the morning to teach the boys how to set a table and how to clear it once dinner was over. For someone who had grown up with servants, it was easy for Isabella to understand the importance of chores now. She wanted her boys to grow up knowing how to do the things she never learned.

Setting and clearing a table might not be life changing skills, but it was a start.

Abel and Aaron both jumped out of their chairs, eager to prove to Isabella that they had paid attention.

“Remember the cutlery first,” Isabella reminded them as they placed all four plates together on their side of the table.

Isabella dared to glance at Cooper only to see confusion and irrational

confrontation in his gaze. But then, it was nothing new.

Aaron carefully slid the plates onto each other while Abel carried the cutlery to the kitchen. Just as Aaron lifted the four plates, he accidentally let the bottom plate fall back to the table. His tiny hands had a hard time holding all four plates.

“Aaron, watch what you are doing. It’s not that hard, you just need to pay attention!” Cooper’s voice was loud and frustrated.

Aaron’s eyes almost immediately welled with tears. Isabella cast a firm look of disapproval in Cooper’s direction before she stood up and moved to Aaron’s side. “It’s all right, honey. Maybe rather try taking two at a time like we practiced.”

Aaron did as he was told and smiled brightly at Isabella once the table was cleared.

“Well done, boys, that’s an extra half hour of song time for you tomorrow. Now get ready for bed. I’ll be in to read your story shortly,” Isabella praised them, wishing their father would do the same, or perhaps even offer to be the one to read them a bedtime story.

She turned to Cooper who seemed like his usual sullen self. “Can we have a word on the porch?” Cooper frowned a questioning look. Isabella narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice. “We can have a word here, or outside. I’d prefer outside.”

Isabella didn’t wait for his answer before she headed outside. The cool fall breeze made her shiver, but then it could’ve been the anger as well.

Something inside her had just snapped. She had stood by and watched Cooper scold the boys and reprimand them for too long without praise or affection. When she had come to Haven Ranch, she had hoped it would be forever, but she couldn’t stay if Cooper Turner didn’t at least try to make life pleasant for her and the boys on the ranch.

“What do you want to have a word about?” Cooper asked as he stepped out onto the porch.

Isabella cocked a brow in surprise. “You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what? Please just tell me what you want to tell me. I have had a long day, I’m tired and I’d like nothing more than to get to bed.” Cooper groaned sitting down on the rocker as if he were already bored with Isabella’s conversation.

Isabella clenched her fists as she took a step towards him. “You don’t realize that you never praise the twins. You do nothing to show them affection or even attempt to spend time with them. Have you ever considered that their problem hadn’t been the nursemaids or the nannies, but that it had been you all along?”

Cooper’s eyes widened. “I thought we established in our first correspondence that the twins needed a mother, so why are you reminding me of that now? You’re here, ain’t ya?”

“Really?” Isabella asked exasperated. “Cooper, having me as a ma is never going to replace your place in their lives. Those boys already lost their ma and now they are losing their pa as well. Do you realize that I have not once seen you seek the boys out to spend time with them? You don’t take the time to teach them anything and the moment I teach them something or they learn a new skill, you’d rather criticize how they’re executing it than praising them for even trying.”

“You want me to clap my hands every time they do somethin’ right? That ain’t gonna happen,” Cooper groaned.

“I’m not asking you to clap your hands. I’m asking you to be a father. You can’t just ignore them. You can’t leave at sunrise, return before dinner and head to bed straight after. They have no time with you. They weren’t acting out because they needed discipline, Cooper, they were acting out because they were looking for attention. Attention from you!” Isabella’s voice had risen slightly, making Cooper actually look up.

“I have a ranch to run, I can’t go around holding their hands all day.”

Isabella nodded. “No, you can’t, but you can at least attempt to be the

father they deserve. Abel has such a big heart and just wants you to show him some love. Do you know that if he steps on an ant, he buries it and grieves for it? And then there's Aaron, he's a little braver and more inquisitive, but deep down he's just a little boy. He just wants to be loved.. He looks up to you and one day wants to be exactly like you, but he doesn't even have a chance to find out what you're really like. Perhaps it's better that way, he'll probably be disappointed."

"What are you saying?" Cooper snapped, clearly not enjoying Isabella telling him that he was a bad parent.

Isabella drew in a deep breath and hoped she was doing right. "I'm saying that unless you try to be a better father, I won't sit around and watch you hurt these boys any longer. I don't want to leave, Cooper, heaven knows I've fallen deeply in love with those boys, but it breaks my heart to see the way you treat them. Perhaps it would be better if you found a nanny who isn't so attached."

"So you want to leave?" Cooper demanded.

Isabella shook her head. "And yet again you're not listening. I don't want to go anywhere, Cooper, but I need you to be a real father to those boys. I need you to at least try to be my friend. We've barely spoken more than five minutes since I arrived. This isn't the life I want to live, and this isn't the life those boys deserve. If Hannah were here, I'm sure she would agree."

Isabella didn't wait for him to respond, instead she headed straight to her room.

Cooper could tuck the boys in tonight; she had some crying to do.

CHAPTER 20



Cooper sat on the porch trying to figure out what had just happened. He had never met anyone that stood up to him before, except for Hannah.

Since making Isabella his wife he had tried to keep his distance from her, afraid that proximity would lead to affection. The last thing he'd expected was that Isabella would chasten him, argue with him, and tell him some home truths about his parenting. If that hadn't angered and surprised him enough, he had been dumbstruck when she had mentioned Hannah.

For a moment he wanted to demand that she never speak Hannah's name again, until he realized she was right. Hannah wouldn't have wanted him to be the father he had become.

It was easy to admit that through grief, the work on the ranch and taking care of the boys, he had become stuck in routine instead of trying to be a good father. But was he ready to admit that to Isabella?

He had been adamant Isabella would have no effect on his emotions in any way. There had been a time or two that she had brought a smile to his face when she was playing with the boys. But to anger, exasperate, sadden and excite him in a matter of minutes was not tolerable.

For the first time Cooper had allowed himself to really look at her tonight. Isabella might have been as angry as a bobcat whose prey had just

been stolen by a fox, but she had never looked more beautiful. All fiery and angered, she had reminded him what it was to care about something. To care about someone so much that you were willing to cry if not treated right.

She might not have realized it, but Cooper had seen the tears well in her eyes.

A heavy sigh escaped him when he heard the front door creek. He wasn't ready to face her again just yet. He needed to work through everything she had said and then he needed to find a way to ignore the emotions she had awoken in him.

Emotions such as attraction.

"Pa, why'd you make Isa cry?" Abel demanded with his hands on his hips.

Aaron joined his brother's side. "You can't let her leave, Pa, we like her. Please, Pa, don't let our new ma leave too."

If Cooper had thought Isabella's word had upset him, he clearly hadn't considered hearing his boys defend her. "I didn't make her cry..."

"Yes, you did. She's crying in her room, she didn't even come and read us our story. You have to make her stay, Pa. Please, Pa, don't let her leave," Aaron insisted.

"We'll be better, we promise. We won't bother you so much. We'll be good," Abel backed his brother with promises.

A searing headache began to pulse behind Cooper's eyes, realizing Isabella had been right with every word she had said. He had become a terrible father. One that his children thought didn't love them. A father that his boys would plead with to have a practical stranger stay with them.

Cooper swallowed past the regret and guilt that welled inside him. "Come here, both of you."

"We can't sit on your lap. You said we're too big, remember?" Abel reminded him of the words he had spoken not long before Isabella had come to live with them.

And yet, Isabella had allowed both his boys to sit on her lap, numerous times.

“I think my lap has grown since, let’s try,” Cooper encouraged them. He pulled Aaron onto one leg, and Abel onto the other. “I’m sorry I’ve been so... angry.”

“It’s alright, Pa, you said we’re naughty. It’s our fault.” Aaron nodded repeating more of Cooper’s harsh words.

“You’re not naughty, I was naughty for not taking better care of you. I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much as you would like. I’m sorry I don’t play with you; I’ll try and do better,” Cooper promised his twins.

“You have to do better, Pa, or Isa will leave,” Abel reminded him.

Cooper nodded and pulled his boys in for a hug. “And we can’t have that.”

As soon as he spoke the words he realized they weren’t just said for the sake of his children, he didn’t want Isabella to leave.

His house had become a home again. He might have avoided the homeliness or her sweet laughter, but suddenly he couldn’t imagine life without her.

CHAPTER 21



“The decorations look wonderful,” Cooper complimented, joining Isabella by the fireplace.

Winter had snuck in almost overnight and had brought a frosty chill. The fireplace that had hardly been used a few weeks before was now constantly burning through firewood to warm the cabin. And although the fireplace warmed the cabin, it was Cooper who was warming her heart these days.

“The boys enjoyed making them.” Isabella smiled at him. “They enjoyed you taking them to pick out the tree even more.”

Cooper chuckled. “I barely made it out with my life. Have you seen Aaron with an axe?”

Isabella laughed. “I can only imagine. Are they asleep?”

“Sweet and sound. We read another chapter of Moby Dick; the boys are really enjoying it.” Cooper settled on a cough and crossed his legs at the ankles.

Isabella took a moment to look at him, struggling to fathom how he could be the same person she had threatened to leave a month before. Neither she nor Cooper had ever mentioned their talk on the porch but effective the very next morning, Isabella had seen a noted difference in her husband.

Instead of ignoring her, he kept her apprised of his plans. Instead of scolding the boys constantly he began to praise them. Slowly he began to

invite them to help him with chores. Even more surprising was the way he would make Isabella and himself coffee once the boys were in bed, to enjoy on the porch or in front of the fireplace when he would tell her all about the day.

She had promised not to fall in love with a rancher who still mourned his wife, but Isabella had broken that promise. Cooper might not know it, but she had fall in love with him just as deeply as she had fallen in love with his boys.

Cooper was indeed a wonderful man; he just had too much on his mind to remember it.

“There was something I wanted to discuss with you,” Cooper said turning to her with a serious look.

“That sounds foreboding.” Isabella frowned.

“Not at all. This last month got me thinking... I don’t need to spend so much time riding cattle and working horses,” Cooper said, considering his words.

“You don’t? But if you don’t then who will?” Isabella asked with a frown. “You said yourself if the herd isn’t looked after the predators or thieves will get them.”

“And I meant it. But I also know that my boys won’t be young forever. I’ve already lost too much time with them due to my grief; I don’t want to lose more time. I thought perhaps... if we can afford to feed another mouth on the ranch, I’d like to hire another hand. That way I can give more responsibility over to Jacob and I can spend more time with the boys.” Cooper’s words made Isabella’s brows rise with surprise. “And with you...”

She nearly swallowed her tongue with shock. “You... I mean... that’s a good idea. I’m sure the boys would love to spend more time with you.”

Cooper’s mouth curved into a smile she’d never seen before; it was handsome and playful at the same time. “Would you love to spend more time with me as well?”

“Cooper...” Isabella drew on all her defenses and threw them up all the higher. “We both agreed this would be a friendship and a marriage of convenience. Let’s not complicate things.”

Cooper shrugged before he leaned forward and moved a little closer to Isabella. “I agree. But when I said that I was lost. I was lost in my grief, struggling to raise the boys and wondering why it was Hannah that was called home and not me. I shut down all my emotions, just trying to get through every day. I realize now that it wasn’t right, Isa.”

Isabella’s heart skipped a beat. It was the first time Cooper had used the boys’ pet name for her.

“You made me realize that emotions weren’t a sin, they were part of life. I can’t promise you that I’ll ever love you, especially not the way I loved Hannah, but I would like us to be closer. I would like us to be friends. The type of friends that can laugh together and share secrets. If we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together, don’t you think we should at least try?”

Isabella hesitated for a moment before she realized he wasn’t telling her he loved her, merely that he wanted to get better acquainted. It would be painful for her to spend more time with him as his wife and the mother of his children, especially if he only sought a stronger friendship. She summoned a smile and finally nodded. “Yes, I do. For the boys.”

“Exactly, for the boys.” Cooper agreed. “Would you like coffee?”

Isabella nodded with a grateful smile, although it felt as if her heart was breaking. Only now that Cooper had made it clear that he would never love her, did she realize that she loved him more than she had ever loved Matthew.

She swallowed past the numerous emotions flooding her mind and summoned a smile when he returned. She couldn’t reveal her feelings to him. For some reason she was certain that if Cooper knew that she had fallen in love with him, he would either run for the hills or revert to his sullen self.

Neither would be an option for the boys.

So instead, she would hide her feelings and pray that one day Cooper's heart would make a little room for her as well.

For now she was just grateful that he had fully embraced fatherhood again and was proving to be a wonderful father.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22



On Christmas Eve, the entire Turner family sat around the fireplace. Gifts were piled underneath the Douglas Fir and the scent of fresh pine filled the room.

Cooper smiled as he glanced at Isabella, realizing he had come to think of her as a member of the family.

For the last two years Christmas had been a sullen affair with a gift for each of the boys and a meal cooked by Jacob's wife. But this year, Christmas was better than he could ever remember. Isabella had insisted that no gifts be bought. She had explained to him that after being raised in a home with an abundance of money, gifts had become a display of wealth instead of a gesture of affection reflecting the true spirit of Christmas and the Lord's birth.

At first Cooper had thought it foolish, but Aaron and Abel had quickly managed to get him just as excited as they were. They would walk in the snowy pasture and Aaron would find a rock shaped like a bowl, only to take it home as a gift for Isabella to keep her broaches in. Abel had surprised him by asking for his help to weave pieces of dry sticks together. When he held it up in the wind, it made a cheerful sound.

Little by little Cooper had caught onto the new tradition, appreciating it even as it built excitement with every day as Christmas grew closer. He had

used cow hide to make leather chaps for his boys because he wanted to teach them to horse ride next year. He had even been creative enough to make them each a train set from dried cattle bones.

It wasn't only refreshing but challenging as well.

"How about some hot cocoa?" Isabella asked getting up.

Both boys eagerly agreed and Cooper couldn't help but join in. He'd never tasted cocoa such that Isabella made it. He wasn't sure what she put in the concoction, but it warmed from the inside out and even brought an improved sleep.

Tomorrow they would be spending their first Christmas together and Cooper couldn't help but look forward to hosting friends for the feast that Isabella was planning. But before he allowed himself to become excited about tomorrow, he was excited about his plans for tonight.

He rubbed his hands together and cleared his throat. "Since we have so many presents under the tree, why don't we each open one tonight?"

"Really?" Isabella asked from the kitchen.

"Really? The boys are so excited, they won't sleep a wink. Let's at least ease their curiosity a little."

Isabella laughed. "Cooper Turner, you are turning out to be a mushy as fluffy potatoes."

Cooper shrugged. "Then that will be my weakness. Go on, boys, you each pick one."

Aaron grabbed one first and opened it to discover the bone train set Cooper had made. Aaron's eyes lit up with such joy that he immediately began to attempt to whistle like a train.

Isabella returned with the cocoa, giving Cooper an impressed look. "That's mighty creative."

"Thank you," Cooper said with a smile.

Abel tore the wrapping paper off his gift and gasped with joy. "A coloring book!"

“Hold up there, I thought we weren’t allowed to buy gifts.” Cooper pretended to chasten Isabella.

Isabella shook her head. “Every outline was drawn by hand. I simply purchased an empty book.”

“Creative of you,” Cooper said approvingly.

“Go on, you open one,” Isabella encouraged.

Cooper shrugged and retrieved a gift from under the tree bearing his name, grabbing another one at the same time. He tucked the latter into his pocket before he opened his gift.

A smile settled on his face even as his heart swelled in his chest. The only photo he had of Hannah was kept in his bible. It was a black and white photo of her taken a month before their wedding. Now the photo was framed with pieces from Haven Ranch. Sticks, bones, rocks and even a horseshoe had been glued together to frame Hannah. It was perfect in every way.

“I thought we could put it on the mantelpiece. That way the twins can see it too?” Isabella asked carefully as if she had overstepped in some way.

Cooper turned to her with a warm smile. “No gift has ever meant more to me, Isa. Thank you so much. It incorporates everything she loved, where she was loved and where our sons were born.”

Isabella smiled warmly. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Here’s yours,” Cooper said handing her the gift he had secreted from under the tree.

“I thought I get to pick.” Isabella frowned.

Cooper shook his head. “You can pick tomorrow, tonight you’re opening this one.”

Isabella shrugged and began to open the gift. A frown creased her brow as she recognized the letters she had written to Cooper all those months ago. “My letters?”

Cooper nodded. “When you wrote me those letters I appreciated every single word. I appreciated that you understood what I needed. I appreciated

even more than you didn't expect more of me than I could offer you at the time. But none of that applies anymore."

Isabella frowned, clearly confused. "I don't understand."

Cooper took the letters from her and walked over to the fireplace. He dropped the letters into the flames before he returned to her side, kneeling before her.

"I don't want a friend; I don't want a marriage of convenience and I don't want a nanny for my boys. You've become so much more to them than I could've ever imagined. You've become the ma they needed and you've become the wife I never thought I needed," Cooper began, hoping he was doing it right.

Both boys were smiling from ear to ear, curious about what was happening.

"I want to renew our vows, but this time I want them to be different. I want them to be real. I love you, Isabella, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy. I want to care for you, comfort you and protect you. I want us to share our secrets and our dreams. Let me be your husband in every way that matters," Cooper proposed as he pulled a ring from his pocket.

Tears streamed down Isabella's face as she smiled with a nod. "Yes, Cooper. I'd like nothing more than for this to be a real marriage. I love you, too."

The boys shrieked with excitement although they didn't really understand the gravity of the proceedings playing out before them when Cooper leaned forward and kissed his wife for the very first time.

EPILOGUE



“*A*bel, be careful, you’ll break your neck!” Isabella cried out from the side of the corral.

“Ma, I’m doing just fine,” Abel called back, riding the mare as if he had sat a horse for thirty years.

Isabella couldn’t really argue since he was doing just fine. If there was one thing Abel had inherited from his father, it was his riding skills.

Aaron on the other hand inherited his father’s love for the land. Whereas Abel would spend his day riding after cattle with Jacob or the ranch hands if he was allowed, Aaron would spend it with his hands in the dirt growing vegetables.

Both her boys were growing up too fast, Isabella thought with a heavy sigh. It was hard to believe that she had only been on the ranch for three years. She could hardly recall her life in Boston and felt as if she had been a rancher’s wife for a lifetime.

As if she had been Cooper’s wife for a lifetime.

God had truly blessed her with a wonderful husband and a marriage filled with laughter and love. Isabella could never in her wildest dreams have imagined that she would have been blessed with all this when she had sat across from Agatha reading the Matrimonial Times for the very first time.

“Will you let your hair down, he’s a natural. I couldn’t even ride that well

at his age,” Cooper said sliding an arm around her shoulder.

Isabella rolled her eyes at her husband. “My hair is already loosened, I gave birth six months ago, I don’t think I will ever have the time to fix my hair in an elegant style again.”

Cooper looked at her with so much love and adoration that it made her feel beautiful regardless of the weight she had put on during the pregnancy. “And yet you’re still the second most beautiful thing on Haven Ranch.”

Isabella laughed, playfully punching his arm. “If Hannah wasn’t such a sweetheart, I might have felt offended.”

When they had learned Isabella was with child, it had been her suggestion to name a girl after Hannah. Although Isabella had never known Hannah, Hannah was as much a part of her life as she had been to the rest of the family. She had brought the twins into the world, and she had been the first to love Cooper. It was she who had showed him how to be good husband to her now.

“Isa, Hannah’s lookin’ for her mama.”

Isabella and Cooper turned to the porch where her mother stood holding her daughter. Every time she saw her mother looking healthy and happy, Isabella’s heart skipped a few beats. It had been Cooper’s idea to invite her family to the ranch, and it had been at his insistence that her mother stay.

Before Isabella realized what was happening, Cooper had called for a doctor to see her mother as well as a Cheyenne medicine man. Together, the two had assessed her mother and had decided the Laudanum the doctor in Boston had given her mother had become an addiction.

Once they had weaned her mother off the Laudanum over some days, her mother had returned to her a little by little. Now two years later, her mother was the same person she remembered before the tragedy of her father’s investment had ruined their lives.

To Isabella’s surprise her mother had no intention of returning to Boston. Just like Isabella, she had fallen in love with Montana and life on a ranch. Of

course Isabella's brother didn't understand it in the least, but it was wonderful to have her mother with her.

Especially now that she had the baby.

Before Isabella headed to the porch she turned to Cooper and searched his eyes. "You're a wonderful man, Cooper Turner."

Cooper shrugged. "Back at you. You brought me back, the least I could do was try to bring her back."

"And you did." Isabella nodded gratefully.

"Have I told you how much I love today?" Cooper asked brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

Isabella laughed. "I don't know, I can't remember. You'll just have to tell me again."

Cooper smiled affectionately. "I love you, Isa. I never thought that my heart would have space to love like this again, but I do. I love you more than my next breath, more than my herd of cattle and more than I love the rain during a drought."

Isabella laughed. "That's quite a declaration, Mr. Turner. Let's just say I love you more than all the dresses that no longer fit me."

Cooper's laughter rang after her as she walked to the porch. "Hey there, baby girl," she crooned as she reached for Hannah.

Hannah's gummy smile made her heart swell with love. "Thank you, Mother, was she crying?"

"Not at all. She's the sweetest baby ever, Isa. Can I just say something?" her mother asked with a curious look.

"What?" Isabella asked.

"I'm glad you didn't marry Matthew. At the time it was the perfect match, but now I realize God had perfection in mind for you all along."

Isabella nodded in agreement. "He did, didn't He. If I've learned anything, Mother, it's that sometimes the Lord uses a detour along a rocky gravel road scattered with thorns before He leads you to green pastures. But

every single rock and thorn is worth the journey.”

“You’re wiser than I ever was at your age,” her mother said approvingly.

Isabella looked at her husband, her sons, and her daughter and knew she was not wise, she was just grateful.

OceanofPDF.com

A BRIDE FULL OF KINDNESS



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



*B*oston – 24th March 1865

MARY ROGERS CLOSED the main door to the small tenement building in which she lived. She leaned against the big wooden door and took a deep breath. The only overcoat she possessed was not warm enough for this winter, which seemed to be never-ending.

“Afternoon, dear,” called her kindly neighbor, Mrs. Holt, as she hobbled out of her own room towards Mary at the main door.

“Hello, Mrs. Holt,” she replied as she stepped closer to her neighbor on her way to her own front door. “How are you today?” she asked kindly and with genuine interest. She knew the 82-year-old lady had been struggling to get out in this weather.

“Oh, you know, we just carry on, don’t we, dear?” came her normal reply.

“We do, we do,” Mary responded in her usual way. She smiled at the mundanity and repetitiveness of their lives of late. “I hope you’re wrapped up warm, it’s bitterly cold out there today,” she warned as they passed each other in the gloomy corridor.

“Oh, I am, dear, this winter never seems to be ending. It’s making life

very hard for so many,” she said sadly, to which Mary nodded her head in agreement, her plain poker-straight hair falling blandly in brown strips to either side of her face.

THEY BID their farewells as they went in opposite directions. Mary closed the door behind her, leaned on it hard, and took some time to catch her breath and warm up.

She peeled off her gloves and placed them on the table at the door before removing and hanging her coat on the rickety hook behind the door. The ground had been frozen solid at her parents’ graves, preventing her from securing the flowers in place in the soil as she normally did. Tears filled her eyes again as she thought shamefully about the simple wooden crosses which marked the spot of the final resting place of her beloved parents. She had not even been able to afford a headstone for them. She wondered if she would ever be able to honor them with headstones and sincerely hoped she would.

Her mother and father’s passing had been most unexpected and within a few days of each other, such was the devastation and spread of cholera at the time. She knew she should be thankful she had not also fallen ill, but she was lonely and had been struggling ever since their passing almost a year before. In fact, she was struggling even to keep the very simple tenement roof over her head and to put food in her belly.

Mary had found work in the local factory, but the pay was low, conditions were less than ideal, and the hours were not always consistent. She had started to take in sewing jobs from people in the local community in order to make a little extra money, but it didn’t stretch too all that far at all.

She wearily made her way into the small, dark kitchen where she gathered the remaining vegetables for the week and quickly peeled and chopped them, before placing them into the pot. A vegetable stew for dinner would surely warm her and help to stay the chill in her bones. Mary lit the

small fire using kindling she had scavenged here and there. Once a flame had taken hold, she placed the pot over the heat to cook. She sat back in her chair, deep in thought; memories of her mother and father flooded her mind. They had always been so happy when they were together. Now she was miserable and wanted to cry all the time. She knew she needed to do something to change her situation, but she felt trapped and could see no way out.

Mary jumped Suddenly in her seat and looked around the room, her heart rate escalated. She had the distinct feeling of having been pushed. She took a few deep breaths as she realized took hold that she had dozed off and had most likely lost her balance on the rickety old wooden chair, causing her to have jolted awake. She glanced over to the fire, only to find the flames had died down. She stood to rectify the matter, knowing that she would remain hungry if she did not since the stew would not cook through without more heat. She had no idea for how long she had dozed off, but she berated herself for letting the fire diminish to such an extent.

Mary tried to stoke the fire to life, her stomach growling to remind her of her hunger. Whilst stoking, she spotted in the fire a title on a scrap of the newspaper she had used for kindling - The Matrimonial Times. She had never seen such a paper before and had never even heard of it, although she had been told about mail order brides in the past by other women who worked alongside her at the factory. She had been so tired when she lit the fire that she hadn't even noticed the paper which she now scratched out of the embers. She brushed off the ash and soot and checked the date; unlike most of the papers she had gathered for kindling it was only a week old. Her stomach flipped as she considered perusing the publication further.

SHE EXPERTLY RELIT the fire enough to cook her stew for supper and then sat back in her chair with the newspaper in her hands in a bid to keep herself awake. She stared out the small window into the blackness for a little while,

wondering what her mother and father would think of her considering the life of a mail-order bride. She concluded they would want her to be happy and she sure wasn't happy with how her life was at that moment. And so she cast her eyes onto The Matrimonial Times and dared to look through the advertisements placed by the men out west in search of wives. She realized this could well be her way out. Out of this miserable tenement with its dark halls and rooms. Out of the factory and away from the boss who thought he could say whatever he wanted to her. Out of Boston.

Time melted away as Mary studied the paper as though her life depended upon it. Some of the advertisements sounded far-fetched, and she moved fleetingly past them. Some of the men were too old for her, so she could disregard their placements. Some of the men lived in regions to which she knew she would never want to go. She had no desire to reside in the colder areas and so she moved past these advertisements. Finally, she was down to those with potential. At the tender age of just 21 she knew she needed to be careful. She had heard tales of mail order brides who were deceived, lied to, or taken advantage of, although these tales had always been second-hand and their validity unfathomable.

That was when she came across an advertisement placed by a Percival Grimm of California. She liked the sound of California; she knew it was hot there and it never snowed, which would be such a welcome contrast to Boston. The advertisement pegged Mr. Grimm as a successful landowner and rancher, aged 23. Mary felt her stomach turn and was unsure whether it was due to excitement or hunger. She decided it could be both but thought she should deal with one thing at a time, so she set aside the paper, stood from her chair, and checked on the stew. The vegetables were soft enough and so she retrieved a bowl and helped herself to a ladle full. She checked the store for the possibility of bread leftover from the previous day. But her store proved bare, and she would have to make do with just the stew.

Once she had devoured her dinner and cleared the leavings, Mary

gathered her pencil, paper, and envelope and returned to the table and the newspaper, specifically to the advertisement placed by Percival Grimm. She read the advertisement over and over before she put her pencil to paper and began her response.

DEAR MR. GRIMM,

I trust this letter finds you well and that life is going well on your ranch.

I ventured upon your advertisement in The Matrimonial Times and felt drawn to respond.

LIVING in Boston can be hard, especially with the cold weather drawing on for so long, so the thought of having a successful husband in California appeals to me very much.

I believe I would make an excellent wife. I am hard-working, loyal, and honest and I know how to keep a home. I am eager to have children of my own one day as I love their presence and enjoy family life.

I DO HOPE this is similar to your visions of a future. I would love to hear back from you.

REGARDS,

Miss Mary Rogers

MARY HAD DECIDED to provide as little information about herself as possible. While she didn't want to evoke his sympathy, she also did not want to put

him off by admitting to her lack of means. She certainly didn't mention her appearance as she was without a doubt what people referred to kindly as plain-looking. Her hair was poker straight, vastly different from the bouncy curls she envied on other women, and her eyes were more grey than blue, but she was slim, of average height, and tried to always be well dressed.

She managed to get enough money together to mail her letter and secure a postal box to avoid Percival Grimm knowing her address. He was a stranger after all, and a woman couldn't be too careful.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



*B*oston – 16th April 1865

SHE AWOKE with a start in the morning. Mary had almost forgotten over the last few weeks that she had written to Mr. Grimm, having been so busy at the factory and inundated with sewing jobs after working hours. She had not had much time at all to think on it and wonder whether he might respond. Mary realized that in her panic to see to it that she had the wherewithal financially to survive, she had not been to check her postal box. For all she knew, a letter may have been awaiting her collection, leaving Mr. Grimm presuming her to be tardy for having not yet replied to him.

Mary dragged herself out of bed and prepared for the day. She dressed quickly in layers to try to fend off the bitterly cold weather, which was still a bother in Boston. Feeling relieved that it was Sunday and her day away from the factory, she quickly ate breakfast with a cup of hot coffee, before she donned her outerwear and made her way out of the dark, dismal building.

She walked quickly into town. The faster she walked, the warmer she became, keeping her pace as fast as was feasible without running. She politely asked at the counter if she could check her postal box before being led through to the boxes where she was left in private. She couldn't believe

her eyes when she opened the access to find a letter. It could be from no one else, as she had not given the address to any other person. Who would write to her, anyway? Everyone she knew lived in her vicinity.

She had just opened her purse when the clerk appeared to check on her. She thanked him for his time, discreetly sliding the envelope into her purse before scuttling past the gentleman. She realized she felt embarrassed by her mail, although the clerk would of course have no idea, or indeed interest, as to the nature of her correspondence. Mary held her purse close to her as she walked home. She wondered what he might have said, and by the time she arrived home, she had considered all possible responses from worst case to best.

Mary was bitterly cold by the time she arrived outside her tenement block. She shivered and her hands shook as she opened the main door. She quickly walked along the dimly lit corridor, hoping to make it through her door without being spotted, which rarely happened these days. She knew Mrs. Holt was lonely and so she felt terrible for wanting to get in without being seen, but she so wanted to open her letter and get warm.

It was too late; Mrs. Holt must have heard her or had probably been waiting on her chair in front of the window after hearing her leave earlier that morning. Mary heard the distinct sound of her door opening on the corridor as she approached, and Mrs. Holt popped her little head out with a smile on her aging yet nonetheless pretty face.

“Hello, dear,” she cried enthusiastically. “How are you? Would you have time for an old lady? Maybe a nice hot cup of coffee? It looks like you could do with something to warm you.” She glanced at Mary’s hands, still shaking and red from the bitterness beyond the door.

Mary could see in her friend’s eyes that she really wanted and needed the company. She found herself nodding in agreement as she pulled her purse with the letter concealed within closer to her side and followed Mrs. Holt indoors.

They chatted amicably and with ease for the next hour or so. Mary found she actually had a lovely time catching up to Mrs. Holt. She discovered that it was the anniversary of Mr. Holt's passing and so she was glad that she had been kind and accepted her invitation.

"I really must be getting back now, Mrs. Holt," Mary said as she stood and placed her empty cup on the kitchen sideboard. "Will you be alright?" she asked, genuinely concerned for her older friend.

"Oh, yes, dear, I will be fine. Thank you for coming in, it has broken up my day." Mary saw the familiar look cross her face as she said again, "I do wish I had been lucky enough to have had a daughter. She would have been just like you." Tears filled the older lady's gray-blue eyes as the pair embraced.

"I will see you very soon, Mrs. Holt. Please just let me know if you need anything," Mary said as she left, as she always did.

Finally, Mary stepped into her own home, popped her overcoat onto its hook, and quickly made her way to the kitchen table. The fire had burned out because she had been away much longer than she had anticipated. She rekindled it quickly using the last of her fuel before sitting down with the letter in front of her, the cold of the wooden chair chilling her legs. She carefully opened the envelope, gently pulled out the letter, and opened it slowly. Something fell from the envelope and dropped to the ground and Mary quickly stooped to pick it up and investigate. It was a photograph of the very handsome Percival Grimm. She took a moment to study the image, the shape of his head, the look of his hair and eyes, the straight mouth with thin red lips, and the overall ruddy outdoor appearance. She placed the photograph to one side to concentrate on the letter.

DEAR MISS ROGERS, or may I call you Mary?

It was very pleasant indeed to receive your letter, for which I thank you.

THE RANCH CONTINUES to thrive and we are very pleased with the progress to this end.

I wonder if you are any relation to the famous Mr. Rogers of Boston.

I cannot imagine cold weather lingering for so long; rest assured it is a much kinder climate here in California.

All the attributes you have described yourself as having are certainly what I would look for in a wife. I think it would be ideal for us to write further and to become better acquainted.

I LOOK FORWARD to hearing more about you and your life, and I wonder if you would tell me about your family.

REGARDS,

Percival Grimm.

MARY'S STOMACH had been doing somersaults and when she finally finished reading the letter, she took a deep breath as she realized that she had quite forgotten to breathe. She was indeed related to the infamous Mr. Rogers, although the link was distant being that she was his second cousin once removed. Neither she nor her father had ever had contact with him, as far as she was aware. Mary did know of him and knew that he owned hotels and businesses throughout New England. She very much doubted that Mr. Rogers had ever heard of her or, for that matter, even her father. But as Percival seemed so interested, she should maybe omit that detail and simply answer his question.

Not wanting to lose any time, Mary collected her pencil, paper, and a

fresh envelope and immediately wrote back to Percival. The quicker this process, the better it would be for her to finally be in a position to get out of this place, although she was reluctant to go back out into the cold.

DEAR MR. GRIMM,

I was delighted to receive your letter, and I thank you for taking the time to write back to me.

Of course, you simply must call me Mary.

YOUR RANCH SOUNDS a delight and I hope to see it someday. Do you have help on the ranch? It sounds like a great deal for one man to handle.

I am indeed related to Mr. Rogers, yes. He is doing very well for himself, as I am sure you may be aware.

I DON'T HAVE much to impart about my family, unfortunately. My mother and father both died a year ago and I have no brothers or sisters. I am all alone, so to say. My father was a banker and my mother was a seamstress and we lived very happily together when they were still alive. Now I miss them terribly with reminders of their passing wherever I look in Boston, highlighting my loneliness without them.

THERE REALLY IS nothing more to tell about my life. I haven't done much yet over my short years, but I hope to change that.

KINDEST REGARDS,

Mary.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



California – 14th May 1865

JANICE GRIMM MADE the short walk to the end of their track to check the post box, as she did every morning. As she swung the door open, she was delighted to see an envelope inside. She grabbed it quickly and took it back to the house which was now empty as her son, Percival, had left for his long day on the ranch. She was pleased he wasn't around; she could take time to read the letter which she felt sure was written in the same hand as the previous letter from the lovely Miss Rogers.

She sat in the parlor at the ornate table that she had picked out herself many years ago, her coffee cup still warm in front of her. The weather was becoming so humid that she often let her coffee go cold and drank it then when it proved more cooling and refreshing.

She used a letter opener to carefully unseal the envelope and then gently took out the sheet of paper. As she unfolded it, she spotted the name of the sender and felt so pleased that they had a response from this lady. She read slowly and drank in all the information. Miss Mary Rogers was indeed related to the famous Mr. Rogers; that was very good news indeed. Just the kind of family she had hoped for her son to marry into, she thought.

Janice took some time to pen a reply to Mary Rogers, thinking as she did that she should probably run this one by Percival before she sent it. She was so worried that her son might grow old alone because he never made the time to meet a lady and was always working. She had been pressuring him to find a wife ever since his father had passed away eighteen months earlier, but he had been reluctant, until the day he had agreed that she could find him one provided she kept him out of it. She knew he had agreed in order to shut her up as she had been nagging at him. So she had quickly advertised for a wife for him, as though she was he, and had even replied to a few ladies as though she was her son. She simply had to do this for him. If she didn't take matters into her own hands, the family legacy would end, leaving her little choice.

Now that she knew Mary Rogers was indeed related to Mr. Rogers, she decided she would no longer keep up the correspondence with the other lady. This was the one who would be worthy of her son and his name. She would not rush things, of course, for she needed to be absolutely sure she had found the perfect match before she invited her to the ranch and into their lives, but she felt confident that this Miss Rogers was simply perfect.

Janice Grimm had always been one of life's social climbers. She loved being around people of high society, strutting their family name, and showing off the family's wealth and success. They had only ever been a small family, just her, her husband, and the one son, Percival. But it had always been enough for her and they had seen success beyond their wildest dreams. Success which her son continued to strive towards on his father's ranch. They might be a small family, but they had done big things and continued to do so.

She busied herself for the rest of the day, checking on the darning of clothing that needed repairing, making sure the cleaning of the kitchen was done to her standard, and ensuring the dinner preparation was underway. Every time she thought about her son coming home, she was reminded of the letter he had received from Miss Rogers and the one she had prepared to send to her in return, which she would send the following day after she had spoken

to Percival.

That evening she held her breath as he came through the door like a whirlwind. He had never been gentle, always stomping from one place to the next, heavy-footed and loud-mouthed. But she loved him and knew he was kind and thoughtful to those he loved. He was just a busy man who didn't have time for niceties or for taking his time.

"Evening, son," she said as he kicked off his boots and pushed his lengthy brown hair back with a large hand. "You must let me cut your hair!" she declared, not for the first time.

"The hair is fine," he grumbled gruffly as he pushed it from his eyes, reassuring his mother with a barely conspicuous wink to show that he was teasing her.

He washed his hands before making his way into the dining room, where he sat at the table as Janice had his food brought to him and obediently placed before him. Janice joined him to sit opposite him at the table as they always had. No sooner had she taken her seat than her dinner was served. Her husband had always taken the seat at the head of the table when he was alive and head of the family. Percival had chosen not to assume his father's position, remaining instead in his own designated seat even after his father's passing. She preferred it that way too.

They chatted amicably during the meal of meat and potatoes with gravy, as they did every night. Janice wondered about the right time to bring up Mary Rogers, her mind whirring as to what his reaction might be. Finally, with a lull in the conversation, she took her opportunity.

"Remember how we talked about you finding a wife?" she said cautiously, glancing into his eyes as she saw him roll them in annoyance.

"Are you still going on about this, Mother?" he asked, clearly agitated.

"You said I could go ahead and search for you, as long as I didn't involve you," she explained, a smile on her aging face to let her son know he was safe.

“And yet, here we are, and you seem to be involving me,” he snapped as he fished the last slice of beef on his plate.

“I have to involve you at some point and now seems like the right time. I have been in touch with a lovely lady, a Mary Rogers, descendent of the Mr. Rogers himself!” she exclaimed, which did raise a look of interest from Percival which could not go unnoticed. He remained quiet, though, prompting her to continue. “She seems like a perfect match for you and worthy of our family name. I have a few letters from her now and wondered if you would like to read them, as well as my response before I send it off,” she suggested, interested in his response.

“No, thank you, Mother. I have no interest in this whatsoever. If you insist on me taking a wife, you can sort it for me, as I said, but until such day as she arrives on my doorstep, I do not want to know. I don’t have the time for this childish behavior. I have real work to do,” he stated unapologetically even when he saw the wounded look in his mother’s eyes.

SHE DID NOT THINK SECURING his future was childish in the least. But she did not want to argue with her son and thought it would be better to simply continue the correspondence without his input .

CHAPTER 3



*B*oston – 1st June 1865

MARY HAD NOT LET herself become too busy to remember to check the postal box. She had been twice since mailing her last letter and was yet to find an envelope waiting on collection. She hoped that would be different today. She was relieved that the weather was looking up and that she did not have to layer up quite as much as she had a few months before. She walked slowly into town, not having to pace herself to keep warm, she was able to enjoy the walk and take in her surroundings.

She had been delighted to find the envelope inside the postal box when she opened it. She snatched it out and popped it quickly into her purse, returning the key to the clerk before anyone approached her.

“Everything in order, Miss Rogers?” he asked as he observed her somewhat flustered face.

“Very good, thank you, Mr. Johnstone. Very good, indeed,” she had replied, a wry smile on her thin red lips. She gave him a small wave as she closed the door behind her.

Once outside, Mary walked a short way in the direction of the tenement before opting to take a seat on the bench within the recreational park on the

route. With the weather being a little warmer she could comfortably sit here to open her letter, rather than waiting until she was in the relative warmth of her building. She pulled the envelope from her purse and gently opened it, removing the letter immediately, eager to see his response.

DEAR MARY,

I too was delighted to receive your letter and thank you for allowing me to call you by your first name. Of course, you are welcome to call me by my first name too.

I DO INDEED HAVE some help on the ranch, yes. I simply couldn't do it on my own, such is the size of the land and the number of cattle I have now. Thank you for your concern, I do try to give myself some time off when I can.

I AM INDEED aware of Mr. Rogers's success. He has been of interest to our family for some time, maybe one day I will even get to meet him.

I WAS sorry to read about your parents' passing. I do hope you don't think me insensitive when I ask the details behind their demise? Was it due to illness? My own father passed away almost two years ago. A cardiac arrest, unfortunately. Now it is just me and my mother who live on the ranch. She keeps the house and it is my hope that when I marry she will be able to rest a little.

I am sure there are more interesting things which you can tell me about your life. Are you earning a living currently? What is it that you do? How do you like to spend your time?

I wonder if you might have a photograph you could send to me. I hope you found the photograph I enclosed in my last letter.

*KINDEST REGARDS, dearest Mary,
Percival.*

MARY STARED at the letter while she admired the beautiful cursive penmanship. He was a man who paid attention to detail, she could tell by the attention shown in his letter writing and she suddenly felt ashamed of her own less than appealing handwriting. She would make more of an effort in the future when writing to him.

Mary penned her reply when she arrived home. She answered his questions as best she could, but she could not send him a photograph. Not only was she concerned that he would find her plain and far from elegant, she simply didn't have the money to have her photograph taken. She could not tell him that as she did not want him to think she was only after his money. She had therefore responded with an explanation about not yet having the time or opportunity for sitting for a photograph to be taken, giving instead a description of her best qualities.

Now that the letter-writing had acquired a fairly good flow she did not feel the need to rush back into town immediately to mail the letter as soon as it was in the envelope. She was confident that dispatching it only the following day would nonetheless result in a response, so she vowed to do so while on her lunch break during work the following day.

AS IT WAS a Sunday and she wanted all her sewing jobs completed before the start of yet another busy week, she set herself up at the table and got to work

in earnest. She had realized a fair amount of darning and adjustment jobs over the previous few weeks and was glad of the much-needed income that would make life a little more comfortable for her.

While she worked Mary daydreamed of a better life on a ranch in California where her dashing husband doted on her and her mother-in-law chatted with her throughout the day. She dreamt of her growing stomach, where a baby would grow, and having a family of their own.

Mary felt a tear run down her cheek and onto the fabric with which she was working. She quickly wiped it away and dabbed at the cloth. She realized this was the first time she had allowed herself to dream of being happy since her parents had died. She deserved to be happy and hoped that this was indeed her time.

She took a breath and looked up from her work. She had been so engrossed in her sewing and thoughts of the future that she had not realized the time. It was dark outside and she knew she would need to get to bed very soon to be fresh for work the following day.

For the first time in as long as she could remember, she went to bed with a smile on her face and slept peacefully the whole night through.

CHAPTER 4



*B*oston – 11th August 1865

THEY HAD BEEN CORRESPONDING for almost six months when she received the letter she had been waiting for and dreaming of.

DEAREST MARY,

I have truly enjoyed our correspondence over the last six months and I believe we have a great deal in common, not the least of which is knowing the direction we would want for our lives.

I pledge to continue to build the ranch, to make it a success, and to always be able to take care of my wife and family.

THIS LEADS me finally to an important question. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?

If you are agreeable, I propose you travel by train to California as soon as possible once your affairs are in order in Boston. I have enclosed the money for your train ticket. Please make sure to reserve yourself a first-class

compartment so that you can travel to me in comfort. I absolutely insist upon this, so please do not be too proud.

I KNOW the train leaves Boston every Wednesday morning bound for California, arriving late the following Monday afternoon.

I DO HOPE you are agreeable and would be happy to marry me and I pray you are able to secure a safe passage to me very soon.

AS LETTERS TAKE SO long to arrive, I will be at the train station every Monday evening, excitedly awaiting your possible arrival. But if you do decide not to make the journey, I would appreciate you writing to let me know.

KINDEST OF REGARDS, dear Mary,

Yours,

Percival.

MARY COULD NOT BELIEVE her eyes! She squealed with excitement which drew some concerned and amused looks from passersby as she tried to contain herself on the park bench on which she now read every letter from Percival.

She realized this would be the last time she did so since she would absolutely accept his offer of marriage and would be on her way as soon as was humanly possible. She had only a few days to organize if she was to make the first train that Wednesday, but she was hopeful she would manage

to do just that.

There was an unaccustomed spring in her step as she made her way into the tenement building that she called home. Mary looked around her as she approached her door and thought the building looked a little brighter, not as dark and grimy as normal. Was this what happiness felt like, she wondered, as she heard Mrs. Holt's door open.

"Mrs. Holt, what a lovely day!" Mary declared as she approached the old lady who seemed startled by this change in demeanor.

"Well, good afternoon, young lady. What has gotten into you?" she asked, returning the smile.

"Shall I come in for that coffee that I have been promising to share with you, and I can tell you all about it?" Mary suggested, to which Mrs. Holt nodded eagerly and widened her door to allow access.

Mrs. Holt prepared the coffee slowly. Mary was aware that she was her only friend. The only person she would need to say goodbye to. She had not made any friends in the factory; they worked them all too hard to give them time to speak to each other. She wondered how her boss would receive her resignation the following morning and then realized she didn't really care. He had never been nice to her and she already had her wages for the previous week so she was in no danger of losing earnings should he dismiss her from the factory, which he had been known to do when women tried to leave his employment.

"Would you like some help carrying it through, Mrs. Holt?" asked Mary kindly, knowing that the old lady's hands were now bent with arthritis and shook constantly.

"No, dear, I will be fine. I'm coming now," she called back her reply as she made the short journey from the kettle to the table and chairs. Mary could see the tray shaking and wanted to jump up to help, but she knew how fiercely independent Mrs. Holt was and did not want to take that away from her.

They chatted for a while about their day-to-day lives before Mrs. Holt commented on her earlier joviality.

“Are you going to tell me what has got you so excited?”

Mary explained that she had been writing to a man who had now proposed.

“So where will you be going?” Mrs. Holt asked, with a confusing mixture of sadness and delight for her friend.

“To California,” she stated proudly. “Where the sun always shines!”

“Oh, my dear, I am very happy for you, and I do hope and pray that it all works out for you. Of course, you know you need to be careful, and if he is not all he appears to be you must simply make your way back here. There will always be a place for you to stay here with me.” Mary’s eyes filled with tears at this very kind gesture. “When will you go?” she asked.

“I am hoping to go this Wednesday. I know it is soon, but I see no need to delay. You know I have been unhappy here since my parents...” her voice trailed off.

“I know it has been very difficult for you since your parents passed away, dear child. And you deserve to be happy, so I wish you all the happiness in the world.” Mrs. Holt’s eyes brimmed with tears. “But will you have enough money to get there?” she asked, concern suddenly falling across her wrinkled face.

“Percival has sent me money for the train fare so I only need to get enough together for food for the journey. I should be able to do it with the sewing jobs I have on at the moment. I will have my work cut out for me to get it all done on time, but it will be worth it,” Mary stated confidently.

“Do you still have the adjustments to do for Mrs. Layton? You do know she has passed away, don’t you? Just yesterday,” Mrs. Holt said gently when she realized Mary had not been aware.

“Oh goodness, really? I hadn’t heard. I only saw her last week,” Mary said sadly, but she knew all too well how death could take people without

warning; one minute seeming fine, the next gone forever. Her mind wondered how she would manage now, without payment from Mrs. Layton, but she knew she would get by. She always did. She liked this newfound optimism that seemed to be searing through her body.

They bid their farewells as Mary explained that she needed to get working on her darning work, and she vowed she would visit the old lady again before she was to leave on Wednesday.

Mary looked over the sewing work she had to do when she got back into her own apartment. The three dresses she had to take in for Mrs. Layton hung sadly on the back of the door, awaiting her collection. Mary took them down and she had a thought. She knew Mrs. Layton had no family to speak of and that no one would really know of the whereabouts of the dresses or even that they were missing. She thought back to the last time she had seen Mrs. Layton when she had told Mary that one day she would like her to have some of her dresses. She held a dress up in front of herself and wondered if it would fit. She would, after all, need some nicer outfits in which to travel and meet her new husband-to-be and his mother. She wanted to create a favorable impression. And Mrs. Layton had always had such exquisite gowns.

She fitted the dresses and made slight alterations. She said a silent thank you to Mrs. Layton and prayed this would not be something that would be frowned upon. She was confident the deceased lady would have wanted her dresses to be worn for just this purpose.

CHAPTER 5



California – 13th August 1865

JANICE AWAITED her son's return after his day's work on the ranch. She was excited to inform him of the developments and knew he could not complain as she had not involved him until the very end. She had not so much as mentioned finding him a wife since he had got angry with her the past time and so she had followed his wishes.

In he strolled, his brow damp and his shirt wet from the heat and the baking sun. He mentioned freshening up before dinner as he always did in this weather. She felt so much pride for her son. He worked so hard and always had such good manners. She knew he was going to make a wonderful husband and father and she was confident she had chosen well for him.

“What's for dinner tonight?” Percival asked, a smile on his tanned face as he took his place at the table.

“I got them to get that special cut of beef that you like and have put it in a broth, just the way you like it,” she exclaimed happily, knowing this was his favorite meal.

“That sounds delicious! What have I done to deserve this?” he questioned, as his mother instructed the servants to serve their food. Honour,

a young nervous girl, brought his plate over to him and laid it down on the table in front of him, his cutlery on either side ready for him. She then did the same with Janice's, painfully slowly.

"I thought you deserved a treat; you've been working so hard," she remarked, a genuinely loving smile on her face as she began to partake of her own supper.

They ate their dinner together, discussing the day and sharing anecdotes of what they had done. Percival told his mother about the shoddy work his ranch hand Jim Jones had been doing recently and complained about the standard of work from him.

"Well then, can't you find a new ranch hand? Someone who can do things the way you need?" Janice suggested to her son, although she had always thought Jim did a great job and her husband had always spoken very highly of him and his work.

"I will have to if he doesn't start doing as he's told. He's stuck in his old ways, you see. That's the problem. Wants to do things the way he always did them with my father, but things change for a reason, and he needs to move with the times."

"Well, yes, I suppose that's true. But as your father used to say, 'if it isn't broke don't fix it!'" she reminded him, to which he huffed his disapproval.

She quickly changed the subject and got him onto talking about the cattle and how well they were doing and how fast they were growing, with their young now thriving into adulthood. This lightened his mood immediately and she could see the joy in his eyes.

"Well, I have some good news, too!" she declared before she could change her mind. "Your new wife sets off on her journey to us tomorrow morning, all going well."

There was a moment of silence where the pair stared into each other's eyes, and she wondered what he was thinking.

"My wife?" he asked incredulously.

“Yes. You told me to sort it and let you know when the time arrived that she was on her way. Did you not?” she asked.

“Well, yes, I did. But I didn’t think you would actually go ahead with this madness,” he stated quietly, but she could detect a smile on his lips.

“What’s mad about it? Many men have found their perfect wives this way, and what better way than for me to get to know her first? Not that she knows it was me talking to her, she thinks it was you!” she smiled at him. “I am excited for you. She will arrive late Monday afternoon, as long as she can make this Wednesday’s train.”

“Do you even have a photograph of this woman I am meant to marry?” he asked, his eyes open wide in surprise.

“No, but she has told me everything we need to know, and she sounds just fine. And did I say, she is related to the Mr. Rogers?” she reminded him, a triumphant smile on her face. He shook his head. She could tell he was not angry about this sudden change of situation but seemed to be intrigued.

Janice went on to tell her son everything she knew about the bride-to-be and showed him the letters she had received. He showed genuine interest, although he tried hard to seem aloof. She explained to him that although she had not yet told Mary this, they would not marry until a month after her arrival. This would allow them to make sure they were compatible and that she was not simply after their money. They had room for her to sleep in the house, and this would be acceptable because Janice was under the same roof to supervise the pair. He had seemed content with that plan, although he did not say as much.

CHAPTER 6



*B*oston – 14th August 1865

MARY MADE her way to the train station, her carpetbag over her arm holding her worldly goods. She felt good in her new dress and held her head high as she walked, with a nod of good morning to those she passed.

The previous evening Mary had spent a few hours with Mrs. Holt in her home, and they had whiled away the time chatting and reminiscing about Mr. Holt and about Mary's parents. She had been sad to say goodbye to her friend, but they both knew she needed to make her own life. Mrs. Holt would not be around forever. It was a tearful farewell when Mrs. Holt said she knew her parents would be proud of her.

In contrast, her boss had not taken the news of her leaving well, and had, as she had expected, thrown her out and told her not to come back. She had missed out on a few days' work and wages but had instead had the time to complete the remainder of her sewing work and return the items to the owners. She had received payment for all the work as well as a little extra from most of the clients to go towards her adventure. She patted the side of her purse, happy to have some money of her own for the journey, and again checking the money from Percival was tucked away safely.

She had arrived at the station to find that it was getting busy and so she quickly purchased her ticket, first-class, as instructed by her husband to be. She had felt self-conscious and embarrassed asking for the first-class ticket, so unaccustomed was she to the finer things in life. She would need to get used to the wealth she was marrying into.

MARY LOCATED a bench right next to the track on which to sit while she waited. The hustle and bustle around her was disorientating and she found herself feeling very unsettled, as she clung to her carpetbag and purse, holding all her worldly goods.

She was relieved when the train finally drew into the station, and she gathered her belongings and made her way to the doors. She accepted help from a kindly gentleman, who offered his hand to help her step up onto the train. She placed her carpetbag in the compartment as instructed and then carried her purse to her place in the first-class day compartment of the train.

As she looked around her and nodded greetings to fellow travelers, she reveled in the comfort and beauty of the train. The ornate parlor train car was grand, with exquisite carved wood and velvet hangings. Mary tried to look as though she fitted in within this opulence, not wanting to seem out of her depth. She was relieved to see several women traveling alone and was particularly happy when a kind-looking older lady took the seat opposite her. They greeted each other and introduced themselves, made small talk about the weather, and then settled into a comfortable silence as the train jolted into action. Mary glanced around the carriage and felt enormous relief that she had been fortunate enough to have Mrs. Bell seated across from her. She would not have felt as comfortable sharing the space with a man on the carriage. She smiled at the older lady as they caught each other's eye.

By late evening, Mary was exhausted. Her first day on the train had been more of an ordeal than she had expected. At mealtimes, they had been asked

to follow a gentleman through to the dining car, where they were to have all their meals. The carriage was just as exquisite as the parlor but set as an extravagant dining hall. Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing and where they should go. Mary stuck with Mrs. Bell and was grateful to be able to sit with her in the bustling carriage. The food was a delight but Mary felt out of her depth unaware of the etiquette required at this type of dining table. She was thankful for Mrs. Bell taking her under her wing and gesturing her towards the correct use of the silverware.

She had started to believe she was not good enough for the life she was about to enter, the family she was about to become a member of, and the wealth she was to marry into. She cursed herself for allowing Percival to believe she was wealthier than was true and for misleading him to believe that she was higher in society than she actually was.

“What is it, dear? What is bothering you?” asked Mrs. Bell quietly as she leaned towards her, a kind smile on her wrinkled face.

“I fear I have bitten off more than I can chew, Mrs. Bell,” she admitted honestly, tears springing to the corner of her eyes as she fought to prevent them from falling down her cheeks.

“Don’t be silly, my dear. You are a kind, generous, and thoughtful young lady. Any man would be lucky to have you and I am sure this Percival chap will realize this as soon as he meets you,” her new friend tried to reassure her.

“But I don’t belong in this world. You’ve seen me today. I don’t even know which fork to use,” Mary said quietly, not wanting to draw attention to their conversation in the parlor carriage.

“You can learn those things. And really, they aren’t that important. You can always follow other people’s lead as you did with me today.” Mrs. Bell paused. “Let me help you over the next few days. You will soon have all the knowledge you need to be a lady and to fit right in with your new husband.”

Mary reached her hand out and took her friend’s, giving it a friendly squeeze by way of thanks. “Oh, Mrs. Bell, I could not ask you to do that for

me. You are journeying to see your son, surely you would like to rest.”

“You didn’t ask, I offered, and I am happy to do so. In fact, I would be offended if you were to say no,” she stated as she smiled and squeezed Mary’s hand in return.

They let go of each other’s hands and fell into an amicable silence as they each sat back in their comfortable chairs and watched the surroundings pass by. Daylight was drawing to an end. Mary glanced across at her new ally and was reminded of her dear friend from the tenement, Mrs. Holt.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



California – 19th August 1865

AS THE TRAIN pulled into the Californian station Mary felt her stomach somersault. She was nervous but felt more prepared than she had on day one of her journey. Mrs. Bell had worked wonders with her and she now felt much more confident that she would fit in.

“Well, this is it, my dear. I wish you all the luck in the world. Remember, if you start to doubt yourself, that you do deserve this life,” Mrs. Bell reminded her fondly.

The pair bid each other a final farewell as the train came to a stop and Mary stepped aside to allow her older friend to disembark ahead of her, with the help of the younger man on the platform, who she suspected was her son. She watched as they walked away together, he carrying her bags for her. She smiled at her good fortune at meeting the lovely lady.

As she disembarked from the train, she glanced around the station for the face which had over time become familiar to her. Mary had looked at his photograph so many times she was confident she would recognize him. Finally, she did spot him, but he was standing behind a glamorous woman and a slightly disheveled-looking man.

With both feet on the ground, she placed her carpetbag on the ground as Mrs. Bell had instructed, and she patted down her clothing to ensure she presented the best possible impression. The lady with Percival had clearly spotted her and they all bundled over to her, Percival staying firmly in the background.

“Miss Rogers, I presume?” asked the tall lady, her accent thick and her smile tight.

“Yes, ma’am,” Mary replied with a genuine smile on her face. She looked over at Percival who kept his head down and made neither eye contact nor engaged in conversation, let alone offered to relieve her of her bag.

“Right,” the lady said as she looked her up and down rather disdainfully. “I am Mrs. Grimm, Percival’s mother. Percival over there, and this is Jim Jones, our ranch hand. He will take us to the ranch. Where is the rest of your luggage?” she inquired as she looked around her and then to the train.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mrs. Grimm,” Mary said politely, dismissed instantly by the turn of the older woman’s head. “This is all I have brought with me for now. I thought it best I send for the rest of my belongings once we are married,” she explained, feeling guilty that she had to lie about her measly baggage constituting all she had in the world.

“Right. I suppose that makes sense. Let’s go.” With this firm instruction, Jim stepped forward and took up her carpetbag before leading the way to the very impressive horse-drawn coach.

Mrs. Grimm indicated for Mary to get into the carriage first, then she, followed by Percival. She was obviously meaning to keep them apart until their marriage. Mary took her place obediently and watched as her husband-to-be climbed in effortlessly. He had not said a word or even glanced in her direction as far as she was aware, but she was silently impressed with his handsome appearance which proved even more so in person than his photograph had suggested.

The journey to the ranch was made in silence. Mary dared to look up at

Mrs. Grimm just once and was discouraged with a scowl. She spent the rest of the journey watching the scenery beyond the carriage and wondering what she had already managed to do wrong. Maybe she had not been polite enough. Perhaps she had said the wrong thing. Or maybe they did not like the look of her. She knew she was not pretty in the traditional way, but she had made every effort to appear as appealing as possible, with the help of Mrs. Bell.

Mary could not believe her eyes when they arrived at the ranch. The house was huge and stood alone, surrounded by fields and accompanied by barns to the side. She drank in all she could see, in awe of what they had built.

As they came to a stop in front of the house, she saw Percival jump down from the coach and rush into the house. Jim helped Mrs. Grimm down and then held his hand out for Mary, which she gratefully accepted due to the height of the coach. Once on the ground Mary looked up at Jim and thanked him. He smiled in return with a small nod of his head as he released her hand. She noticed a scar on his face which was obviously the result of an accident at an earlier time in his life, Mary thought.

Mrs. Grimm led her into the house, through the main door which opened into a large open area in which Percival stood at the unlit hearth, chewing tobacco. He looked up as the women entered and Mary's and his eyes met and she smiled warmly at him. His eyes darted away as he turned his back on them.

Mary was told to proceed into the parlor, which was to their left. She was instructed to sit at the table while Mrs. Grimm prepared them a cold drink of fermented peach juice.

"You have a lovely home, Mrs. Grimm," Mary complimented kindly as the older lady approached to offload three glasses of juice onto a small round table.

"I suppose you should call me Janice. We are to be family after all," she

stated with the frown still firmly in place on her cold face as she took her place opposite Mary at the table.

“Alright, thank you, Janice,” she conceded politely, wondering again what she could possibly have done wrong. She wondered if his mother did not approve of this marriage and the manner in which it had come about.

“Percival, come and sit, please. Drink your juice,” Janice called out to be sure he would hear from beyond the parlor door and appeared obediently to take his seat on the only chair still unoccupied at the quaint table. Her mother-in-law-to-be then went on to explain to Mary the rules of their house and what she was expected to do and not to do, and where to go and not to go. The cattle were off bounds to her; she was not welcome in any of the farming areas and was confined to the house and the small area of land directly attached to it.

Mary listened, wishing she could take notes so that she wouldn't falter at a later date. She nodded her understanding and agreement and occasionally glanced at Percival, who kept his eyes on the table, sipping at his juice.

“Finally, I have decided that your marriage will take place in one month.” Mary felt Janice's eyes bore into her, waiting for her response.

“A month? Not immediately as was discussed in our letters?” Mary gently enquired, again looking to Percival for support.

“A month. We need to be sure this is the right fit for us first,” she said abruptly, causing butterflies to take flight in Mary's stomach. “Will your family be attending?”

“My parents have both passed away, ma'am,” Mary replied sadly, missing them more now than ever before.

“Yes, I know that, but what about your other family? Mr. Rogers of Boston perhaps?” she inquired, clearly hoping to meet the infamous hotelier.

“Oh, pardon me. I believe it is unlikely, he is a very busy man,” she explained, keeping her thoughts to herself as she also mused that he had likely never heard of her. She saw the look of disdain on Janice's face in

response to this news and knew this was not going to work in her favor.

Mrs. Grimm went on to explain that she would have her own room and at no time should she and Percival be left alone. She demanded that their reputation be upheld and reminded Mary that they were taking a risk by inviting her into their home. She wanted to cry, she had never felt so alone and unwelcome.

Throughout the conversation, Percival had contributed in no way besides simply grunting at times by way of acknowledging his mother's words or to agree with her. Mary wondered about the nature of their relationship and whether this was indeed the place for her.

"Now, we should prepare for dinner. It will be ready shortly. I will show you to your room. Jim has already put your small bag in there. Do you have something suitable to wear?" she asked, rather affectionately.

Mary thought about the two dresses she had bundled into her carpetbag, hoping they had fared well on the journey.

"I do, ma'am, thank you," she replied, again with a small smile on her face. She hoped she would be able to win Janice over.

Once in her huge room, she had been able to breathe a little easier and quickly unpack her bag, pressing the creases out of her dresses with her hands and praying they wouldn't look too bad at dinner. She wasn't even sure she would remember her way to the dining room, which Janice had briefly shown her on the way to her room. She allowed herself a moment to lie on the bed before getting ready for the evening ahead. She felt exhausted after her journey but knew that closing her eyes and risking falling asleep would be disastrous if she did not make it down to dinner on time, so she sat up and readied herself, hoping her change of dress might successfully win the mother and son over.

Mary entered the dining hall at precisely the right time. Despite only three of them dining together, the affair seemed so much grander, and she wondered if they dressed for dinner every evening in this way. She thought

the effort was unwarranted but was happy to go along with it. She was eternally grateful for Mrs. Bell and all she had taught her about the expectations surrounding etiquette among the elite while they were travel companions on the train.

As servants served an endless procession of food, water, and wine. Mary observed Janice's rude behavior and the way she snapped at the staff for the smallest apparent infringements. Percival again remained silent at his end of the table, only responding to direct questions from his mother.

She went to bed that night heavy-hearted and weary, wondering what the next day would bring.

CHAPTER 8



California – 20th August 1865

MARY AWOKE to raised voices in the house. She strained her ears to discern the direction of the sound. She recognized the voice of her mother to be, Janice and wondered if the man’s voice belonged to Percival. She couldn’t be sure as she had barely heard him speak.

She quickly slipped into the one dress he had not yet worn since arriving, and silently opened her bedroom door. She crept to the top of the stairs and listened, feeling as though she was a terrible person for listening in to someone’s private conversation, but rationalizing that if it was private, they would be quieter.

As she heard her name mentioned she leaned forward, craning her long neck to hear better while clutching onto the wooden banister so as not to fall. Tumbling down the stairs to land at their feet would not have been a good look.

She was now certain that the voice belonged to Percival Grimm. She couldn’t see either of those speaking but she could tell from what they were saying.

“...when I never even asked you to do this. I wasn’t ready to get married.

And certainly not to someone like her!” she heard him state with disgust in his voice.

Mary felt crushed. What had she done wrong and what did he mean by not asking his mother to do this? She continued to listen. She needed some answers of her own.

“Keep your voice down! And Percival, think of her family. Think of her breeding. She comes from good stock. Give it some time. Get to know her.” She heard his mother plead with him and again her familiar pangs of guilt told her she should have been honest about her family links.

“She is so plain looking. I can’t believe you didn’t get a photograph of her before inviting her to this house. She has no conversational skills and nothing interesting to say. You have got this one wrong, Mother, and you need to fix it!” he declared angrily, to which she heard his mother shush him once more in a bid to conceal their disagreement.

Mary felt sick to the pit of her stomach. She knew she wasn’t the prettiest, but she had gone to much effort to try to impress them both. And what did he mean about conversational? He had barely said two words to her since she had arrived, so what did he know about her holding conversations? She could feel herself starting to get angry about the situation. What was she to do if not stay at their house? She had nowhere to go.

“She might not be much to look at, Percival, but she tries, you can see she does. And her letters showed her to be quite adept at conversation. Maybe you should read them to get to know her better.” Mary held her breath as those words sunk in and she thought back to the letters she had received. Of course! The cursive writing. The kind and thoughtful conversation. This could not possibly have been Percival. She must have been writing to his mother the entire time.

Mary felt betrayed, confused, and isolated. It had become clear that Percival had in fact never wanted any of this and that his mother had forced it upon him to see to it that he did not grow old alone and without a family of

his own. She struggled to catch her breath and was at a loss as to what to do. It was now blatantly obvious that Percival Grimm did not want her in his home and certainly did not want to take her as his wife.

She could hear them arguing but chose to drown out their voices with her own thoughts. She coughed politely to announce her presence as she descended the stairs in the direction of the settling silence. At the bottom of the stairs, she glanced to her right and could see into the parlor as the door was carelessly open. The pair stared at her momentarily before Percival dropped his eyes to the floor and shifted position awkwardly.

“Oh good. You are finally up!” Mrs. Grimm stated, clearly annoyed at Mary’s tardiness even though the sun had barely breached the horizon. “Let’s breakfast,” she declared, obediently followed by her son. Mary watched, incredulous at their façade but with no choice but to join them.

They sat down in silence to the breakfast of omelet and fresh fruit. The only sounds in the room were of the servants serving and removing plates and cups, with occasional quips from the woman of the house as she insisted on criticizing the staff incessantly for what Mary considered was a marvelous job.

Mary felt saddened to find herself at this table with these people who were probably the most unpleasant people she had ever had the misfortune to meet. And she was due to marry into the family. She smiled kindly and discreetly at the staff in a bid to let them know that she was on their side.

Her mind was in a spin as she frantically wondered what on earth she could do. She had very little money and her tenement flat would now be occupied by a new tenant. She found herself in the middle of nowhere, not knowing how to get around and with no idea how to get to the train station, knowing that these awful people wanted her there even less than she wanted to be there.

She was relieved to be excused from the table once they had finished breakfast. She needed to be away from them. She needed time to get her

thoughts together and devise a plan. Percival left for his day on the ranch and Janice headed up the stairs, without so much as a backward glance at Mary. She decided to entertain herself by taking a stroll through those areas of the grounds she knew she was permitted to enter.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



California – 4th September 1865

MARY HAD BEEN in the Grimm's household for just over two weeks. She felt more lonely with each passing day. Percival and Janice had their routines and she was expected to fall in line and keep herself entertained when they did not need her.

She had been unaware before her arrival of their actual wealth and that they had servants to do their bidding. All the activities she would normally have busied herself with were out of the question. She could not be seen cooking or baking in their huge kitchen or pottering around the house cleaning where needed.

Each day they ate breakfast together, most days without conversation before Percival went off to work on the ranch and Janice retired to her room. Mary had taken to going for a walk on her own every day after breakfast and this had become her favorite time of the day, when she was alone with her thoughts.

Mary was expected to be back in time for a light lunch, which she ate in the dining room with Janice. During this time Janice had taken to questioning Mary about her background, her upbringing, and her family, particularly her

infamous relative Mr. Rogers. Mary kept up the façade of knowing him; she felt like there was no option and it was most likely the only reason she was still welcome in the house and due to wed Percival in two weeks.

Following lunch, Mary had been instructed to join Janice in the parlor where she ran a sewing circle, which she had done every day since, except on Sundays. At these times Janice took pleasure in telling the unpleasant ladies about her son's fiancée being a member of the prestigious Rogers family from Boston. Although this always incited a good reaction from the women, they were never polite or kind to her. They never made conversation with her; she was simply at Janice's disposal. The afternoons dragged by slowly as she wished the time away, so she would be free again.

When the sewing circle finally closed each afternoon, Janice would exclaim her exhaustion after her afternoons 'work' and would go directly to her bedroom where she slept for the rest of the afternoon until Percival returned for dinner. This meant Mary was free to slip out for another walk during the afternoons, for which she was grateful. She needed the time away from the house even though it was still on their property. It gave her time to herself to think.

She knew she didn't want to marry Percival, but she felt trapped. It was nearing late afternoon when she reached the place behind the house she had taken to visiting. It was a small clearing where she was confident no one would be able to see her from the house or from the grounds. She had so often felt as though she was being watched and finding this place of solitude was idyllic.

Mary sat in the small cove, surrounded by trees and bush with her eyes closed as she listened to the glorious sounds of nature around her. She could hear the birds singing their summer song, crickets chirping to their mates in the grass, and she could hear the faint sound of Percival gathering the cattle to take them into the barns for the night.

"Oh, sorry, ma'am!" she heard someone say as she quickly opened her

eyes to see Jim with gardening tools in hand.

“Hello, Jim. No apology needed. Am I in your way?” she asked kindly. She knew how unkind the Grimms were to all their staff and so she went out of her way to be the complete opposite when she had the opportunity. Not that she would be any different ordinarily anyway; her parents had brought her up to be respectful of every living being, regardless of their class, wealth, or background.

“Not at all, ma’am. I will leave you to it,” he said gently as he turned to walk away.

“You don’t need to go, Jim. Carry on with what you wanted to do. There is plenty of room for us both, as long as you don’t mind me being here,” she suggested hopefully. She felt as if she had not been in civil company for a long time since her train journey when she had enjoyed the company of Mrs. Bell.

“Oh.” He took a moment to think about it. “I don’t know, ma’am.”

“It’s up to you, but you know that whatever Mr. Grimm has asked you to do, he won’t be happy if it’s not done,” she reminded him, a smile upon her face so he knew she was accepting of him.

“Alright, thank you, ma’am. Mr. Grimm will be mighty cross if I don’t get my work done. I will try not to make too much noise.” He smiled wearily and Mary instinctively knew he was tired of the treatment he received from the Grimms.

Mary observed Jim as he set about his work. There was a small pond to the side of the little cove, only a few feet away, and he was working to cover it with netting, which was proving to be quite a challenge for only one pair of hands.

“Would you like me to help, Jim? I could hold it at one end.” she suggested, wanting to finally be of some use to someone.

“Oh no, ma’am. Thank you for the offer, but I couldn’t allow a lady to do that,” he answered respectfully. Mary always found him to be warm, caring,

and respectful, of her and the Grimms, no matter how badly they treated him. She wondered why he stayed, but dared not ask for fear of it getting back to Percival and Janice and being interpreted as going against the family.

He found a way to secure the net at one side whilst he worked on the other and Mary found it fascinating how he managed to find ways around his challenges so that he could accomplish his goals.

Mary made occasional attempts to spark a conversation, such was her loneliness and desperation to talk with anyone but the members of the Grimm inner circle. Each time, Jim would answer her respectfully, but never chatter freely. She discovered that he lived on the grounds in one of the barns, and he worked all of his waking hours, although he was very clear that he was not unhappy about this for he was indeed hugely grateful and indebted to the Grimm family.

Mary found out that Jim had been set the task each afternoon to sort out the pond area. He needed to cut it all back as it had become overgrown, and he had to ensure it was all covered so the birds could not get to the fish. She considered changing her route but then thought how nice it would be to have at least someone with whom to converse every day, even if Jim was reluctant to fully engage in conversation. She knew this was simply because he was worried his employer would find him talking and think he was not working. She vowed that if this was to happen, she would protect Jim. He was a kind man who just wanted to earn an honest living. Not that she thought Percival would venture around these parts of the ranch since he was always too busy with his cattle to leave his duties.

CHAPTER 10



California – 10th September 1865

IT HAD BEEN ALMOST a week since Jim had started working on the pond next to the cove and Mary found herself looking forward to the afternoons when she could sit in her comfortable, peaceful spot and enjoy time spent in his company. She enjoyed the chance to escape from the ranch even though she was still on the grounds. Because she could not see the house or surrounding fields, she let herself believe she was somewhere else.

She was awaiting Jim's arrival when she shuddered at the thought of marrying Percival in just over a week. Janice had made the necessary arrangements and had told them both at dinner the previous night that they would be wed in ten days. Percival had clearly been furious, although he never said a word in front of Mary, she could see it behind his eyes and by the way he had left the room as soon as he had finished dinner, not to be seen again until breakfast that morning.

Mary was no more eager to marry than he was, but she felt she had no option as she had nowhere else to go. She remembered her dear friend Mrs. Holt telling her that she would always be welcome to stay with her, but she didn't even have the money to get back to Boston.

Deep in her thoughts, Mary could not see a way out of the predicament in which she had found herself, and marrying Percival seemed unavoidable. She would be a part of this family, whether she liked it or not.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” Her thoughts were interrupted by Jim’s arrival, and she was horrified to realize she had allowed tears to course freely down her cheeks. She dabbed at them quickly, but she could tell he had seen. “Are you alright, ma’am?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

“Oh yes, don’t worry about me, I am just being silly and sentimental. Thinking about my parents,” she responded, forcing a smile on her face.

He seemed to accept this answer with a nod of his head, and he silently set to work. Mary felt as though she understood more about what happened on the ranch, reading between the lines of what Janice and Jim had told her, or had alluded to. It was truly Jim who ran the ranch, although Percival was always putting huge pressure on him and implying that he was not doing a good enough job. Jim was always calm and stoic and would simply work harder to try to meet the high expectations. Mary worried for him. He was only twenty-nine years old, but this pressure could take its toll on a man. Before his father died, Percival had never really stepped foot on the ranch, and Jim had run it with Mr. Grimm senior. He had not taken to it naturally after his father’s death, but rather than accept or acknowledge this, Percival was always on at Jim as though it was he who was making all the mistakes when in actual fact it was he who was clearing up Percival’s messes.

Jim spoke fondly of Mr. Grimm and the household back in his day. Mary got the feeling it had been a much better atmosphere and that the change in Janice must be due to grief. She reminded herself to try to think about this when the woman was being so unkind to the staff, berating them in front of her friends because she thought it made her look good.

They were mid-conversation about grasshoppers and their role in the world when they were joined unexpectedly by a furious-looking Janice.

“What on earth are you doing?” she spat at Mary, incensed that she would

be spending time talking with the staff.

“I... I’m... nothing really. I am just relaxing and asking Jim what he is doing,” she responded as casually as she could, hoping not to get Jim into more trouble than he always seemed to be in.

“Get away from here, girl!” she demanded as she grabbed Mary’s arm and pulled her from her seat and to her feet. “He is not paid to sit around and chat with you!” she declared as she glared at Jim angrily, unseen by the man who had his eyes on the work he was concentrating on, although Mary could see the red creep up his face into his cheeks.

“Jim has still been working, I can assure you. I have not stopped him at all,” she replied weakly to a bemused Mrs. Grimm who yanked her arm and almost dragged her back to the house.

Once indoors Mary was subjected to a tirade of information as to why she should not cavort with the staff and why they should be left to do their work. Mary listened and nodded where she needed to, but her mind was on Jim as she was worried that he might be reprimanded for her actions.

“You will no longer go around that side of the house. You need to be within view at all times. You clearly cannot be trusted!” Janice bellowed at her. “No more conversations with the staff. They are here to do a job.” And with that Janice turned on her heels and ascended the stairs.

Mary was left alone, wondering how on earth Janice had discovered them when she ordinarily slept all afternoon after the daily sewing circle. She knew this was irrelevant now. She had started to think of Jim as a friend, she realized, and now she would no longer be able to spend time in his company. She felt saddened to the core, the familiar feeling of desolation and loneliness creeping in once more.

That evening’s dinner was even more awkward and silent than normal. Mary was panic-stricken that Janice would tell Percival about her chatting with Jim and that he would get into trouble for it. She felt responsible as she knew she had talked Jim into allowing her to stay and chat with him and that

he would not have done that without her requesting it. He was a stickler for the rules, and she knew he would do anything to stay in the good books of Mr. Grimm.

Janice had obviously decided it would be too much of an inconvenience for her to let her son know about the day's events, so she didn't mention it at all. In fact, she tried to make small talk throughout the meal, which neither she nor Percival was interested in taking part in.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



California – 16th September 1865

IN THE SIX days since Janice discovered her talking to Jim, Mary had not known what to do with herself. She wanted to still visit the cove and talk to Jim, but she felt as though she was being watched and did not want to get Jim into any trouble. She had seen him, of course, but he had kept his head down and scuttled by, clearly not wanting any trouble.

Mary had found that with more time on her hands she couldn't help but think about Jim. She thought back fondly to their days of chatting and wanted that time back even more knowing how much Janice despised them being together. For Mary, it had been the only time she had felt heard in this house and she had enjoyed spending time with him.

Percival had continued in the same way towards her, distant and non-comital. He barely said a word to her, and she to him. She wondered what kind of a marriage this was to be when neither of them wanted it at all. She thought Percival had actually become more withdrawn with the approach of their ceremony. She almost felt sorry for him as she knew it was his mother who was forcing him into this, although she had never admitted to either of them that she had overheard their argument.

As she lay in her bed, willing herself to get up and dressed so she could get another day over and done with, Mary heard raised voices again. This time there was no attempt to keep the volume down and she could hear from the comfort of her bed exactly what was being said.

“But I have told you time and time again that I do not want to marry that woman. I am too good for her. She is too plain for me. It is simple. I will not marry her. She may as well leave now. Give her the money and send her back where she came from!” Percival declared with ferocity. Mary could not help admiring his attempt to stand up to his mother, even if it was hurtful to her.

“Do you not hear anything I say, you stupid boy?” Janice shouted. “She is of Rogers stock and that could bring great advancement for us. This is not something we can pass up. We have worked hard to get to where we are now, and we will continue to get better and better.”

As admirable as Percival’s fighting words were, Janice was still firmly in control of him and their ranch.

“But mother...”

“No, Percival! I will hear no more of it. I have had enough of your immaturity. None of this would be happening if you had just made an effort to find a wife yourself. Now stop being so ungrateful. Lord knows we need someone of high esteem in our family, the rate at which this ranch is dropping.”

Silence permeated the house. Mary thought you would literally be able to hear a pin drop should it happen. She held her breath, fearful that they would somehow hear her from downstairs. Mary had been under the impression that the ranch was thriving. She had to strain to hear his response.

“That is not my fault, Mother,” Percival declared in a tight voice. Mary could imagine he had his teeth gritted with anger as he spoke.

“You took over this ranch. You chose to do that, so whose fault is it? And don’t tell me it is Jim’s fault. He has been a loyal member of our staff for many years and there was never any problem with his work under your

father.” She prepared for his excuses, all of which she had heard before.

Mary decided she didn’t want to listen anymore. She knew what they both thought of her, and she knew what she thought of them, and spending any more time listening to them would only cause her upset. She quickly arose, washed, and dressed for the day.

Mary had thought previous breakfasts had been quiet and uncomfortable, but that morning was on a whole different level. Percival looked furious, whilst his mother tried to make small talk with Mary with the clear purpose of demonstrating to her son that she was able to hold a conversation. Several times Janice stated how she enjoyed her chats with Mary, and she knew this was for Percival’s benefit.

By the time they had finished their breakfast each of them was clearly desperate to get out of the other’s company. Mary made her way outside, needing to go for a walk and clear her head after the morning’s events. She followed Percival out of the front door, grabbing her shawl on the way so that she had something to sit on when she found a quiet spot.

“Why are you following me?” Percival turned on her and demanded to know.

“I am not following you!” she declared as she almost bumped into him due to his abrupt halt. “I am going for a walk like I do every morning.”

He huffed his response and stormed away from her, leaving her shocked that he chose to speak to her only to be mean.

Mary knew full well she was headed in the direction she had been told by Janice not to go. Being morning Jim would not be there and she told herself that Janice would therefore have no reason to complain.

She felt her body soften as she saw the small cove where she had loved to sit. She quickly approached it and spread her shawl on the rock so she would be more comfortable. She sat down, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. As she breathed out, she opened her eyes to notice Jim at the other side of the pond looking at her, with an amused expression on his face.

“Oh goodness! Sorry, Jim, I didn’t see you there. I thought you only came in the afternoons,” she said quickly, flustered by his unexpected presence.

“No apology needed, ma’am. I have been asked to see to the pond in the mornings instead of the afternoons, ever since Mrs. Grimm happened upon us innocently talking.”

Mary knew then that Percival’s mother had intervened on the off chance that she tried to go back and see Jim.

“Do you want me to leave?” she asked him, not wanting him to get into any trouble. “I just needed some space, but I can go somewhere else.”

“No need, ma’am. Mrs. Grimm never ventures out in the morning; she keeps herself in her room. Always has,” he explained. “Now, what is it that has you needing some space, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The look of genuine concern on his face made Mary want to cry. She wondered if she should just tell him the truth. She felt as though she could trust him.

“I overheard mother and son arguing about me again this morning. Percival does not want to marry me, and his mother is forcing him!” she heard herself declare.

“You heard them say that?” he asked incredulously. “Why would he not want to marry you?” his face flushed pink as soon as the words left his mouth, as did hers, although she enjoyed the compliment. “I mean, why is she forcing him?”

“Because they think I am related to the rich and famous Mr. Rogers!” she announced, a nervous smile on her face, as she hoped Jim didn’t judge her for her stretching the family story.

“Are you not related to Mr. Rogers of Boston?” he whispered, confusion written all over his face as he fought to understand all that was going on. He rose to his feet and quickly made his way around the pond to be near enough to hear her without drawing attention. “I thought you said you were.”

“I did say I was. And technically I am. He is my second cousin once

removed. But I have never spoken to him or met him. And as far as I am aware neither had my father,” she admitted. Her eyes are wide with fear that Jim would lose respect for her now that he knew she had lied.

“You mean to say the man who Mrs. Grimm thinks is to help their standing in society is not actually even aware of any of you?” he asked as a grin filled his face and he suddenly started to laugh uncontrollably. Mary could not help but laugh with him, relieved at his reaction.

“Why is this so funny?” she asked mid laughter.

“Because, ma’am, this is all we have heard about since you began writing to her, or to him.” He suddenly stopped talking as he realized he had said too much.

“Don’t worry, Jim, I know that it was she who was writing to me and not Percival. I discovered it overhearing an argument the day after I arrived. But I haven’t let them know that I know”, she shared in a whispered tone. This set him off laughing all over again and Mary felt a huge affection for him.

Suddenly, without even thinking, Mary leaned forward and kissed him on his cheek. As soon as she had done it, she knew she had overstepped the mark and she sat up straight, rose to her feet, gathered her shawl, and rushed back to the house, aware that her cheeks were burning with shame. She knew perfectly well how inappropriate her actions had been. She took herself straight to her room and buried her face in her pillow.

CHAPTER 12



California – 17th September 1865

MARY DECIDED that she should stay indoors for the whole day. She was ashamed of her actions the previous day. She would never normally be so forward. She didn't know what had come over her, but she knew it couldn't happen again.

The wedding was fast approaching, with only three days remaining. In the knowledge that Percival still didn't want to marry her and Mary's own feelings of not wanting to marry him, she had not slept at all the night before.

Janice had arranged for a tailor to visit the house that morning to fit Mary for the very same wedding dress that she had worn when she had married Mr. Grimm senior many years before. Mary had been mortified when the older woman had made cruel comments about the dress needing to be let out a little. Mary knew that she had not put on any weight since she had arrived and initially tried on the dress, so she knew the woman was simply being unkind. She fought not to show how upset it made her; she would not give the woman the satisfaction.

That afternoon Mary stayed in her room after the sewing circle. She could not trust herself. She stood by the window, taking in the scenery of the ranch.

It really was breathtakingly beautiful. She heard a sound behind her and turned to face her door. She realized it was the quietest of knocks on her door, so she walked across the room to open it to find a servant who looked anxious.

“Mr. Jones would like to see you, ma’am. He says to tell you Mrs. Grimm will be asleep now, so it is safe.,” said the young girl, who she recognized to be Honour. Mary felt her face flush. “He is on the front porch, waiting for you,” she said before she rushed away silently.

Mary wondered if she should see Jim or stay in her room, but she feared he would not give up and didn’t want to seem rude, so she checked herself in the mirror and made her way to the porch.

“Ma’am, thank you for coming down to see me. I was worried you were in hiding. I hope you didn’t mind me asking for you.” His words were rushed and nervous. “Shall we walk?” he asked, to which she nodded, and they walked to the right, towards their familiar spot.

“Jim. I am sorry for my behavior yesterday. I simply don’t know what got into me,” she tried to explain, the shame still fresh in her memory, burning at her cheeks.

“Mary,” he said calmly and quietly, and she realized this was the first time he had called her by her name rather than addressing her as ma’am. “I have not been able to stop thinking about that kiss. Please don’t apologize for it. Unless of course, you regret your actions.” His voice teetered off as his eyes went to the floor.

“No, no, I don’t regret it. I’m just not normally so forward. And I overstepped a boundary.” She stopped walking and faced him, urging him to do the same, which he did. “But I can’t stop thinking about it either.”

The pair looked at each other and she felt as though he was able to see right into her soul. She allowed her mind to wander and think of all that could be. And then she remembered her fate and that she and Jim had nothing to their name.

“But, Jim, I am to marry in just three days,” she reminded him. “We must forget this. We cannot be.”

Hearing unexpected footsteps on the gravel behind them, they automatically turned to be faced with Mrs. Grimm, her face red with anger.

“I knew I heard voices. What have I told you about spending time with the staff? Get inside now!” she demanded, and Mary found herself obediently doing as she said, fearful of the consequences of not doing so and not even allowing herself to glance back at Jim.

Once inside Mary rushed back up to her room, not ready for the confrontation that she knew would be inevitable. She would delay it until dinner and hoped that by then she would have calmed down and would not want to mention it in front of her beloved son, like the previous time.

Mary didn't know why Janice was so against her talking to Jim. Did she suspect something of a romantic nature to be going on? Surely, she could not have noticed anything like that. Or did she know about the kiss? Mary's cheeks burned again with the shame and the thought of others knowing what she had done.

As Mary entered the dining room that evening, she felt sick to the pit of her stomach, but she knew that not attending would make things worse for her. Janice had not been up to her room to speak with her since the incident, which she had suspected might happen, and so had sat nervously awaiting her.

Janice and Percival stood to one side of the room. It was customary to await all dinner guests before taking seats at the table, so she knew they had been waiting for her and were probably not delighted about that fact, although she wasn't late. They glanced over at her when she entered, but they were deep in muffled conversation and continued quickly in order to get what they wanted said before she got to them.

They finished their conversation just as Mary got to them and Janice turned to Mary with a sickeningly sweet smile on her face.

“Shall we?” she asked as she gestured towards the table and chairs and they each took their places.

To Mary’s surprise, Percival was quite chatty with his mother and they talked about their day and the weather. Mary remained quiet, she had nothing to say, and the sickly feeling remained in her stomach. She simply wanted to get her food eaten and return to her room.

“And what about your day, Mary?” she heard her mother-in-law-to-be ask, pulling her out of her own thoughts. “What have you been up to?”

Mary looked up at her and saw a menacing look on her face. She was goading to her, and Mary didn’t know what to do. Had she already told Percival that she had been talking to Jim? She looked to Percival, who was looking at Mary and she felt her cheeks flush as she imagined they both knew about her kissing Jim.

“Oh, nothing exciting for me. I went for a walk earlier,” she replied quietly, her eyes averted.

“Oh yes, of course! You had another little chat with your friend Jim, didn’t you? Even though I had specifically told you not to!” Janice’s tone changed as Percival repositioned himself in his chair. “Tell us about your conversation?” she asked.

Mary placed her fork beside her plate and shifted nervously in her own chair. She knew she was not good at lying to people and that they would see straight through her, but she had to try to protect Jim.

“I was asking him how he was getting on with the pond,” she replied, as she tried to hold eye contact with the older, formidable woman, who scoffed at this response.

Mary sat stunned as Janice then went into a tirade about why she should obey orders and not chat with the staff. She noticed the help around the room shifting uncomfortably as they listened to reasons why they should not be spoken to. Mary could only imagine how they must be feeling having to listen to it.

“You will be my son’s wife!” Janice exclaimed. “We have certain standards, and you must meet those standards. When I am dead and gone it is you who will oversee the household arrangements. And how will you do that if the servants don’t respect you because you have been chatting with them? You will never have anything to do with the ranch hands who work for Percival, so stay away from them! Your domain is this house and this house only!” she blasted.

Mary could only look at her hands on her lap as she was shouted at and humiliated. She wanted to cry but didn’t want to give the woman the satisfaction.

“You need to remember who you are, young lady! You will be a mother to Percival’s children, my grandchildren, and we expect a certain decorum. Not to mention that you are part of the Rogers of Boston family, imagine the shame you will bring on them if you are not proper and do not lead your home well,” she spat at her, with a sheer look of hatred in her eyes.

Mary saw movement out of the corner of her eye; it was Honour leaving the room. Maybe she had heard too much or maybe she had work to do. Suddenly Janice shot to her feet and slammed her hand down on the large wooden table, making everyone in the room jump and stopping Honour in her steps just as she had reached the door to the kitchen.

“Are we boring you? Did we not eat quickly enough for you?” Janice shouted at the girl, her face red with rage. She approached the small girl, her tall foreboding presence leering over her. “You do not leave this room until I say you can, do you hear me? You stupid girl!”

As Janice raised her arm, Mary panicked that the girl might be struck and she ran to her side and stood between them, the young girl crying uncontrollably behind her. The older woman stared at Mary, disgust in her eyes.

“Stop, Janice!” Mary pleaded. “Can’t you see she meant no harm?”

“Remember your place, woman!” Janice retorted angrily. Mary noticed

her look to her son for backup, but he remained in his chair, spineless as ever.

“I don’t want that place if this is how you treat people!” she heard herself say, suddenly buoyed with confidence. “The way you treat people here is abhorrent!”

“You watch your tongue, girl. I am sure it is no different in the Rogers household, we must assert our leadership!” she stated, again looking to her son for some support and receiving none.

“I wouldn’t know, I have never even spoken to them or even met them, let alone been to their home!” Mary spat back, fury growing within her as she finally realized there was no way she would marry into this family. She would rather be alone and homeless for the rest of her life.

Mary ignored the shocked face before her and turned her back on the woman, gently pushing Honour through the doorway to the kitchen, before turning on her heels and leaving the dining room, her head held as high as she could muster. She ran up the stairs and locked herself in her room.

CHAPTER 13



California – 18th September 1865

SHE AWOKE EARLY THAT MORNING, feeling just as exhausted as she did before she had gone to bed, so fretful had her sleep been. Mary had no regrets about how she had spoken to Mrs. Grimm the previous night, but she was now faced with the consequences of her actions and feared what they would be.

Once dressed, she sheepishly descended the foreboding staircase, took a deep breath, and entered the dining hall. She was partly relieved that she was the first to arrive but dreaded their arrival as she stood awkwardly by the table. She could hear approaching footsteps heading her way.

“Here she is! I should have known you would have been here first, always ready for a feed!” Janice spat as she took her place at the table. Mary heard Percival laugh at his mother’s poor taste in jokes.

Mary felt her cheeks redden with the shame of the insult, again poking at her for her weight and size, which was barely more than the older woman’s. With only two days before the planned wedding, Mary felt scared and alone. She wondered what she could do, how she could get away.

“Sit down then!” Janice ordered, and again she found herself obeying her orders, as did Percival.

The servants served the food, laid out on silver plates before them, before taking their places around the room, where they had initially been instructed to be in case anyone needed their assistance at any time. Mary glanced around, only to notice the absence of Honour. She wondered where she was and hoped she was alright and safe.

“Servants, leave this room. Await further instruction in the kitchen,” Janice ordered as they filed out one by one, and Mary’s stomach knotted.

Mary could not eat, so she kept her hands busy by sipping on her cup of hot coffee. She watched as the woman of the house prepared her plate of food before she lay down her cutlery to speak. Mary braced herself for another tirade of abuse but was taken aback by the calm voice of Janice.

“So, you have no real link to the Rogers of Boston?” she inquired, her voice unusually flat and devoid of any emotion. Mary shook her head in response. After a moment’s pause, Mrs. Grimm held her hand out to her son, who passed her an envelope, a smile on his face. “Here is some money. You are no longer required here. Please take your carpet bag with your meager belongings which Honour has prepared for you. Jim will take you to the station in the coach.” And with that, Mrs. Grimm dismissed her with a wave of her hand as Honour entered the room from the main door, her carpet bag on her arm.

Mary stood and picked up the envelope of money. She looked from one to the other of the Grimms, neither of whom looked at her or showed any emotion. As she silently walked away, she heard the pair start to talk about the work Percival would be doing that day. She followed Honour out of the dining room and to the main entrance. Mary had mixed emotions about what had just happened. She was relieved to get away from this planned marriage, but the shame of being dismissed in such a way was a lot for her to take.

“Are you ready, ma’am?” she heard from below the steps of the porch. The sound of Jim’s kind voice brought her out of her thoughts and back to the moment. She gave a small nod as she looked at Honour and took her

carpetbag from her delicate arm.

“Thank you for trying to look out for me, ma’am,” Honour whispered, clearly still fearful of being caught doing something that they considered to be wrong. She smiled at Mary before she scuttled back into the house and a life of misery.

Mary accepted Jim’s hand when he offered to help her up onto the coach before he found his place up front to drive the horse. Only a few minutes into their journey Mary felt the horses slowing and then come to a full stop. She wondered what the delay might be, and peered around, only to see Jim hopping down and coming round to the carriage.

“May I?” he asked politely, and Mary quickly nodded her head to allow him to join her in the carriage. They sat at each side of the coach, facing each other.

“Mary, I am sorry about how these people have treated you. I shouldn’t have allowed it to happen, and I am sorry. I heard what happened last night over dinner. I only wish I had seen her face when you told her about the tenuous link to the Rogers of Boston family.” He winked his eye and Mary let out a small laugh, grateful to be starting to feel like her normal self again now that she was away from that place.

“Why do you all put up with it?” Mary asked him earnestly, although she knew the answer already.

“Work is hard to come by these days and we can’t afford to be out of work, so we take what is thrown at us and we grin and bear it,” he admitted sadly. “It hasn’t always been like this. Mrs. Grimm and her son have always had a vicious side, but Mr. Grimm senior was a good man. He treated us all with dignity and respect. But since he passed away things have changed.”

Jim suddenly looked nervous. He took a deep breath before he pulled another bag from under the seat. He looked at Mary, a question in his eyes, searching for the answer in her own.

“What is that?” she asked him.

“I packed a bag!” he declared proudly, although still anxious that she might not agree to his suggestion. “If you find yourself willing, we could take our bags, the horse, and coach and ride off to anywhere we would like to go.”

“But, Jim, what about your work. You can’t give it all up for me!” she declared, thinking again about the day she had kissed him.

“I don’t care about that job if I have you by my side. Somehow I know we would make it work,” he replied honestly and she felt the same. “You know how I got this scar?” he asked, pointing to his face.

“I didn’t like to ask,” Mary replied.

“Young Mr. Grimm made a mistake on the ranch and whilst I worked to get the cattle back in line so we didn’t lose them all, along came Percival with his whip, throwing it around like nobody’s business, until...” his voice teetered off.

“Oh, Jim, that’s terrible. Did they get you any medical help when it happened?” she enquired but thought she knew the answer to that already.

“Mrs. Grimm said they couldn’t because it would be hard to explain and would disgrace the family name,” he answered sadly, which explained why it had scarred so badly. “I thought no one would ever be able to love me with this scar. But you never seemed to even notice, you don’t stare like everyone else.”

“It is not all of you, it is a part of you, Jim,” she replied kindly, as she leaned forward and traced a finger gently down the scar.

“I have nothing much to offer you. I have a small amount of money, but we won’t have the life of luxury that you would have had back there. But what we will have is love,” he said quietly as he looked into her eyes, and she knew she had loved him since the very first time they talked.

“But what about this coach? We can’t very well steal it,” Mary reminded him. They were both good and honest people.

“I thought about that, and it did have me in a bit of a quandary, but then I thought about all the hours I have worked for them without any pay, and I

decided this could be my payment. And anyway, have you ever seen him ride a horse?" he asked. She thought about it and then shook her head. "Because he can't! A ranch owner who can't ride a horse!" Jim shook his head in disbelief.

"Well then, of course, I will run away with you, and we can start a life together, nothing would make me happier!" she exclaimed, and they embraced warmly.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE



Texas – 1st July 1868

ALMOST THREE YEARS had passed since Jim and Mary had ridden off into the open air with nothing but their love for each other. Before riding out of town they had gone to the small chapel and become man and wife in a tiny ceremony with strangers as their witnesses.

They had then ridden with no real sense of direction, side by side up front so Jim could steer and Mary could be with him. They chatted and they laughed as they rode, with no urgency or worries.

Together they had managed to build a good life for themselves in Texas, where they finally decided to stop on some desolate land in the middle of nowhere. Bit by bit they had built themselves a small ranch, which had now become much larger, although they didn't want it to be too big, they liked it just as it was because it meant they had time to spend together.

Two years before, they had heard that Percival Grimm had to sell his ranch after many bad choices saw him losing money and cattle. Without Jim, it would appear he was not able to keep it going, which had surprised neither of them. Mary couldn't help but feel sorry for the Grimms, for they had lived in that family home for a long time, and it must have been hard to leave. Jim

told Mary she was too kind and reminded her that they had done all they could to help. Mary felt sad for the servants and staff but expected they would find work locally and would most likely be with people who were kinder to them than the Grimms ever could be.

Mary looked over to their beloved coach which they had stripped and repainted together to make it their own. She had always been worried Mr. Grimm might set the law on them for taking his horse and carriage, so Jim had come up with the idea of reinventing it and now it dazzled in the sunlight, with 'Jones' scripted across each side.

As they sat together on their wooden porch, which they had built together, she squeezed her husband's hand in silent gratitude for the life they had built together. They owed no one and were beholden to no one. They were finally free of the restraints of that family.

"It's just me and you my darling wife," he stated, as he often did, a smile upon his handsome scarred, tanned face.

"Not for long, Mr. Jones," she said as she patted her stomach.

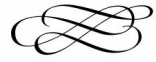
"What?" he shouted with glee as he jumped to his feet in wonder. "Could it be?" he whispered as he knelt on the wooden floor at her feet and touched her stomach gently.

"Yes," she replied, her loving eyes searching his. "We are going to have a baby."

He wept tears of joy, as she held him close, and they embraced.

They were finally going to have their happily ever after.

ANGEL'S HEART



OceanofPDF.com

THE BRIDES OF MOUNTAIN FALLS

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON -FEBRUARY 1893

“*A*ngel, if you get your nose out of that book long enough, you’ll be happy to learn that Mitchell offered to pay for my ribbons at the store.”

Angel Jones looked up from her book, her expression vaguely focused. “What was that?”

“Honestly, you’re no fun. No fun at all. All you do is read and read and read and when you’re not reading, you’re writing. There is a whole world out there and you’d rather be stuck in here with a book you’ve probably read a hundred times.” Grace, Angel’s younger sister by two years, said with a pout.

“Dear sister, that’s what you don’t understand. I go on an adventure every day through my books. Tell me about Mitchell.” Angel set her book aside and focused on her sister.

Grace was simply breathtaking with striking features and a perfect posture. At the age of eighteen, she was much more interested in courtship and flirtation than Angel had ever been. Although Angel was two years her senior, Angel had no such interests.

She had seen too much of society where once a woman was married, she became an extension of her husband and was no longer her own person. Angel had no desire to be married at all. She wanted so much more from her life than simply providing company and comfort for a man.

“There’s not much to tell, really. I was at the store buying some ribbons for my hair when he arrived. We talked for a little about this and that and the ghastly dress Rowena Spade wore to the last dance and then he offered to pay for my ribbons. Please tell me that means something.... Anything....?” Grace all but begged.

Angel couldn’t help but laugh. Ever since her sister met Mitchell at a

dance a few months ago, she had been infatuated with him. Mitchell came from a wealthy family and would be able to provide his future wife with all the comforts of the modern world. But Angel also knew that Mitchell was already engaged to be married to a girl from England.

“It means he was being kind. You know he’s engaged. You shouldn’t be too forward with him; it will only earn you a bad reputation,” Angel warned.

“How would you know? You’ve hardly ever even spoken to a man unless it was about books, travel, or books about traveling,” Grace snapped.

“Girls, girls, don’t be rude,” their mother, Elizabeth Jones, said as she walked into the room. “Do either of you know where Faith is?”

Faith was the youngest sister of the Jones family. Whereas Angel was infatuated with books, and Grace with Mitchell, Faith was simply captivated by her love for music. Even before they could answer their mother, the melody from the piano traveled up the stairs.

“Ah, there she is,” their mother said with a smile. “She’s hoping to play in church next Sunday.”

“That would be lovely,” Angel said with a smile.

“Mother, could you please talk to Angel. She’s done nothing all day but sit here with that book. She didn’t even want to go to the store with me,” Grace complained.

Angel’s mother turned to her with a cocked brow. “Angel darling, you know how much I adore your love for reading, but you’ll become a hermit if you continue this way.”

“I’m not a hermit,” Angel argued. “I simply enjoy reading about other places, other people, and this book,” she held up a worn copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. “it’s magnificent. I hope that one day I can tell a story with such eloquence.”

“You cried. Twice,” Grace reminded her.

“I didn’t cry because I was sad,” Angel explained. “I cried because the characters are so real you feel their angst and their concern.”

“I’m concerned about you, Angel,” her mother interjected as Faith began to play a hymn downstairs. “Most of the girls your age are either engaged or married. I even heard that Martha Wakefield is with child. You need to start thinking of your future and not your next book,” Elizabeth warned with a hand cocked on her hip.

“But I am, Mother. I want to travel the world. I want to see new places and meet new people. There is so much more to life than just Boston and a dance at the social club every few weeks,” Angel said with a sigh.

“Travel? Where on earth would you travel to? It’s preposterous. A woman doesn’t journey on her own; it’s dangerous and inappropriate. Perhaps your sister is right, these books are filling your mind with rubbish.”

“No, they’re not,” Angel said firmly. “I’ve learned so much about England, France, and even the Pacific Islands simply from reading. I’m not saying I’m leaving right away; I’m just saying that it is something I dream of doing in the future.”

“What you should be dreaming of is finding a husband to care for you. A woman needs a protector. This world wasn’t made for a woman to be alone. Although your father and I love you dearly, I’m sure you know that becoming a spinster and remaining in our care would cast quite a stain on our family. Your father didn’t work all these years only to have his daughters ruin his reputation.”

Angel bit down hard on her tongue. Why couldn’t she live the life she wanted. Why did she have to find a husband and get married? She dreamed of seeing the world and, most of all, she dreamed of becoming a teacher.

It had been her secret dream for years; one she knew her parents wouldn’t approve of at all.

“Yes, Mother,” she finally said, knowing that any other answer would only upset her mother more. “I’ll go to the next social dance with Grace if you insist.”

“I insist,” her mother said with a smile. “Who knows? You might meet

your own Mr. Darcy.”

Angel’s eyes widened with surprise. “You’ve read it?”

“Of course I’ve read it, but that doesn’t mean I allowed it to keep me from finding my own happily ever after.” Her mother winked at her before she left the room.

Grace turned to Angel with a curious look. “Mr. Darcy?”

Angel chuckled. “You’ll have to read it to find out. Now let me continue reading; go play with your ribbons,” she teased.

Grace stuck out her tongue in a playful way. “I’ll do just that and at the next dance, I’ll be the prettiest girl there. Mitchell might even forget he’s engaged to be married.”

“You’re terrible,” Angel said with a laugh before her sister left the room.

She opened her book and continued where she had left off. She was swept away to an English manor house where flirtation and stubbornness met head-to-head.

CHAPTER 2



“*H*ow are my girls?” John Jones asked after he finished saying grace at the dinner table.

Angel looked forward to their family dinners every night. Her father was a banker and did very well for himself. That was why they could afford to live in a beautiful brownstone on the nice side of town. It was also the reason they enjoyed the services of a cook and two housemaids.

Tonight, the cook had spoiled them with roasted duck and vegetables, and the aroma permeated the air, making Angel’s mouth water.

“I went for tea this afternoon with Mrs. Brown. She’s very eager for a match between her eldest nephew and Faith,” Elizabeth said warmly to her husband.

Faith’s eyes widened with horror. “But I’m only sixteen!”

“In time, dear, in time. Remember, it’s important for your mother and me that you and your sisters find suitable husbands. If we are to keep our standing in society, the right matches are just as important as spending time with the right people,” her father explained.

Angel quietly sighed, her appetite gone. It had been like this for the last few weeks. At least twice a week, the subject of their future husbands would be brought up at the dinner table. As the eldest, there was an unspoken expectation that Angel be the first to wed.

“Yes, Father,” Faith said, sounding resigned.

Angel couldn't help but feel sorry for her sister. Faith was very shy and mostly kept to herself. The only time her face lit up was when she played the piano.

“There is a very handsome tutor who came to the bank the other day, Angel, I might consider inviting him to dinner so that he can meet you. I bet the two of you will hit it off right off the bat.” Her father said with a knowing look.

“Speaking of tutors,” Angel began, trying to divert the conversation. “You know how much I'd like to work with young children. I've considered applying for a teaching position if one becomes available. Perhaps after I gain enough experience, I can become a private tutor.”

Her mother's face contorted as if Angel had just told them that she was marrying a coal miner. “Why on earth would you want to do that? It isn't appropriate for a young lady of your standing to seek out gainful employment. What would people say? They'd think your father can't provide for our family.”

“Mother, you know that isn't why I want to do it. I enjoy reading and writing and I want to share that passion with young minds. Is that so terrible?” Angel asked, confused as to why her mother would be so against her finding a teaching position.

“Yes, it's horrible. A teacher or tutor is barely a few steps above a maid. Do you honestly think your father worked this hard all these years for his eldest daughter to become a maid? It's out of the question,” her mother snapped firmly before she reached for a drink of water. As if Angel had caused her throat to become parched by simply mentioning her own dreams.

“Unfortunately I agree with your mother, Angel. It simply wouldn't be appropriate. Rather find a nice man to court you. Then when you have your own children, you can teach them. That would be a much better plan,” her father said firmly.

Angel frowned. “So I have to find a husband and have children before I can even consider following my own dreams.”

“Exactly. It’s what’s expected.” Her mother nodded, setting down her water glass. “Now enough of this nonsense. Grace, what were you up to today?”

Angel hated the way her mother had just dismissed her dreams. It had been something she had aspired to for years, but she never imagined her parents would be repulsed by it. She turned to Grace and pretended to pay attention to her story about Mitchell and the ribbons.

Her father chuckled when Grace finished telling the story. “Now that’s a young man who could do a lot for our social standing.”

“Isn’t he engaged to be married? I heard his fiancée would be traveling to Boston from England in the summer?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

Grace smiled at her mother. “There is time yet.”

Her parents laughed, clearly happy that their middle child was eager to find love. For a moment she wished her parents would smile at her like that, but Angel pushed the thought away. She knew she wasn’t a disappointment to her parents. Their only disappointment was that Angel enjoyed the company of books and children more than she enjoyed the company of men.

The few times she had been courted, Angel found the men to lack enough intelligence and world wisdom to actually conduct a conversation. The men she had met could talk only about how much they earned and what they could afford.

It might be because Angel was raised in an affluent household, but such things didn’t appeal to her in the least.

As the conversation turned to her father’s day at work, Angel couldn’t help but admire the way her mother looked at him. It was clear that even after all these years her parents were still in love.

Did she want that for herself?

A smile curved Angel’s mouth. Of course she did. But not right now; first

she wanted to live her life and travel the world.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – MARCH 1893

At her sister's insistence on a cold morning in March, Angel agreed to go with her to town. The wind had a slight chill and the streets were a little muddy, but Grace clearly looked forward to going shopping.

Neither Angel nor Grace needed anything new but Grace considered herself a fashionista and always wanted to stay up-to-date with the latest styles and hats from Europe. This morning, Grace was in search of a light cream hat to go with her new dress.

By midmorning, they had visited almost every hat shop Angel knew of in Boston, and Grace was yet to find a hat she wanted. Angel was exhausted and irritable and wanted nothing more than to go home and curl up in a window seat with a book, but she had promised Grace that she would come.

"There is one we haven't been to," Grace announced happily as she hooked her arm through Angel's elbow and all but dragged her towards another hat shop.

Angel let out a quiet sigh. "Please let this be the one where we find what you're looking for. Do you even know what you're looking for?"

"No," Grace giggled. "But I believe the moment I see it, I'll know. A hat is the most important part of any outfit. It rounds it off and gives it a certain panache."

Angel knew better than to argue when it came to fashion because Grace truly did know better than her. She followed her sister into the store and silently cringed when she saw all the hats. She knew that Grace would want to try on every single hat in the store before she began to search for the color that she had in mind.

"Oh, look at this one!" Grace cried out with excitement as she rushed towards a royal blue hat.

“You don’t even have anything royal blue to wear it with,” Angel protested.

“My dearest sister, haven’t I taught you anything? If you find an item that you really like, you just have to find a dress to go with it,” Grace said, laughing as she tried on the hat.

Angel shook her head as she began to browse the store. She really did hope this didn’t mean that they would have to go dress shopping too.

She saw a community board at the front of the store and walked towards it, willing to do anything at that moment but look at another hat. Reading the various notices on the board, she couldn’t help but smile. A seamstress had posted a notice, looking for extra work. And a nanny was seeking alternative employment. And then there were notices about positions at factories. But one notice, in particular, caught Angel’s attention.

TEACHING POSITION AVAILABLE IN WATERFALL, Indiana.

THIS CHARMING SMALL town that serves a community of ranchers is urgently seeking the services of a teacher for the younger students. No experience necessary. Must be able to read and write, and to be firm but gentle with young students.

INTERESTED PARTIES CAN SEND a telegram to the mayor of Waterfall.

ANGEL READ the advertisement and immediately felt her heart begin to race. That was exactly the type of teaching position she hoped to one day have. She glanced over her shoulder to see Grace trying on a scarlet hat and then

turned her attention back to the noticeboard. She quickly memorized the details for submission of the telegram and then returned to Grace.

Hope began to grow in her chest as she imagined herself being appointed.

Angel knew the location of Indiana on a map and knew that it was an agricultural state, known for its corn, wheat, and cattle industries. She had no idea about the small town of Waterfall but that didn't dampen her excitement in the least.

"What do you think of this one?" Grace asked, turning to her with a bright red hat atop her head.

Angel couldn't help but laugh. Only Grace would be bold and brave enough to wear something as bright as that. "You won't be looked over, that's for sure."

"Do you think father might disapprove?" Grace asked with doubt.

Angel cocked a brow. "Do you mean the father who won't want his daughter to be noticed from a mile? Yes, I think he might disapprove just a little."

"I know, but it's so pretty."

"It is," Angel agreed. "Have you looked at the cream hats yet?"

Grace took off the red hat with a heavy sigh and offered it back to the shop assistant. "I think it's time to look at your cream hats now."

Angel laughed, shaking her head. "You mean to say you haven't even looked at them?"

Grace simply shrugged. "I became distracted, wouldn't you?"

Angel nodded indulgently. She had been distracted, only not by the hats. But by the notice on the community board. A notice that made her feel like this was something that she really needed to do.

She knew her parents wouldn't approve. They wanted her to get married. But perhaps, just perhaps, she might be able to convince them to allow her to take a train westward. Indiana wasn't even that far; no more than a four-hour train ride away.

“This is it!” Grace announced as she turned to Angel with a pretty cream hat on her head. The hat was very simple with a small veil that hung just below Grace’s eyes.

“You’re right, that’s the one,” Angel agreed with a smile, although secretly she was relieved that their shopping marathon was finally over.

She couldn’t wait to get home and decide what she was going to say in the telegram if her parents allowed her to apply.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



*A*lthough Angel had been taking Latin lessons since she was young, she still attended a lesson once a week. Angel knew that she would probably never have the privilege of actually using her Latin skills, but she didn't mind. She enjoyed the lesson, the new words, and learning how many English words were rooted in Latin.

The best part about her Latin lesson was that her best friend Mabel Cooper was there as well.

They didn't see each other every day, only once a week after their Latin lesson. The two girls would enjoy tea and cakes on their way home and talk about what had happened the previous week.

Mabel's parents were currently in England and, according to her suspicions, trying to find a Duke to ask for Mabel's hand. Mabel wasn't completely against the idea of moving to England and marrying a Duke, but she wasn't all that eager either.

Mabel very much reminded Angel of Grace. She was full of life, witty, and eager to become a wife to a handsome and wealthy man.

They differed in too many ways to count and yet they simply loved each other's company.

"Enough about my future Duke and the manor he simply has to have, what have you been up to? Wait," Mabel laughed. "Let me guess. You read

you wrote, you read, and you read some more.”

Angel laughed. “I did read, you’re right. But I also went hat shopping with Grace. It was exhausting, to say the least. I swear she tried on every single hat in Boston before she finally found one that looked almost exactly like the very first one she had tried on.”

“No two hats are the same,” Mabel informed her pointedly. “Besides, Grace has a very good eye for fashion. Perhaps I should ask her to come along with me next time I go shopping for a new hat.”

“She’ll love that,” Angel agreed. “At the last hat shop, I saw a notice about a teacher needed in a small town in Indiana.”

Only Mabel knew how badly Angel wanted to become a teacher. Whereas her family tried to convince her otherwise, Mabel supported her dream. “Really, did you apply?”

Angel scoffed. “How can I apply when I know my mother and father won’t let me go. They’ve made it clear in no uncertain terms that it isn’t appropriate for a member of the Jones family to take up work. And in their opinion, being a teacher or a tutor is akin to being a housemaid.” Angel sighed heavily. “I just wish they would be more open-minded.”

Mabel shook her head. “I’m sorry to hear they’re so unsupportive. I know you’ll make a great teacher.”

“Thank you,” Angel said with resignation. She had already written the telegram in her mind about a hundred times, but she knew that she would never have the opportunity to actually send it.

“What are you going to do? Sneak off?” Mabel suggested with a teasing smile.

Angel shook her head. “I can’t do that to them. Although I feel a little imprisoned by their expectations of me, I won’t be able to just run off.”

“You’re a better person than I am,” Mabel said firmly. “If someone was standing between me and my dreams... let’s just say they won’t be standing for long.”

Sometimes Angel wished she could be as brave as Mabel. But she wasn't. She wanted to please her parents, but she was starting to wonder if it was going to be at the cost of her own happiness.

"Would they let you teach if you were married?" Mabel asked curiously.

Angel frowned. "How do you mean? When I'm married, I'll have to care for my husband? They wouldn't be able to stop me, but what husband would want his wife to be employed?"

"The right husband. I was just thinking about my cousin Nellie. Do you remember her? You met her a few years ago?" Mabel asked with a questioning look.

"Yes, of course I remember her. She was a dear girl." Angel nodded.

"She still is. But..." Mabel glanced around to make sure they weren't being eavesdropped on. "But she's now living out West."

"How? Do you have family there or...." Angel trailed off.

Mabel's mouth curved into a wicked grin. "She became a mail order bride. Her parents matched her with a gee-awful fat man who was old enough to be her father. So instead of just running away and trying to make a life on her own, she found a man who wanted a wife, and they began to correspond. Two days before the wedding, she took the train West and hasn't looked back."

"You mean she married a complete stranger?" Angel asked horrified.

"Not exactly," Mabel began. "There is this newspaper, you can only find it at certain shops and stores. It's almost exclusive, one could say. With all the men out in the West and little to no women, one could understand it's hard for them to find wives. That's where the Matrimonial Times comes in..."

Angel listened as Mabel explained how mail order brides were now a common occurrence. By the time Angel had learned everything she could, she wondered if Mabel wasn't right.

Perhaps becoming a mail-order bride was one way for her to follow her

dreams and get her parents' approval. She could marry someone she didn't plan to love, someone who just wanted companionship, and then become a teacher.

To Angel, it sounded like the perfect plan.

Even more perfect than Grace's new hat.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – MARCH 1893

Travis Scott kicked back on his porch and took a long drink of the lemonade his mother had made that afternoon.

It might not yet be summer, but after working cattle all day on the back of a horse in the early summer heat, he was quite simply exhausted. The aroma of meatloaf drifted out to the porch, making him grateful for his mother's cooking.

Waterfall Ranch lay before him as far as the eye could see. Many men would muster pride or even arrogance by such a spread, but Travis had worked long enough to know that such a vast property was humbling.

You were at nature's peril every second of every day. She could sneak up on you and trap you in a snowstorm even as quickly as she could dehydrate you if you forgot an extra canteen of water at home when you were lost in the fields.

But he wouldn't exchange this lifestyle for any other.

In fact, Travis knew nothing else.

He'd been born on Waterfall twenty-five years ago. He'd learned the lay of the land and the art of working cattle at his father's side. Together, they had grown the herd, improved the breed, and worked the land to such an extent that they were almost completely self-sustaining.

There had been nothing his father had been afraid of, nor a challenge he'd back away from. He was as healthy as an ox when God decided to call him home just three years ago. Travis could still remember the exact spot where it had happened. They had been moving cattle down from the hills when suddenly the sky had darkened.

Thunderstorms were as much a part of life in Indiana as maize and corn. Travis had never feared one before.

Until the day a bolt of lightning had reached down and stopped his father's heart. It had been a cruel way to go, but luckily his father hadn't suffered. It had been quick.

Ever since, Travis had been left to run the ranch on his own. He was responsible for all the cattle, ten ranch hands, and his mother who was nearing the age of sixty. It was a busy life, one that didn't leave him a lot of free time to travel to the nearest town in the hopes of finding a sweetheart.

But Travis dreamed of finding love and companionship. He dreamed of sitting on the porch and watching the sunset, with children laughing as they played outside. He wanted someone to confide in, someone to cherish, someone to build a future with.

This wasn't a dream he had shared with his mother. Although he knew she wanted that for him as well, she had become very protective over and selfish of him. Even when Brandy, his right-hand ranch hand and best friend, came up to the cabin for supper, his mother would toe the line of being downright rude.

With age also came quirks. His mother had become more stubborn than ever before. She'd try to do things that she was no longer capable of, and hurt herself in the process. More often than not, Travis would stay up late at night to take care of the chores around the house that he didn't want her to attempt. Something as simple as washing the floors had led to her slipping and falling. She hadn't broken a bone, but she'd been hurt enough to stay in bed for a week.

"Heya, boss, watcha thinkin' 'bout?" Brandy asked, jogging up the stairs.

Brandy was a pretty woman in a tough kind of way. She could wrestle a bull, ride a mustang and drink beer with the best of them. But to Travis, she was a most reliable ranch hand and his best friend. He'd seen the way most of the ranch hands looked at her, but Travis had never thought of her as anything more than a friend.

"Dreamin' 'bout the future," Travis said holding out his glass of

lemonade.

Brandy took a long sip and cocked a brow as she leaned her hip against the porch railing. “Seems to me you’re mopin’.”

“I’m not,” Travis said stubbornly.

“Fine, then tell me what you’re mopin’ about,” Brandy demanded, crossing her arms. She would never dare to talk to him in this way in front of the other ranch hands but when they were alone, they were equals.

“I was just thinkin’ ‘bout the future. Havin’ a family, a son to leave this all to,” Travis admitted in a roundabout way.

Brandy laughed. “Travis Scott, if you think a son is going to fall from the sky, you’ve got another thing comin’. You’ve gotta find a woman first,” Brandy teased.

Travis shrugged. “That’s the problem. Waterfall barely has any women at all, and the ones who are available don’t interest me. And it’s not like I have the time to go and spend in town, hoping to find someone who wouldn’t mind living in the middle of nowhere. Then there’s Ma... she won’t approve of just any woman movin’ into her home.”

Brandy nodded. “The biggest problem there is the last one. As for finding a woman, I’ve got another suggestion for you. Do you think you’re the only man in the West that can’t find a wife? Think again.”

“What do you mean?” Travis asked, leaning forward, intrigued by Brandy’s words.

“Why do women have to know everything? It’s called the Matrimonial Times. Men across the country, seeking companionship, love, or simply a wife, advertise in it. Then, if a woman finds said man interesting, they write,” Brandy explained.

“And then?” Travis asked, confused.

“Then after corresponding for a few months, you can decide whether or not you want to ask her for her hand. If you do, she comes out here and marries ya,” Brandy finished with a shrug.

“And how would you know ‘bout this?” Travis asked curiously.

Brandy smiled mischievously. “I might have my eye on a bachelor in the West somewhere. I just haven’t found one I wanted to write to.”

“And if I decide to do this, how do I place my... offer?”

Brandy laughed. “Don’t worry, boss, I’ll take care of it.”

Brandy hopped off the porch and headed back to the small cabin in which she lived, adjacent to the ranch hand quarters. Travis wasn’t sure if he’d just made the best decision of his life or the biggest mistake.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – MARCH 1893

Angel pretended to go to the library the next day, but instead, she was on the hunt for more than just a book. She was on the hunt for the Matrimonial Times.

After hearing about it from Mabel, Angel couldn't help but be hopeful that perhaps she could find a husband who would satisfy her parents so that she could pursue her dream of teaching. She had dreamt about going to Waterfall the night before to become a teacher.

In her dream, the children loved her. The townsfolk adored her for the work she did. She felt happy and free. When she woke, Angel couldn't help but be disappointed that it had only been a dream.

She stopped at every store she could think of, but no one had the Matrimonial Times. Desperate, she finally moved to the less savory part of town. She walked into a small shop that was owned by a woman with a strange accent. Not willing to waste more time scouring the shelves, Angel stepped up to the woman with a hopeful smile. "I'm hoping to find a copy of the Matrimonial Times."

The woman smiled, revealing a few missing teeth. "You become mail order bride, da?"

Angel wasn't sure why the woman suddenly seemed so friendly. "I just want the paper."

"When a girl comes to buy a copy of Matrimonial Times, I never see them 'round here again." The woman reached behind the counter and handed Angel a newspaper. It looked like any other newspaper but instead of headlines and news, it simply had the names of men. "Here, you take it. It got damaged; I can't sell it."

Angel was grateful for the woman's kindness but it didn't feel right to

just take it. This part of town drew people who had fallen on hard times. She pulled a few coins out of her purse and handed them to the woman. “Thank you.”

The woman beamed with gratitude. “Thank you!”

Feeling a little out of her depth in this part of town, Angel quickly hurried back towards more familiar roads. She found a small diner that served coffee and took a seat. This was not something she wanted her sisters or her parents to find in her possession.

She wasn’t sure how long she sat there but by the time her second coffee was cold, Angel was completely fascinated. There were men from all over the country. Some widowed, others simply alone and then there were those who quite frankly just wanted a trophy wife.

From her experience in the social circles of Boston, Angel could quickly tell the difference. She found one man in particular in California who had been widowed. He was left with two young children and hoped to find them a new mother. He made it clear that he wasn’t searching for an intimate relationship but that he would be grateful for the company.

It seemed like a very attractive opportunity for Angel. She could teach his children and perhaps spend more time attending to her own writing.

She reached for the cup of cold coffee and was about to take a sip when her eyes fell on a word. Surprised and shocked, Angel only realized she had spilled when she felt the cold liquid seep onto her leg.

She quickly dabbed the coffee spill with her hanky before she returned to the word that had caught her eye.

***HANDSOME RANCHER SEEKING WIFE, WATERFALL –
INDIANA***

ANGEL FROWNED. It couldn't be. It was the exact same town advertising the teaching position! She drew in a deep breath, hoping to calm her racing heart as she started to read the rest of his advertisement.

TRAVIS SCOTT IS a second-generation cattle rancher on Mountain Falls Ranch. With a large herd of cattle, he has no time to search for a lifetime companion. He is looking for someone kind, young, loving, and gentle with whom to share his life. Travis is a hardworking man with a passion for his land. He is known to be generous and fair and cares for his mother regardless of his busy routine. If you feel the capacity to be a rancher's wife and support him through the seasons of life, then Travis is eager to hear from you.

ANGEL READ the advertisement again and wondered if she could indeed become a rancher's wife. Surely Travis Scott didn't expect her to marry him straight away. Mabel said that in some instances couples corresponded with each other for months before a proposal was made.

She glanced up at the clock and realized she had already been away too long. If she was going to write to Travis Scott, she would have to do it now.

Angel drew in a deep breath and walked over to the manager of the diner. "Do you perhaps have a sheet of writing paper and a pen I could use to pen a letter? You can add it to my bill."

The manager looked confused for a moment before he provided her with a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a pen. "Here you go, ma'am."

"Thank you."

Angel returned to her table and read Travis's advertisement again. She had never truly believed in fate, but could it be fate that had called her attention to his advertisement? Could it be fate that she had seen the

advertisement for the teaching position first and then came upon Travis's advertisement?

She closed her eyes and said a quick prayer. "Dear Lord, if this is what You have planned for my future, then let my words speak to his heart."

Angel's hand hovered over the page for a few seconds before she began to write.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – APRIL 1893

Over the next two weeks, Angel kept a close eye on all the mail that arrived. She had all but begged the housekeeper to make sure that any mail that came for her was put directly in her hand and not left around the house.

She was beginning to wonder if her letter had reached Travis Scott at all. She wasn't sure how long it took for letters to find their way to Indiana, but surely he would've received them by now.

Angel was so distracted as she anxiously awaited a letter from Travis, that she hardly read at all. Instead, she had taken to her old hobby of sewing. She also visited Mabel more often, hoping it would help to pass the time.

With every day that passed, she found herself wondering if the teaching position had been filled. She found herself doubting if she had said the right things and if Travis would even want to correspond with her.

It was late afternoon on a Thursday when the housekeeper stepped into her room. "Angel, this just came for you. It's postmarked from Indiana?"

Angel's heart skipped a beat. "Thank you."

She quickly took the letter from the housekeeper before shutting her door and locking it. She knew she might appear rude, but she couldn't chance anyone learning about what she was up to. She rushed over to her window seat and carefully opened the envelope.

It felt both strange and exciting to know that a man she had never met had taken the time to write to her. After drawing in a steadying breath, she began to read his letter.

MY DEAREST ANGEL,

I HOPE you don't mind but I have to say that your name is simply beautiful.

WHEN I FIRST PLACED MY advertisement in the Matrimonial Times (or rather when my best friend did so on my behalf), I wasn't sure anything would come of it. But when I received your letter, it gave me hope.

Not only the hope of corresponding with you in the future, but hope that we might share a future together. Please don't think me too forward, but I was charmed by your honesty.

It isn't often a woman writes to a man to tell him that she has no intention of falling in love. It also isn't often that a woman of your social standing seeks gainful employment. I both admire and respect that. Your family sounds wonderful and very protective, such as a family should be.

The position at the school in Waterfall hasn't been filled, to my knowledge, but I can put in a good word for you if you would like to apply.

You told me so much about your life in Boston and your dreams of becoming a teacher and a writer that I would like to share with you a little more about myself.

As mentioned, my mother lives with me. Or rather I live with her. Depends on which way you want to look at it. Since my pa passed away, I've been taking care of her just as she has been taking care of me. She tends to the house and the cooking while I tend the ranch and the cattle.

Living on a cattle ranch is often hard work, at times much harder than I'd like to admit. We have small twisters, dust storms, and thunderstorms, but we also have more space than you can imagine. If you sit on my porch, where I am sitting now, for as far as the eye can see, the land belongs to the Scott family. It's a humbling feeling to know that you're responsible for so much of God's creation.

I understand that you're not looking to fall in love, and I'll be honest with

you by saying I doubt one can fall in love through words. But I will say that I look forward to hearing from you again. You have such a talent for describing things, such as your home, that I was thoroughly enchanted by your words.

I can understand why you want to become a writer one day.

The town of Waterfall is about two miles from Mountain Falls Ranch. It's not too far to walk, but in the winter, the snow will be too thick for such a walk as that. Should you decide to one day come to Waterfall, I will drive you in the snowy weather. I might be an advocate for a woman following her own dreams, but when it comes to the wilds of Idaho, no woman should travel alone in bad weather, in my opinion.

I have to warn you that during the summer months I often work from dawn till dusk. Sometimes, I might be away for a day or two when we're moving cattle, and, once a year, I drive the cattle to an auction fifty miles away.

I promised to tell you more about myself, but to be honest, I have a hard time talking about this subject. I guess one could say I work hard. I'm fair and I'm honest. Sometimes brutally so. I am patient (I have to be with my mother living with me) and I hope one day to have children of my own.

I will leave it there for the moment but please do write again. Tell me more about yourself and if you think you'll be able to manage life on a ranch. We don't have dress shops or stores like you might have in Boston, but we do have a general merchant who allows us to order through catalogs.

YOURS TRULY,

Travis Scott

ANGEL WASN'T EVEN aware she was smiling by the time she had finished the

letter. She had made it clear that she didn't plan on falling in love with Travis, and that becoming his bride would be a way for her to follow her dreams, but something about his letter made her doubt that decision.

Perhaps Travis Scott could be more than just a way to follow her dreams.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA - MAY 1893

Travis found himself smiling even before he read the first word of his latest letter from Angel. Over the last two months, he'd written more than in all the years before. He had never enjoyed writing, not even when he attended the small school in Waterfall, but when it came to Angel, he found the words pouring out of him as he wanted to tell her everything about his life.

After their first letter exchange, Travis had been nervous that he wouldn't hear from her again. But she'd replied instantly, and he'd received a letter only a few days later. They had written to each other about their childhoods, their parents, and even some of the challenges they had faced.

Through her letters, he had learned about her sisters and their different personalities and her love for reading. He'd also learned that she had gone ahead and applied for the position at the school in Waterfall.

Travis had kept his word and went to have a word with William Thomas, the headmaster, who promised to notify Angel of his decision to appoint her in the vacant position.

Travis didn't want to be overly optimistic, but he couldn't help but hope that once Angel learned she had been accepted as a teacher, she would have more reason to come out to Waterfall, giving them a chance to get to know each other in person.

He sat back and began to read, feeling his smile curve a little more with every sentence.

MY DEAREST TRAVIS,

THANK YOU! Thank you! Thank you!

I JUST RECEIVED word this morning via Telegram that I have been offered the teaching position at the school in Waterfall. Thank you for helping me make my dream come true. I'm not sure what you said to Mr. Thomas, but he seemed delighted to have me on staff.

Your last letter truly intrigued me. I never knew that there was so much one could learn about cattle from simply working with them. It sounds fascinating and also a little dangerous. I've read a little about cattle ranching since we last spoke and I want you to know that if I come to Mountain Falls, I wouldn't mind helping with the smaller tasks.

I should probably tell you that I do not know how to ride a horse. I've only ridden in horse-drawn carriages.

I agree that it would be better for us to meet in person to further pursue our correspondence. Although I find myself eagerly awaiting your next letter, I'm also curious about the sound of your voice, the gait of your walk, and the color of your eyes. Please don't tell me. Hopefully one day I can learn for myself.

I can understand why you haven't told your mother about us corresponding; I haven't told my parents either. This is a modern world we live in and I doubt they would understand how you can find kinship through letters.

Which is exactly what I believe we've found.

It heartens me to know that you attend service every Sunday at church. Being raised with religion, it is important for me to be able to listen to the Lord's word at least once a week. It reminds me of what the Lord expects of us and the character of person He wants us to be.

I should probably tell you that I'm not very patient. I'm working on that every day.

Brandy? I was surprised to learn that your head ranch hand is a woman. Is it wrong of me to be surprised? She must be tough as nails and mean as a rabid wolf to be able to do all the things you say she can do. I must warn you, I'm not a delicate flower, but I've never been asked to muck out a stall or to wrangle a bull. She sounds fascinating, I hope that one day I can meet her. I'll thank her for placing your advertisement, otherwise, we never would have met.

I have to end this letter now; it's almost dinner time and I don't want Faith or Grace to find me writing to you.

*YOURS TRULY,
Angel*

BY THE TIME he'd finished reading, Travis found himself chuckling. Although he had no idea about Angel's voice, he could imagine her being a rambler. She wrote down exactly what she was thinking, making her letters very entertaining.

He read her letter again and found himself eager to meet her. Twice, she'd mentioned coming to the town of Waterfall. Did that mean she wanted to meet him as well?

Travis watched the sunset in the distance, painting the sky in beautiful hues of pinks and purple, as he allowed himself to search his heart.

Was he in love with Angel?

Certainly not.

But could he fall in love with her?

Definitely.

A smile curved the corners of his mouth as he began to write to her. He knew that he might be a little forward and that it might be too soon to ask, but

if he didn't, he would regret it.

Besides, she had a teaching position waiting for her in the fall.

He wrote the letter with as much finesse as he could muster. Spending every day in the company of ranch hands, he wasn't even sure what the word meant. But by the time he was done, he hoped his letter was charming enough to elicit a telegram in response within a few days.

He didn't seal the envelope just yet, knowing that if she said yes, it would only be appropriate for him to include her train fare. He'd add a postal order for that in the morning before he mailed, hopefully, his last, letter to Angel.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – MAY 1893

Angel had never been this nervous before. Her hands were clammy, her cheeks flushed and her heart was racing a mile a minute. She was trying her best to hide it from her family as they bowed their heads in prayer.

Once her father was done, he smiled at his family with the usual question. “How was your day, ladies?”

For a moment a stab of doubt punctured the excitement that had been building within Angel since the day before.

When she had received Travis’s letter, she had been overcome with so many emotions she wasn’t even sure she could name them all. She had been excited, flattered, hopeful, afraid, nervous and most of all she had pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming.

As conversation picked up around the table, Angel found herself thinking of his letter once again. She had memorized every single word of it, simply because she had read it so many times.

MY DEAREST ANGEL,

I HOPE this doesn’t come as a surprise to you, but I feel it is time for us to take our correspondence to the next level. With every letter I’ve received from you, I’ve grown more and more convinced that we could quite possibly be a perfect match.

You entertain me in ways that I find endearing and I’m tired of reading your words. By that, I mean that I’d like to hear you laugh and the cadence of

your voice as you speak and I'd love to see the way your face lights up when you talk about teaching.

I've given this quite some thought; hopefully one day I can take you to the place where I go to think. The place where I make all the important decisions in my life. I think you'll like it there.

I would like to invite you to come to Mountain Falls.

Would you honor me by giving me your hand in marriage?

Before you tear up the page and think I'm being too presumptuous, I'm not expecting us to get married moments after we meet for the first time.

I'm hoping you'll accept my proposal and come to Mountain Falls as my fiancée. This will not only give you time to settle in before you start your position as a teacher in the fall, but it will give us time to get to know each other without having to wait for days for a written response.

I'd like to show you my ranch, to let you experience the life you would have if you choose to move forward with the wedding.

I know you said that you weren't planning on falling in love with me, but hopefully, given enough time, I might just convince you otherwise.

Through your letters, I've developed feelings for you. They are hard to name at the moment, but they are there. I find myself thinking of you most of the time and when I'm not thinking about you, I'm writing to you.

Over and above this distracting my attention from my work on the ranch, I'd much rather spend time with you in person to learn if we might be a good match. It would be perfectly acceptable for you to live on the ranch with my mother as a chaperone protecting your reputation.

I can't promise you wealth or luxury, but I can promise you that if you come to Mountain Falls that I will always protect and cherish you. In my heart, I know that I will come to love you as well.

Honor me with a yes, Angel.

Come and meet me, because I simply can't wait to meet you.

AFFECTIONATELY YOURS,

Travis

P.S. I'VE ENCLOSED money for your train fare, a telegram, and any other expenses you might incur on your travels. I eagerly await a telegram to learn of your date of arrival.

“WHAT ARE YOU SMILING ABOUT. I just said that Mitchell is moving forward with his wedding. We received the invitation this morning.” Grace’s irritated tone of voice snapped Angel out of her dreamy smile.

“What? I’m sorry to hear that. But you knew he was engaged to be married,” Angel reminded her.

“Still, it was heartbreaking to receive the invitation,” Grace sighed heavily.

“What about you Faith, how was your day?” John asked his youngest daughter.

Paying attention to the conversation, Angel took a bite of her roast potatoes.

“Routine mostly. I went for a walk in the park, practiced playing piano, and then I spent the afternoon visiting with a friend,” Faith said easily.

“I can still remember a time when you asked that question and I would tell you how Grace pulled Faith’s hair and Angel drew on the walls all the while trying to get dinner on the table and trying to act like a good mother when you got home,” Elizabeth laughed. “We’ve come a long way, John. Just look how elegantly our daughters have grown up.”

“You did a good job,” John complimented his wife.

“Now that you mention elegance, I’ll be wearing my new hat to the dance next week. Word is that there are some naval officers in town,” Grace said

with a wicked grin.

Angel had to laugh. A moment ago her sister was devastated about Mitchell's engagement and now she was already planning on finding a new beau to fawn over.

"What are you laughing at. At least the men I like are real and not stuck between the pages of some Bronte novel," Grace said teasingly.

Angel felt her heart skip a beat. She had put it off until now, but she knew she couldn't procrastinate forever. Not if she wanted to arrive in Indiana before the week was over.

"Actually, I found a real man, one that isn't between the pages of a book," Angel said calmly. "He proposed to me and I accepted."

Faith's fork clattered onto her plate even as Grace's eyes bulged out of her head. Her parents shared a look of confusion with widened eyes.

Then they all turned to Angel with shocked expressions.

CHAPTER 10



Angel had known this would be their reaction. She also knew that the hardest part wasn't done yet. Right now her family was only shocked to learn she was engaged, she had yet to tell them to whom and where he lived.

Her mother began to chuckle. "Angel, you whimsical girl. You had us all believing you for a moment."

Her father began to laugh. "I think I just aged five years. You shouldn't tease your parents like that."

Faith frowned at Angel and a small smile curved her mouth. "I don't think Angel was teasing, were you, Angel?"

Angel shook her head. "Not at all."

Silence fell over the table for a moment before her mother shook her head and turned to her with a confused expression. "Engaged? To whom? You haven't even been courted. You hardly ever attend a dance? Do we know him? Is he from Boston? What's his last name?"

"What business is his family in?" her father added.

"Why didn't we know about him until just now?" Grace asked.

Angel glanced around the table and cocked a brow. "Now which of those questions would you like me to answer first? Or would you rather I just start at the beginning?"

“I uhm...” her father trailed off, speechless.

“Start at the beginning, dear.” Her mother who hardly ever touched alcohol reached for her burgundy and took a sip before she turned to Angel with an expectant look.

“His name is Travis Scott. He lives in Indiana in a town called Waterfall. We’ve been writing to each other for the last few months, and he’s asked for my hand in marriage,” Angel began to explain.

“So you haven’t even met him?” Grace asked, disgusted.

“I don’t need to meet him to know that I like him. In our letters to each other, we’ve told each other everything. I know how he grew up; I know that he goes to church on Sundays; I know that he adores and respects his mother although she is a little stubborn and I know that I like him very much.”

“That isn’t love,” her mother stated quietly.

“I know,” Angel agreed. “He’s asked for my hand in marriage in order for me to go and visit him in Waterfall. I’ll be staying on the ranch with him and his mother, who will act as a chaperone. After an agreeable amount of time, we will decide whether we are both willing to proceed with a wedding or to break off the engagement.”

“It sounds... reasonable.” Her father surprised himself with the realization. “You’ve given this a lot of thought?”

“I have,” Angel agreed.

“How did you come to write to a man in Indiana?” Grace asked confused.

Angel couldn’t tell her parents about the Matrimonial Times so she told a white lie. “He’s a friend of Mabel’s family. She told him about me, and he asked to write to me.”

“Oh,” Grace said with a nod.

“How far away is... Waterfall?” her mother asked.

“It’s about four hours by train. So it’s close enough that you can come and visit if I decide to stay and I can always come and visit you as well. Although with the ranch, it might be hard for Travis to get away for any

length of time.”

“You really have given this a lot of thought,” her mother said with a heavy sigh. “I suppose your father would’ve appreciated being asked for his blessing but in these times, I guess that isn’t done anymore.”

“I know you might find this strange; I also know that you might think that I’ve lost my marbles somewhere in a book and I’m making a mistake. But I’m not. I’m twenty years old, I know my own mind and my own heart. I’ve prayed on this matter, and I’ve thought about it for a while. I know I’m doing the right thing. Do I have your blessing to leave on the train day after tomorrow?”

“So soon?” her father asked, surprised.

Angel couldn’t stop the light blush from creeping into her cheeks. “We’re eager to meet each other. Now that we’re engaged, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

“I’ll need to arrange for your train fare and you’re going to need a steam trunk for your things....” Her father began to list everything she would need for the journey and life on a ranch.

Angel held up her hand. “Father, Travis has sent me money for the train fare and any other expenses I might have. Once I have your blessing, I’ll send him a telegram in the morning notifying him of my time of arrival. There is enough for a steam trunk and perhaps even a lightweight dress or two to wear on the ranch.”

“A wedding dress! You don’t have one of those!” Grace cried out.

“That was very generous of him.” Her father nodded approvingly. He turned to her mother with a questioning look. “What you do think, do we give her our blessing to marry a man we’ve never met in a town we’ve never been to?”

Angel could’ve hugged her mother when she began to laugh. “Weren’t you the one that always told me that love had no reason and no rhyme? Sure seems to me that Travis at least has some rhyme to his reason if he chose our

daughter.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Angel couldn’t believe her mother approved.

“Then I guess all that is left to say is, we love you and this will always be your home if things with this Scott fellow don’t work out. What does he raise on his ranch?” her father asked rubbing his chin.

“Beef.”

Her father shook his head with a chuckle. “A rancher’s wife. Can you believe that?”

“I’m just grateful his mother lives with him, otherwise your father and I might not have given him our blessing. You’ll write? Often?”

“As often as I possibly can,” Angel promised.

Feeling relieved about telling her parents, she couldn’t help but feel a little guilty as well. She didn’t tell them about the teaching position or that she didn’t plan on falling in love with Travis. Some things were better kept to herself.

CHAPTER 11



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 15 MAY 1893

*A*lthough the train journey had been long it was with great excitement that Angel disembarked from the train on the platform in Waterfall.

The town was small and dusty and the buildings looked weathered and beaten by the elements. But Angel didn't care. Arriving in Waterfall was the first step to living her dream. She was a little nervous about meeting Travis Scott for the first time, but just the thought of having the opportunity to teach eased her nerves a little more.

She thanked the conductor after he deposited her steam trunk beside her and watched as the train began to slowly pull away from the platform. For the first time since she left Boston, Angel doubted whether or not she had made a mistake.

What if Travis was a brute and a drunk? What if all the letters he'd written her were only a way to woo her into coming here and to treat her as a servant? What if he beat her? What if he didn't like her? What if he sent her back on the next train to Boston? Fear crawled up her spine even as her throat went dry with the reality of what she had done.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Are you Angel Jones?" a deep voice rumbled behind her.

Angel turned and looked into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. They were steel blue and although she didn't doubt they could be cold, they seemed kind. His hair was sandy brown and windblown. His brows were thick as they hooded his striking eyes above a strong square jaw.

He was the most attractive man Angel had ever laid eyes on.

With broad shoulders, hat in hand, and a curious smile, he spoke again. "Are you Angel Jones?"

Angel blinked and forced herself into the moment. "That's me."

He held out a wildflower and smiled at her with affection. "It's me, Angel, Travis Scott." He reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to the top as a real gentleman would. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

When he released her hand she was holding the flower, feeling thoroughly charmed. She hadn't known what she had expected of Travis's appearance, but she hadn't expected him to be so handsome.

"The pleasure is all mine," she replied with a quiet voice.

"I never asked, but I have to say you're easy on the eyes. You're real pretty, just like an Angel should be," Travis said with a charming grin.

Angel felt her cheeks heat with a blush. "Thank you."

"Here, let me get your bags, and then we can head out to Mountain Falls." Travis picked up her steam trunk as if it weighed nothing, although Angel knew it was too heavy for her to even move by herself.

She followed him to the wagon standing at the end of the platform and couldn't help but feel a little trepidatious about riding off with a stranger.

As if sensing her trepidation Travis turned to her once he had loaded the steam trunk onto the back of the wagon. "If at any moment you feel threatened, the Sheriff is right over there."

A nervous laugh escaped Angel. "Is it that obvious?"

Travis chuckled. "Just a little."

He helped her into the wagon before he climbed in himself. "I'm sure it's natural. It's a brave thing you did to come out here without even meeting me first."

"I don't feel very brave right now," Angel admitted.

"Well you are," Travis insisted. "How was your train journey?"

For the short duration of the ride to the ranch, they spoke about her train journey, the weather, and the landmarks around them. Without even realizing it, Travis had set her completely at ease by the time they arrived at Mountain Falls.

The cabin as he had called it, was actually a beautiful large two-story

house. Angel couldn't help but be fascinated by the large logs that had been used to build it. It was amazing that it had been done out here in the middle of nothing.

A large barn stood to the one side, coated in linseed oil that had turned the wood red with time. "Travis, your property... it's beautiful."

Travis stopped the wagon in front of the house. "I'm glad you approve; was afraid you'd be expecting a brownstone."

Angel laughed, shaking her head. "A brownstone, really? I might be from the city, but I realize out here cabins are built out of logs mostly."

"And mothers can be a little difficult – just as in the city," Travis warned with a smile.

Angel appreciated the warning but she was sure that his mother would be a sweetheart. Older women were, at least to her.

The moment they stepped into the cabin; a woman walked toward them. Her hair was grey and her smile terse as she looked Angel up and down. "She'll do."

Angel felt a little offended by the comment but summoned a smile. "I'm Angel Jones, it's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Jones."

"Yes, yes. Travis, show her to her room. I've put new linens in there, so you can just make the bed," Mrs. Jones said a little dismissively.

Angel heard Travis sigh quietly beside her. This was probably what he meant with difficult mothers.

She followed him up the stairs, admiring the craftsmanship that went into the railing, and the detail of the roof shingles. When they reached the first floor, there was a long broad hallway with numerous doors on either side.

"My pa had hoped for a big family, unfortunately, they only had me," Travis explained as he moved to the second door on the left. "This room is yours."

Angel had been raised in comfort and wouldn't have minded anything less, but it was clear that although they lived in the West, Travis and his

mother had most of the home comforts you could expect in the city. The stove pipe from the wood stove in the kitchen traveled through her room towards the roof, assuring her the room would be warm in winter. Large windows allowed the light to stream in.

Apart from the bureau, there was a large closet and washing basin in the corner. She even had a desk. For a moment her heart fluttered realizing that the man she had been writing to for so many hours was now standing beside her.

She glanced at him and reminded herself that she wasn't here to fall in love, she was simply here to teach.

But when Travis turned to her with a smile, Angel wondered if it was going to be that easy.

"I'll meet you downstairs in a while for dinner. Give you time to rest and settle in."

"Thank you," Angel said before he left the room.

She turned in a circle, her arms flung wide; she felt excited about her new adventure.

CHAPTER 12



“*I* don’t know where you found her, but she seems a step or two above your usual housemaid,” Jessica said as soon as Travis joined her in the living room.

His eyes nearly bugged out of his head at his mother’s comment. He had simply explained to his mother that Angel Jones from Boston was coming to stay with them. Since he had known, his mother would object to him finding a mail-order bride, he hadn’t been forthcoming about his relationship with Angel.

Now he regretted it instantly.

Jessica Scott had always been a force to be reckoned with. Living in the West and raising a child amongst the wolves, bears, and Indians, she had to be. Travis had always admired her for her bravery and her determination. But after his father passed, those qualities had turned into something much fiercer.

Protectiveness.

His mother had become like a bear protecting her cub. Losing her husband had her focus turned to Travis, every minute of her every day consumed with his safety and his happiness. It wasn’t that Travis didn’t think his mother wanted him to have a wife or a family, it was merely a matter of knowing that his mother would feel no one was good enough for her only

child.

He had thought that once his mother met Angel and was charmed by her, she would be more acceptable to the news of her becoming her future daughter-in-law; now Travis doubted that would ever happen at all.

Especially if she had come to the conclusion that Angel was their new live-in housemaid.

He shook his head with a sigh, wishing he had been clear about his relationship with Angel.

For a moment he considered telling his mother the truth, explaining to her that in actual fact Angel was his fiancée, but he realized doing that now would cause an argument. One he didn't want Angel to overhear.

An argument that could cause Angel to take the next train out of Waterfall back to Boston. He thought of their letters and her excitement about taking up a teaching position in the fall and knew he couldn't allow his mother to ruin this new opportunity for Angel.

He wouldn't tell her now, but he would tread carefully and keep a close eye on his mother until she was ready to learn the truth about Angel's arrival.

"Ma, I know there is a lot you need be done around the cabin, but just let her settle in first?" Travis asked trying to circumvent his mother from working out a schedule or putting Angel to work right away.

"Fine, but just a few days. Room and board aren't free, and neither are our good graces. I don't know why you invited her to come here, but I do know she won't be sitting around idle and watching me do all the housework," Jessica said firmly.

Travis nodded, hoping that Angel wouldn't mind helping out around the house.

"I have to check on the calves, would you mind starting with dinner?" Travis asked with the hopes of distracting his mother until he could come back to shield Angel from his mother's mindset.

"I don't mind, that's why I've cooked your meals all your life," Jessica

snapped.

Travis put his hat on his head and headed outside. He checked on the calves, made sure the chickens had been fed, and that Brandy had moved the pregnant cows to a closer paddock before he headed back inside.

Just as he stepped into the kitchen, Angel joined him and his mother.

“That smells delicious. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yes, you can start peeling them carrots,” his mother said with a nod toward a bunch of the freshly picked vegetables.

By the expression on Angel’s face, Travis quickly realized she wasn’t that at ease in the kitchen. She’d mentioned they had house staff; he just didn’t realize they had a cook as well.

“Here, I’ll help,” Travis offered.

He collected two pairing knives before he carefully demonstrated to Angel how to peel the carrots. She seemed entertained by the chore rather than dreading it.

Travis’s heart warmed knowing he’d made the right decision by asking her to come to Mountain Falls. His mother might not be aware of his plans, but Travis couldn’t help but be excited. Angel had come across in their letters as positive and joyful and he could see now that she embraced that very attitude when it came to new challenges.

Something that would take her very far in the West.

CHAPTER 13



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 22 MAY 1893

A week after her arrival in Waterfall, Angel fixed herself a cup of tea and went to sit outside on the porch.

She had learned so much over the last few days that she could only hope to remember. Jessica had taught her how to care for wood floors, how to deal with wayward snakes, and, most of all, how to cook Travis's favorite meals.

Today she had done the laundry; all the clothes including the bedding. Her arms were aching and her back was sore, but she had a stupid grin on her face as the sun began its descent in the West. For her whole life, everything, or at least most of the things, had been done for her. There had been times when she had felt frustrated with boredom.

But here on Mountain Falls, she could see the difference her effort made every day. She took pride in the windows being free from dust and rain streaks. She enjoyed the scent of the lemon balm she had rubbed into the wood floors and stairs to protect them. The house smelled like freshly washed laundry and the stew she was cooking was happily bubbling on the woodstove.

It felt good to make a difference, to feel as though she was needed.

Although she couldn't help but feel an arctic breeze coming from her future mother-in-law. It was clear that either Jessica didn't want her here or didn't approve of her. She hardly spoke to Angel at all and when she did it was either to issue instructions or to remind her of something she hadn't done yet.

Angel didn't mind the work, but she would appreciate a little conversation from Jessica rather than the wide chasm of ice that seemed to lay between them.

She sipped on her tea as Travis approached the porch. At the sight of her,

his mouth curved into a smile. Angel's heart skipped a beat as she felt a smile curve her mouth as well.

"That looks like a good way to end the day," Travis said taking off his hat.

Angel nodded. "It is; the view here... it's truly beautiful this time of day."

Travis nodded. "Sure is from where I'm standing."

It was the first time in a week that Travis had flirted or complimented her. She felt a flush rise into her cheeks and quickly looked away. Although she felt as if she knew everything about Travis, she couldn't help but feel a little shy around him.

"Did you... get everything done on the ranch today?" Angel asked trying to divert the attention from her.

Travis chuckled. "First thing you need to learn about a ranch is that the work is never done." He smiled at her as he took a seat beside her. "The second thing is, you never ask – because if you managed to get everything done that you planned on doing, chances are something's gonna come up that will have you out in the muck and elements for the rest of the night."

Angel laughed. "I didn't think you were superstitious."

"I'm not, I've just been a rancher long enough to know you don't tempt fate," Travis returned with an easy smile.

He glanced over his shoulder before he turned back to Angel with an apology in his gaze. "Listen, I'm sorry about Ma. She can be a bit of a slave driver when she wants to. If you feel like not wantin' to do somethin' you just tell me, and I'll talk to her."

Angel shook her head. "I enjoy helping out. I've learned so much in the last week. Besides, I don't like doing nothing."

"Fair enough. She hasn't had any help around the house before. She used to be able to keep up with all the chores, but she can't anymore. She refuses to believe she's growing older, but she is." Travis shrugged. "I guess it's hard to accept you can't do the things you had no trouble doin' before."

“We’re all going to get there someday, God willing. But as I said, I really don’t mind helping out,” Angel assured them.

They sat in companionable silence for a while before she turned to Travis. “I didn’t expect to like it so much out here in the middle of nowhere. I’m used to shops, diners, coffee houses, and everything being within walking distance, but this type of life, the solitude brings a different type of satisfaction. Almost peace.”

“Wait until you harvest the first vegetables from a garden you’ve grown. Or the first time you see a calf stand up for the first time. It’s hard work, but the rewards... I see it as a blessing to be able to live on a homestead.”

“I can see that you love it very much,” Angel observed with a smile.

“Have you started to prepare your lesson plans?” Travis asked.

Angel shook her head. “I haven’t really had time yet, but I will. I still want to see Mr. Thomas to find out the subjects he’d like to handle. I know at that young age it’s hard to keep the attention of children, but I’m hoping they’ll learn from me. I’ve read that teaching with games makes it a lot more fun and helps the children memorize. Like the alphabet song.”

“The alphabet song?”

Angel chuckled. “The Alphabet song – you don’t know it?”

“Nope, never sung the alphabet in my entire life,” Travis laughed.

Angel began to sing, feeling a little embarrassed to be holding Travis’s attention as she was. When she was done, he clapped his hands and laughed. “I know I’ll never forget that song or the alphabet after that.”

“Let’s hope my students feel the same way.” Angel stood up and turned towards the door. “I’ve got to check on the stew.”

“Angel,” Travis said before she could open the screen door.

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s much more fun than just waiting for your letters to arrive.”

Angel felt a smile curve her mouth. “I agree, it’s much better.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 31 MAY 1893

Travis had known that he and Angel had a connection through their letters, but he hadn't realized how much that connection would strengthen so soon after her arrival.

In the couple of weeks that she'd been on Mountain Falls, he'd seen her work without complaint, laugh without reservations and endure his mother's orders as if they were acceptable.

Which they definitely weren't.

He knew it was past time to tell his mother about his relationship with Angel, especially since he could see them going ahead with the wedding, but something held him back. It wasn't that he doubted a future with Angel, it was merely that he doubted whether or not his mother would understand.

His parents had had a wonderful relationship up until his father passed away. Travis knew that his mother wanted that for him. But what she didn't realize was that it wasn't up to her to choose with whom he was going to spend the rest of his life.

It was up to him.

He rounded the corner of the house and felt his heart swell at the sight of Angel on her hands and knees in the vegetable garden. He knew with certainty that this was the woman he wanted to build a life with.

She'd made it clear in her letters that she didn't want to fall in love, but Travis hoped that in time her feelings would change. His feelings had already changed more than he could've imagined. He no longer just liked her or enjoyed her company; he was falling in love with her.

It was a feeling that made him feel more powerful than standing on top of the hill overlooking his herd, more powerful than wrestling with a bull or riding a stallion. Angel looked up and smiled at him and Travis knew the

only thing he could compare that feeling with was love.

“I thought you were out riding cattle?” Angel asked wiping the sweat from her brow. A smear of dirt touched her nose.

Travis leaned closer and used his handkerchief to wipe away the dirt. “There you go.”

“I must look a right mess,” Angel laughed. “I never knew how much I’d enjoy gardening. It’s quite satisfying actually.”

Travis nodded. “Especially when you start harvesting your own vegetables. You do know the difference between vegetables and weeds?” he asked teasingly, although he really hoped she did. Otherwise, she would be weeding out all their new seedlings.

Angel stuck out her tongue in a cute way. “Of course I do. Your mother had me bring in the first weeds for her to inspect.”

Travis cringed. “I’m sorry. I know she can be very overbearing at times. I haven’t…”

Before Travis could come clean and tell Angel that he hadn’t been honest with his mother, she shook her head and held up her hand. “You don’t have to apologize on her behalf. I understand. This home has meant everything to her and now another woman has arrived and is interfering, in her eyes. I won’t ever do things the way she did, but I can at least try to honor what she has achieved here.”

Angel’s words made Travis’s heart expand even more. “You’re somethin’, you know that?”

Angel smiled. “Right now, a grimy somethin’.”

It was the first time she spoke in the Western twang Travis had spoken with all his life. A chuckle escaped him. “I better get back to work.”

He walked away from Angel, missing her already. After jogging up the porch to grab something to eat before he headed out to the fields again, he stepped into the cabin. His mother stood there with her arms crossed and her brow cocked.

“Travis Scott, your pa would be turnin’ in his grave if he saw you just now,” Jessica said in a snippy tone of voice.

“What?” Travis asked confused. He had no idea what his mother thought he did but it was clear she disapproved.

“Fenagling with the help like that? We raised you to find a good wife, Travis, one that will be able to stand by your side and give you strong children. We didn’t raise you to banter with a servant. That girl should know her place on this farm. You laughing with her and teasing her will give her the wrong idea. I won’t have that. Not in this house.” Jessica was out of breath after her tirade.

Travis glanced over his shoulder to make sure Angel hadn’t heard his mother. “Calm down, Ma, you’re flushed. You’re going to give yourself a headache,” Travis cautioned her.

“I’d rather have a stroke than see you marrying the help!” Jessica cried out with anger before she stomped upstairs to her bedroom.

Travis shook his head and let out a heavy sigh. Now would’ve been the perfect time to tell his mother about his relationship with Angel but she was already so worked up and upset, that he feared for her health.

He began towards the stairs and thought better of it. He’d wait until she calmed down, then he’d make sure Angel was as far away from the house as possible and then he would tell his mother.

It might not be today, but by the time the sun set tomorrow, his mother would realize that Angel was her future daughter-in-law. Not a servant girl or a maid that she could order around to her heart’s content.

Seeing the way Angel had worked over the last few weeks had truly bothered him, but he’d decided to keep his secret until he was more certain that she would stay.

He couldn’t see the benefit of upsetting his mother if Angel were to pack up and return to Boston in a few days.

But regardless of what Angel might feel or think, Travis knew he was

going to do everything in his power to keep her on Mountain Falls.
Even if he had to beg.
He simply couldn't imagine a life without her anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 1 JUNE 1893

Jessica Scott was a woman toughened and trained by the Wild West. She could hardly remember her life before she and Jacob had set out West from the ugly streets of New York. They had worked and saved and saved and worked until they had enough to pay their way with a wagon train.

Through blood, sweat, and numerous tears they had built a life for themselves on Mountain Falls. The first few years had been hard, harder than Jessica could've ever imagined they would be. She didn't count the number of times they didn't have food, or even harbor anger for the second winter when she'd lost a toe due to frostbite.

Instead, she only had to look around her at the life they had built to know they had made the right decision to come out West. Just like their ranch had taken shape, so had the town of Waterfall. They had raised cattle, a log cabin, and a garden. By the time Jessica felt the need to have a child, she realized that although they might have been blessed in the West, it didn't seem God had children in mind for her and Jacob.

For the first couple of years, it had been hard to accept that she might have a childless life, especially since she knew Jacob would've made a wonderful father. But only once they had accepted their fate had she been surprised with a child in her womb. She'd been thirty years old, too old, the doctor had said, and yet she had given birth to a beautiful and healthy baby boy.

Jessica didn't know if all mothers loved their children with a love that consumed them, but she and Jacob did. Perhaps it was because they had Travis later in life, perhaps it was because they had accepted that they would never have children; but from the day Travis had been born, their lives had

revolved around making him the best man he could be.

Since she had lost Jacob, that love for Travis had only grown.

One day her son wouldn't have her advice to fall back on, or her experience to count on, and when that day came, he needed the right woman by his side.

That was why she knew that this maid from Boston was only going to cause her problems.

She had seen the way Travis looked at the girl. She'd seen the way the girl looked back.

It didn't matter that Angel was pretty, hardworking, or even pleasant company; it only mattered to Jessica that her son deserved better.

He deserved someone with class, with a good upbringing; someone who would be able to weather the tough challenges of the West.

Not some maid from Boston, desperate to escape whatever situation she had found herself in.

After seeing Travis and Angel in the garden yesterday, Jessica had been brooding in her room. She needed to find a way to make Travis see the error of his ways, the problem was she didn't know how.

A knock startled her out of her brooding mood.

"Yes?" she answered, knowing it would probably be the maid offering to bring her tea.

"It's me, Ma, are you decent?" Travis's voice came from the other side of the door.

"Of course I'm decent. It's almost noon," Jessica snapped with irritation.

The door opened and Travis walked in with a concerned look. "Are you feeling under the weather? Should I go and fetch the doctor?"

"The doctor can't fix what's ailin' me," Jessica said simply.

Travis nodded before he pulled a chair over to join her at the window. Jessica's heart contracted for a moment as she remembered all the times she and her late husband would sit at the very same window and plan their next

project on the homestead.

“I need to talk to you, Ma... about Angel,” Travis said with a questioning look.

“I’m listening.” Jessica sighed, her gaze drifting out the window. She knew the look of a lovestruck fool when she saw one.

“Ma, Angel isn’t here as a maid or a servant or the help. She’s my fiancée.”

Jessica began to laugh, certain she’d heard her son say he was engaged to the help. But when Travis didn’t speak, her heart began to race. She turned to him with a baffled look. “Fiancée? But she’s only been here a few weeks. Goodness, Travis, surely you know there are much more suitable women in town than the help.”

Travis shook his head. “I didn’t tell you because I knew you wouldn’t approve.” He drew in a sharp breath before he spoke again. “I know you want the same kind of marriage for me that you had with Pa. I knew that I couldn’t leave the ranch and head East to find a woman of my choosing. And the women in town... Ma, you know the pickin’s are slim. I placed an advertisement for a mail-order bride.”

“You did what!” Jessica cried out without qualm.

“I did.” Travis continued calmly. “Angel and I have been corresponding with each other since March. We’d been corresponding for almost three months before I asked her for her hand in marriage.”

“You proposed to a woman you’d never even met. Strike me with a whip and call me a donkey!” Jessica cried out with disappointment. She was shocked, mortified, and very disappointed.

“Listen, Ma, I’m not done. I invited her to come and stay with us as my fiancée to see if we want to go ahead with the wedding. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d do anything in your power to make her head back east with her tail between her legs,” Travis finished, shaking his head. “Don’t give me that look. I know how protective you are of me.”

Jessica sighed and relaxed her angry expression. “Are you going ahead with the wedding?”

“If it were up to me, I would marry Angel today, Ma, but it’s not just up to me. That’s why I’m telling you this. I need you to ease back, stop ordering her around as if she’s your maid. She’s here to help, she’s even starting with a teaching position in town come fall.”

“She’s a teacher?” Jessica couldn’t hide the surprise in her voice. “She’s not homeless?”

Travis chuckled and shook his head. “No, Ma, she’s not homeless. Her parents are quite well off. Her father is a banker. She was raised in a brownstone in Boston – with housemaids and a cook.”

Jessica’s eyes widened with shock. “That doesn’t mean she’s the right woman for you. How do you know she’ll weather the winter or be a good wife?”

“I don’t. But I know that you didn’t know any of those things when you married Pa either, you simply tried your best.”

Jessica hated that her son was right, but that didn’t mean she approved of the waif of the east coming here to steal her son’s heart. If Angel stayed and they got married, she wouldn’t be anything to him anymore. He’d only care about Angel and she would be all but forgotten.

“I need you to try, Ma, to make her feel welcome. Help her learn. I apologize for not telling you sooner, but I was afraid... Now that I’ve told you, can I count on you to be nice to her?” Travis asked with hope in his gaze.

Jessica had been a mother long enough to know that if you told your children not to do something, they would do it anyway. So she summoned a smile and told her best white lie. “Of course, I’ll try my best.”

“Thanks, Ma.” Travis stood up and left her alone by the window.

Jessica found herself looking out towards the yard where the socialite from Boston stood hanging out her sheets. She would be friendly and *nice*

like Travis had asked, but that didn't mean she couldn't show Angel how hard life could be out here in the West.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 15 JULY 1893

The scent of sharpened pencils, paint, and summer filled the classroom as Angel turned in a circle. She could hardly believe her dream was finally coming true. For a moment she just stood, soaking in the feelings of joy and contentment.

When she had first arrived in Waterfall, she had been a little doubtful as to whether or not she could live in such a remote and wild place. But now after eight weeks, she found herself struggling to imagine ever going back to Boston.

Travis's mother had been very distant with her in the beginning. She'd been downright awful and demanding at times, but even Jessica had started to warm towards her. She had learned so much about living on a homestead and knew that it was all thanks to Jessica.

Her first tomatoes were ready to harvest, she had potatoes in the ground, and yesterday she had spent the afternoon picking berries with Travis.

They hadn't yet spoken about their future together, but Angel had reached a point where she no longer just thought about Waterfall as an opportunity for her to teach but as a place where she wanted to build a life.

Her feelings for Travis had grown exponentially since she had arrived. All her fears about what type of man he would be were set at ease after just a few days. She only had to see the gentle way with which he treated his calves to know he would be a good father. When she watched how patient he was with his mother, she knew he would one day be a good husband.

Then there was the fun and humorous side of him she enjoyed so much. He could make her laugh, even at herself, without feeling foolish.

And now, she was finally standing in her very own classroom. It was as if Waterfall had brought all her dreams to life.

Hopefully, by the time the first snow stuck to the ground, she wouldn't only be a teacher but Mrs. Scott as well.

“GOOD MORNING, Miss Jones. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.” William Thomas smiled at the pretty young girl as he walked toward her. When he'd received an application for the teaching position from the East, he'd known it would be a good match. Although she had no formal education when it came to teaching, she did enjoy the benefit of private tutors growing up.

Their small school only had twenty-five students. William had managed to teach them all by himself for the first two years after the school had opened, but as of late, he had realized he needed someone to help with the younger children. Their attention span wasn't as long, and he couldn't explain algebra while teaching tables.

“Mr. Thomas, it's a pleasure to meet you too. Thank you so much for offering me this position. I promise I won't let you or the children down.”

When she turned, William felt his heart stop in his chest. Ever since losing his wife three years before he had never considered remarrying. He hadn't even felt the slightest attraction towards a woman.

But now as he looked at Angel Jones, her youth and beauty beguiled him.

“I'm sure you won't.” William offered her a charming smile. “Have you settled into town all right?”

“Oh yes, Mountain Falls is very lovely.” Angel smiled at him in a way that reminded him that he wasn't just a teacher or a widower, he was a man.

A very alive one.

“Mountain Falls? Are you family of the Scotts?” William asked, curious if he would need to ask Travis Scott permission before he could court her.

“Not at the moment, but Travis and I are engaged to be married.”

It was as if someone had doused him with an ice block the size of a travel crate. William shook his head. “Travis Scott? I didn't know...”

“It’s quite a long story, but for another day. You asked me to come and see you to discuss my lesson plan? I’ve brought it along for you.”

Jealousy raged through William’s veins as he summoned a smile. The first woman he felt attracted to in three years was engaged to the wealthiest man in the area. Life simply wasn’t fair.

William’s smile turned a little cocky as he accepted her lesson plan. Just because life wasn’t fair didn’t mean he couldn’t level the playing field.

She wasn’t married just yet.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 18 AUGUST 1893

Jessica had kept her word and had been nothing but inviting and kind to Angel since learning about their engagement, but that didn't mean she approved of their relationship.

She had bided her time, waiting for the right moment to sabotage their relationship. This morning, she had discovered something that might work. She wouldn't be directly interfering with her son's relationship or his future, but she would make sure that someone did.

Jessica pulled the meatloaf out of the oven and felt hopeful about tonight's dinner.

"Are we expecting someone for dinner?" Travis asked, stepping into the kitchen.

Jessica turned to her son with a bright smile. "The school principal. I thought it would be nice to thank him for offering Angel the position at school."

Travis smiled approvingly. "That's nice of you."

Jessica didn't add that after going into town to do some shopping and to visit with a few of her friends, she had learned that William Thomas had his eye on Angel. With school open and the fall term in full swing, it meant they would be in each other's company every day.

A dinner invitation was her way of putting them together once again and then hope for a private word to give William her approval to court Angel in his own way. Hopefully, Angel would fall for William Thomas, and then she would have Travis and Mountain Falls all to herself once again.

Everything went as planned.

William arrived exactly on time, Travis and Angel were both welcoming and friendly and when they sat down for dinner, the conversation was

flowing easily. Jessica's hopes rose even more when William and Angel began to discuss their students. They had more in common than Angel and Travis ever would, which meant it would only be a matter of time before Angel broke off the engagement.

"Travis, will you help Angel to fetch the bread pudding from the woodstove?" Jessica asked once everyone's plates were empty.

Without argument, Travis and Angel cleared the table before they headed to the kitchen, giving Jessica the moment she needed.

"Angel is a sweet girl, isn't she?" she asked William with a sugary sweet smile.

William nodded. "Travis is a lucky man."

"He isn't yet..." Jessica said with a shrug. "They've yet to announce a date for the wedding, which if you ask me is signs of a mold in the haystack."

William's brow furrowed. "You think they're having second thoughts?"

"I'm just saying that although I think Angel is a lovely girl, I doubt she is the homesteading type. I just fear that in time she'd want to move to town and break Travis's heart." Jessica tried her best to sound like an overly concerned mother, instead of a jealous, vindictive parent wanting to keep her son to herself.

"You think Travis would be better suited to someone else?" William asked, leaning closer. His voice was low as if he realized this wasn't a conversation they wanted to share.

"I think Angel would be better suited to someone who lives in town. Someone handsome who shares her interests... someone like you," Jessica finished with a sigh. "But I know you haven't really considered remarrying after losing your wife. Such a shame..."

William cleared his throat. "Actually, I have been giving it some thought. But since I thought that Angel and Travis were committed..."

"Which they are not..."

"I might reconsider the thought," William finished with a wolfish smile.

“That’s a clever man,” Jessica approved with a smile.

Travis and Angel returned to the table, and Jessica and William shared a knowing look. Jessica recognized that wolfish smile on a man’s face. It meant he was up for the challenge. There was nothing more a man wanted than something that wasn’t his.

It would only be a matter of time before he would turn on the charm and Angel would realize that homesteading wasn’t for her. That a man like William Thomas was more suited to the lifestyle she was accustomed to.

Of course Travis would be heart broke but in a few years Jessica would tell him of her plan and he’d thank her. He’d thank her for saving him from the disgrace of his wife running off. Then in time he would meet the right woman, one Jessica would find for him and then he could marry and start his life.

A life and a wife of which Jessica approved.

Deep down she knew that not many would approve of her interference, but then not many women had sons as handsome or as wealthy as Travis.

As a mother, it wasn’t only her privilege but also her duty to protect and secure the best future for her son.

CHAPTER 18



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 10 SEPTEMBER 1893

Angel laughed as two little girls ran through the leaves, celebrating that fall had arrived. The leaves had started to turn a few weeks ago, but it was only this week that leaves rained from the trees creating a colorful carpet on the playground of the school.

If Angel had ever doubted becoming a teacher, she now realized those doubts were something of the past. There was nothing she enjoyed more than spending her mornings with young, eager minds. They hung on her every word, eager for new information and to learn about the world. Most of the children in Waterfall had never known anything but the West.

When she told them about boats bigger than trees, or carriages decorated with gold, their eyes simply bugged out of their heads. She could tell they were fascinated when they learned about other countries, other cultures, and stories about the Kings and Queens of the past.

But just as she enjoyed spending her mornings enriching the lives and minds of little ones, she cherished her afternoons on the homestead. She would work in the garden or cook a sturdy meal for Travis and his mother, or sometimes she would just laze around with a book after running all morning behind energetic children.

She sometimes wondered where they got all their energy.

She felt the hair on the back of her neck rise as she sat on the steps leading up to the school building. There were only two classrooms that used to be one large classroom. A curtain divided the two classes, but although it was a thin barrier, Angel was grateful for the brief interlude it gave her from William Thomas.

Because she had never been a teacher before, Angel wasn't sure what the relationship between principal and teachers was supposed to be, but she

couldn't help but feel that William was inappropriate at times.

More than once he'd asked her to stay after school to go over her lesson plans, and every time he'd hardly looked at her lesson plans at all. Instead, he'd ask her to sit with him and share his lunch. Or take a walk to the creek to clear their minds after a long day.

Angel appreciated that William liked and approved of her work as a teacher, but she didn't appreciate the extra unfounded attention he was sending her way.

It made her feel uncomfortable.

It was as if her entire body had become tuned into his presence. She merely had to hear the tread of his footsteps or his voice and her whole body tensed in anticipation of what he would do next. He'd once touched her shoulder and, on another occasion, had reached for her hand.

Angel couldn't help but feel that he was trying to pursue her, regardless of her engagement to Travis. She had written to Mabel about it and had asked for advice, but she was yet to receive a letter in return.

She knew that she couldn't address the matter with Travis or his mother, because it wouldn't only upset them, but it might give Travis doubts about her loyalty. So Angel did everything within her power to avoid being alone with the principal of the school.

"Are you as exhausted as I am?" William asked taking a seat beside her on the steps.

Angel smiled, albeit stiffly. "It's not even noon yet."

William nodded. "I know, but that's how much algebra exhausts me."

She chuckled softly to humor him. "It's English next, right? I'm sure that will energize you a little. There's nothing like a good English novel to intrigue and excite a mind."

"There are other things that intrigue and excite me," William's voice had dropped, his gaze pinned on hers.

Angel shifted a little more to her left, but she was right up against the

railing. She quickly turned her gaze towards the children, trying her best to change the subject. “They love to play in the leaves. I’ll be terrified of a snake hiding beneath it.”

“They still have about fifteen minutes of playtime left. Why don’t you join me inside for a cup of tea?” William asked, standing up. The look in his eyes implied that he had a lot more than tea in mind.

Although Angel wouldn’t mind a cup of tea, she wasn’t going to dare go into the schoolhouse without her students. “I’m fine, thank you. I think I’ll sit out here and soak up the sun a little longer.”

William chuckled. “You can’t hide from this forever. We both know what I’m talking about.”

William turned and headed inside.

Angel let out the breath she hadn’t been aware she had been holding. It was the first time William had directly implied that he liked her. The first time he’d been bold enough to think that she liked him in that way. Suddenly she felt trapped, like a caged animal with no way of escape.

If she quit her position at school, it would jeopardize any future position she might apply for as a teacher. Travis would want to know why, since he knew how important her teaching job was to her.

But if she remained employed by William, she couldn’t help but feel as if she would be staying on a runaway train.

Sooner or later it would crash, and Angel wasn’t sure she, or her relationship with Travis, would be able to sustain the impact.

A heavy sigh escaped her as she shook her head and looked up to the clouds. The only way for her to find a solution was to pray.

Hopefully, God would make William understand that she didn’t feel the same about him.

If anything had made her feelings for Travis clearer, it was William’s unwanted attention. It made her realize that the only man she wanted to smile at her or touch her shoulder or tease her was the man she had become

engaged to through a letter.

They had yet to set a date for the wedding but Angel finally knew that when he asked if they would go ahead with the marriage, her answer would most certainly be yes.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 18 OCTOBER 1893

“*N*ow that she’s left, I need to talk to you.”

Travis turned to his mother with concern etching his brow.
“Bout what, Ma?”

Jessica heaved out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “It’s not that I want to, Travis. I simply feel that you should know what is being said in town.”

Travis frowned at his mother with confusion. Ever since he had told her about his intention to marry Angel, she had been nothing but kind and courteous. But now he couldn’t help the uneasy feeling crawling up his spine. He would bet his whole herd of cattle this was about Angel.

The snow had not yet started to fall, so Angel still walked to school every morning. Travis enjoyed seeing her excitement in the mornings and listening to her talk about her students at night. It was evident that Angel enjoyed being a teacher just as much as he enjoyed being a rancher. The only difference was Angel enjoyed tending their homesteads after school as well.

They had yet to talk about their feelings for each other, but Travis knew the time was drawing closer for him to propose. This time in person. This time when she said yes, he wanted to set a date. It would be a goal for him to know when he would start his new life with Angel.

He also knew that her parents were probably anxious to learn when they would be tying the knot.

“I’m listening,” Travis said to his mother with dull interest.

His mother’s eyes lit up now that she had his attention. “Yesterday, when I visited Mavis in town, a few of the women from the weekly prayer group had stopped by for tea and cake.”

Travis sighed. “That’s fascinating, Ma. I really need to get to my cattle.”

“The cattle can wait, Travis. Your future is at stake,” Jessica urged.

Travis took a seat, knowing she wouldn't let him leave until she said what she wanted to say. He also knew that she would make a long story of it with numerous twists and turns. "Just get to the point, Ma," Travis insisted.

"It's been said that Angel and William are spending quite some time together. Especially after school. Apparently, they've been seen walking to the creek, even having a picnic outside the schoolhouse when the children had all gone home." Jessica's voice was high-pitched as she delivered the news.

Travis frowned. "And? They work together. Of course they're going to be seen together."

His mother let out an irritable sigh. "Open your eyes, Travis, the girl is betraying you. I told you right from the start that I don't think she suits you. Now she's fooling around right before your very eyes and you're too blind to even notice. Haven't you seen the way William seeks her out at church on Sundays? It's evident to everyone, but apparently not to you?"

Travis found himself doubting Angel for a brief second before he pushed the doubt away. "Ma, she wouldn't do that. We have an agreement that if she'd rather return to Boston, that's her choice."

"And if she'd rather marry the headmaster, is that part of your agreement as well?" Jessica asked cocking a brow.

The last thing Travis wanted to do was doubt Angel's feelings for him, but the more his mother talked, the more he felt the doubt growing inside him. She hadn't once said anything to prove to him that her feelings for him had grown.

Then there was the wedding they hadn't talked about.

He could understand a brief conversation at school once the students left, but going to the creek? Having picnics?

"I'll talk to her," he all but barked before he walked out of the cabin. He couldn't stand to see the triumph on his mother's face. She had warned him about Angel when she'd thought she was a servant, but now...

Had his mother been right all along? Had Angel only used him and now that she had her position as a teacher, she didn't need him anymore?

Travis made his way towards the barn and looked for something to do that would be physically draining. Something that would make him too tired to think. Brandy and the other cattle wranglers were out moving cattle and, although he had planned on joining them, he decided to stay close to the cabin instead.

He wanted to be there when Angel arrived home from school.

ANGEL WAS ENJOYING the sun on her back as she arrived at Mountain Falls. With her leather bookbag hanging on her left, she used her right hand to wave to Travis. She was surprised to find him home this early in the day, usually, he would be out checking fences or riding cattle.

Sweat drenched his plaid shirt and she watched as he lifted the ax high over his head before he let it fall on a log of wood, making it split in two.

In all the time she'd been at Mountain Falls she'd never seen Travis chop wood before. There was something very attractive about watching him use his strength to provide wood for them for the coming winter.

"Hello. You've been busy," Angel said with a smile as she reached him. There was a large wood pile beside him, almost as tall as her.

"Hiya, yeah," Travis allowed the ax to drop again and Angel had to jump out of the way as one of the pieces of split wood bounced in her direction.

Travis set down the ax and rushed towards her. "Are you hurt?"

Angel laughed. "No, I'm fine. Goodness, I didn't know wood can jump that far. You'd think it was made of a coil."

Travis smiled at her, but it wasn't his usual smile, this one was almost forced.

"Is everything all right, Travis?" Angel heard herself asking. She'd become so in tune with his moods, his expressions, and his smiles that she

could instantly tell if something was off.

Travis shrugged as he returned to the ax and the wood. He set a chunk of wood on the chopping block before he turned to her. “I don’t know, you tell me.”

The ax dropped again, making Angel’s heart skip a beat. Something was definitely wrong. She stood for a minute while he chopped two more pieces before her curiosity and her temper got the better of her. “Would you like me to pry it out of you, or would you just like me to stand here all day watching you sweat?”

Travis flashed her a look that held an edge of temper, his steel-blue eyes as cold as the wind that came off the mountains. “Fine, let’s talk about it. Do you have feelings for William Thomas?”

Angel took a step back, completely offended and surprised by the question. “What? Why would you think such a thing?”

“Maybe because that’s the talk that’s making the rounds in town. Word is the two of you go for romantic strolls to the creek, enjoy picnics after school is out, and are often seen in each other’s company – with no students in sight.” Travis said the words through gritted teeth.

For a brief moment, Angel wanted to respond with a temper of her own. But she could see it was pain that was making Travis act this way, humiliation, and heartache, not anger. She set down her book bag and walked toward him. His eyes held hers, questioning what she was doing.

Carefully, she took the ax from him and set it down on the ground before she framed his face with both her hands. His skin was clammy from the hard work, the growth of his beard a day or two old, but Angel didn’t care. This was the man she had come to love and had come to care for. She wasn’t sure when she had stopped fighting her feelings for him, but she did know that she had lost the war.

She was head over heels in love with Travis Scott.

“Now you look at me, Travis, and you listen closely. When I came out to

Waterfall, I made it perfectly clear that I needed a husband in order to teach. Regardless of that, you wrote to me. You asked me to come here to meet you and to see if our friendship could turn into something more and I came, although I promised myself I wouldn't fall in love. But I was wrong. I was so very wrong about what I really wanted. I don't have feelings for William Thomas, because my heart, my soul, and my entire being is completely consumed by the love I have for you," Angel finished quietly. She had never had to declare her love to anyone and could only hope that her love for books had helped her choose the right words.

Travis's brow furrowed with a curious look. "So you don't want to marry William Thomas?"

Angel laughed shaking her head. "I'd like to marry you, but you haven't asked me again. I'm beginning to wonder if you ever will."

For the first time since he'd met Angel, Travis wrapped his arms around her. He knew that she would probably protest because he was filthy, but instead, she melted against him.

He brushed a kiss over the top of her head before he whispered to her. "I'm sorry for doubting you. I just... I was so afraid it was true. All day I've been thinking that I won't be able to go on without you."

He stood back and searched her face. "We won't complain come winter." He nodded towards the giant wood pile.

Angel laughed and smiled up at the man she loved. "Does that mean you've fallen in love with me too?"

"I've been in love with you since I asked you to come to Mountain Falls. Deep down I knew that we were made for each other. Will you marry me, Angel?" Travis sank to one knee, his hat in his hand and his eyes on Angel.

Angel bubbled with laughter. "Yes, as soon as possible."

CHAPTER 20



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 21 OCTOBER 1893

With her wedding date set, it was with great joy that Angel mailed a letter to her family to invite them to the service. She still couldn't believe that she and Travis were officially getting married. In a little more than two weeks, she would be Mrs. Travis Scott.

As she walked towards school, she couldn't help but be grateful that she had had the courage to write to Travis that very first time. Little had she known that not only would she find joy in her teaching position in Waterfall, but that she would find love as well.

She had left home early, eager to mail the letter to her parents. By the time she arrived at the schoolhouse, it was still another three-quarters of an hour before she would ring the bell for school to start.

Enjoying the slower pace and the extra time, she opened the records she kept of each child's progress. She made notes on a separate page about the children who needed a little extra attention, and who she needed to assign more challenging tasks. Without the children realizing it, she grouped them each week according to their progress. It was a system that worked for her without the children realizing that some of them were falling behind while some of them were excelling.

"This is a good surprise."

Angel had been so lost in her records that she hadn't even heard William arrive. Her skin crawled as he moved in behind her desk and leaned over.

"Good morning, William," Angel said rather stiffly. "I've already fired up the wood stove and put on some tea. Would you like some?" she offered, quickly maneuvering out of her chair to put distance between them.

William smiled at her with that wolfish smile that made her feel like prey. "I'd like more than just tea."

Before Angel knew it William had backed her into a corner. She smiled and laughed nervously. “The tea, William, it’s getting cold...”

“It’s on the wood stove, it’ll hold. But this won’t.”

His mouth crushed against hers so unexpectedly that shock and fear froze Angel for a brief second. William’s hands were on her hips, and he was closing Angel in so that she could hardly move.

Like a feral animal, Angel felt the adrenalin rush through her veins.

Fight or flight.

The decision was made before she even realized it. She shoved William away with a strength she didn’t know she had before she quickly dove out of the way.

William spun around shaking his head. “Don’t make me catch you.”

“William, stop it! You’re behaving like a lunatic. I’m engaged to be married!” Angel cried out at him with both anger and fear.

William shook his head. “The lunacy is you marrying that dumb rancher. He probably can’t even spell...”

Angel wasn’t sure how she had moved from where she was standing to where William was standing, but she looked into his eyes and jutted out her chin. “That dumb rancher knows more about being a gentleman than you ever will.”

She didn’t see his hand come up, she didn’t see it move towards her, she only felt the sting of his slap as if her cheek had been set on fire. Angel shot a hand onto her cheek, the pain ringing in her ears as she looked at William.

She tasted fear mingled with her own blood as the inside of her cheek had been torn by her teeth. Angel wanted to fight back, wanted to stand her ground, but she knew she would never be able to achieve anything with a man who lifted his hand to a woman. He would never see reason.

Angel began to run as fast as her legs would carry her. She ran past some of her students who were on their way to school, but she didn’t even care to stop and wave. She kept running until her lungs burned and her legs ached.

Her throat was bone dry, her hair completely tousled by the wind, but she didn't stop.

Not until she reached Mountain Falls.

She raced up the porch just as the door opened and Travis stepped outside. She ran straight into his arms, needing his reassurance and his protection.

"Hey, you're back soon," Travis said holding her.

The tears began to fall even as her shoulders began to move up and down as she sobbed.

Travis took a step back and searched her face. "Angel, what happened?"

She shook her head. "William..."

Travis pulled her hand from her cheek and cursed under his breath. "Did William Thomas strike you?"

Angel nodded before she rested her head against his shoulders again. She cried, emotionally exhausted from the whole ordeal.

"Ma, come out here," Travis called out.

Within seconds Jessica joined them on the porch. "You take care of Angel; I have something I need to do in town."

Travis handed Angel to his mother as if she were a doll before he jogged down the stairs. Brandy came riding up, but before she could say a word, Travis told her to dismount. He jumped into the saddle and rode off as if the hounds of hell were on his tail.

Angel cried out for him to stop and come back, but Travis was already out of earshot.

"What on earth is going on?" Jessica asked turning to Angel. It was only then she saw the marks on Angel's face. "Who did that to you?"

Angel felt another rush of tears, fearing for what Travis might do. "William Thomas."

Jessica's eyes widened with horror as she huddled Angel into the cabin. "You poor child, come on. I've got just the right balm to help with the

bruising.”

Angel finally stopped crying, although her concern for Travis’s safety was overwhelming as Jessica settled her in her room. She returned a few minutes later with a tiny container.

“When they built the railway, some chinks came through town. One of the men working on the tracks got hurt and was rushed to the doctor. A chink rubbed some of this one the bruise and it hardly even swelled.”

The scent coming from the container was strong enough to make Angel’s eyes burn. “What is that?”

“I’m not sure what it’s called. But the chink called it Tiger Balm. I managed to buy this off of him before they left town. I only use it in case of emergencies.” Jessica smiled warmly at Angel. It was a smile Angel had never seen before. There was no distrust, doubt, or indifference, just warmth, and kindness. “It’s going to make your eyes tear up, so better keep ‘em closed for a while,” Jessica warned as she carefully applied the balm to Angel’s face.

It was the first time that she realized that Jessica wasn’t just a mean and angry old woman. There was a softer, gentler side to her as well. Once she had applied the balm, she went to fetch a warm cloth to drape over Angel’s cheek.

She held Angel’s hand and told her it would heal without leaving a scar, but the scar was the least of Angel’s concerns. In a matter of minutes, William had not only hurt her physically, but he’d also made her afraid to ever return to the school in Waterfall.

She wept quietly, knowing that Jessica would think it was the balm. Neither woman said a word as the morning rolled over to noon.

Together they waited in silence for Travis to return.

CHAPTER 21



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 22 OCTOBER 1893

“*H*ow are you feeling?” Travis asked when Angel joined him and Jessica for breakfast.

“My head is a little sore and my jaw hurts, but other than that I’m fine,” Angel said taking a seat. She glanced at Travis’s hand and felt guilt wash over her.

Neither she nor Jessica had asked what had happened in town when Travis finally returned shortly after noon the day before, but they had both noticed the lacerations on his right fist.

They knew what had happened.

Neither Jessica nor Angel had said a word about it.

“Here, have some tea.” Jessica set down the cup in front of Angel and let out a small chuckle. “I think it’s the first time I’ve made you tea in five months.”

Angel smiled up at Jessica, surprised at the change in her demeanor and the manner in which she treated her since yesterday. “Thank you, I appreciate it. I don’t mind making tea.”

“Still, you shouldn’t have to do so much,” Jessica insisted. She joined Travis and Angel at the table and took a sip of her own tea before she looked up. “I have to apologize... to both of you.”

Angel felt Travis’s hand wrap warmly over hers. Ever since they had set the wedding date, he often took her hand as if to reassure himself that she was there. “About what? You didn’t hurt Angel, William did,” Travis insisted.

Jessica let out a heavy sigh. “I believe it might have been my fault.”

Angel listened as Jessica explained her plan for William to fall in love with Angel and coax her out of Travis’s arms. When she was done, Angel

squeezed Travis's hand in a bid to calm him down.

"Thank you for telling us. I appreciate you being honest," Angel said quietly.

"Honestly won't make right what I did," Jessica insisted. "It was wrong of me to interfere. I just wanted what was best for my son. I didn't want to believe that he could've found the *right* woman through a newspaper, of all things. I was certain you were going to hurt him..." Jessica admitted.

"So you decided to encourage William's unwanted attentions? Ma, that's detestable," Travis said as if he had eaten something sour.

"I know. I'm so sorry. I know you won't ever be able to forgive me after what happened. I never thought he'd hurt her or become violent. I just thought... I didn't think. That's the problem," Jessica said firmly. "If you'd rather I leave than ruin your lives more than I already have, I'll pack today."

Travis opened his mouth to speak, but Angel shook her head. "Of course, you didn't ruin our lives. If anything you made us realize how much we love each other. If it hadn't been for the rumors about William and me, Travis and I would've never admitted how much we cared for each other. And as for yesterday... no one could've known that William was capable of something like that. Isn't that right, Travis?" Angel asked her fiancé with a cocked brow.

Travis nodded. "She's right, Ma, you're not goin' anywhere."

Jessica let out a sigh of relief before a smile curved her mouth. "I've never been wrong about anything, Angel. It's nice to know I was wrong about you. You're exactly the type of woman my son deserves."

"Thank you. It means a lot for me to hear you say that. Besides, you're going to be around long enough to make sure I keep being deserving of him."

"And to make sure he treats you right," Jessica said with a warm smile.

A knock at the door interrupted their moment of truce. Travis stood up and opened the door to find the sheriff and the mayor standing on the porch.

"Might we have a word?" the mayor asked.

Travis invited them in and showed them to the kitchen where Angel and

his mother were already seated.

Angel felt her heart begin to race. She couldn't help but fear that what had caused the bruising on Travis's hand was the reason for the sheriff and the mayor being in their kitchen.

"I apologize for intruding on your breakfast, but there are a few things we need to discuss with both you and Travis urgently," the mayor explained. "Travis informed us yesterday of what William Thomas had done to you after he had dragged him before the sheriff. The sheriff and I both accept that he must have bumped his head a few times on the way there."

Angel had to hide the smile that threatened to curve her mouth. Everyone at the table was aware that William didn't bump his head against anything but Travis's fist.

"Firstly, we want to find out if you need to see the doctor. It's in the town's best interest for you to recover as soon as possible from William's assault," the mayor addressed Angel directly.

"I'll be fine in a couple of days," Angel assured them.

"Right, then onto the arrangements. Unfortunately, there were no witnesses to testify that William struck you. Of course, we take your word and believe you, but without a witness, it's going to be hard to take him to trial. We've given him twenty-four hours notice to leave town and notification that he's to be arrested if he ever sets foot in Waterfall again."

"But the school," Angel began to protest shaking her head.

"That's the other matter we're here about. In the few months you've been helping at the school, it's clear how much improvement there has been in the children's education. We would like you to take over the whole school as headmistress, with wages to match of course. We will also assist you in finding a teacher's assistant as soon as possible if you'll accept the position?"

Angel's jaw dropped, making her flinch with pain. She glanced at Travis who was smiling at her a mile wide. "Say yes, Angel."

"No," Angel said with a smile over her own. "Not just yet. Is there a

possibility that the school can reopen after Christmas break? My wedding is only a couple of weeks away and I'd like to spend the holiday season on the homestead with my husband. It will be my first winter in Indiana."

The mayor laughed and the sheriff chuckled. "I see no problem with that. Sending children to school in the cold has always bothered me anyway," the mayor replied.

"Wonderful," Angel said, clapping her hands.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22



OceanofPDF.com

WATERFALL, INDIANA – 10 NOVEMBER 1894

“*H*appy Anniversary, congratulations on the baby, and, oh my – just look how happy you look.”

Angel laughed at her mother’s rambling as she enveloped her in a hug. “Hello, Mother, it’s good to see you too.”

“I’ve missed you so much, but your father said I shouldn’t complain. Travis is a hardworking man, and he can’t just leave the ranch whenever I feel like giving my daughter a hug.”

Angel nodded. “Thank you, Father, I’m glad you understand. I’m so happy you came. Are you staying until after Christmas?”

“Until the New Year,” John Jones announced as the conductor carried luggage and steam trunks out onto the platform.

“Did Faith and Grace come?” Angel asked glancing over her parents as she searched for her sisters.

“Yes. They’re just slow at disembarking. One would swear they were older than us by the way they’ve complained throughout the journey,” Elizabeth said shaking her head. “Now, where is my grandson? I can’t wait to meet him.”

Angel smiled at her mother and reached for one of the bags. “It’s cold out, Mother, I didn’t want him catching a cold. He’s at home with Jessica, waiting for you by the fireplace.”

“A fireplace, goodness that sounds heavenly,” her father said with a grateful sigh.

“You should try and visit come spring. Then the fields are covered with wildflowers, it’s nice and warm and there are calves everywhere. It’s much better than coming in the winter,” Angel said as they began to move towards the wagon.

After more than a year of living in Waterfall, she was finally confident enough to travel with the wagon when there was snow on the ground.

“But then we wouldn’t see you for Thanksgiving or for Christmas. One should spend holidays with family,” her mother insisted.

“I still find it strange to see you without your nose in a book,” Grace teased as she rushed towards Angel.

Angel laughed and shook her head before she hugged her sister. “I’ve learned that some adventures are better when you experience them for yourself rather than just reading about them.”

“And what the adventure you’ve had. First a husband you met through the mail, then becoming headmistress of the school and now being a mother... For someone who had a slow start, you sure picked up speed,” Faith teased as she joined the group.

“It’s wonderful to see you, Faith,” Angel said, hugging her other sister.

Once all the luggage and the passengers were gathered in the wagon, Angel took the reins and set off for home. She had been looking forward to her family’s visit ever since baby Jacob’s birth a month ago.

Neither she nor Travis had expected to be blessed with a child so soon. It had come as a great surprise, one that delighted Jessica more than they could’ve imagined. For all the grief and trouble she had caused Angel on her arrival in Mountain Falls, Jessica had become a pillar of strength, support, and kindness.

She had taken over some of the chores around the house since their wedding and during Angel’s pregnancy had almost taken over every single chore. Once little Jacob was born and named after Travis’s father, she fawned over him as any loving grandmother should.

Angel still couldn’t believe that there was a time when Jessica had wanted her out of the way. But in a way she understood it, now that she had become a mother herself.

She couldn’t imagine her son one day moving her aside to spend all of his

time and attention on another woman, but Angel would learn from Jessica's mistakes. They hadn't heard from William Thomas again and no one was more grateful for that than Angel.

Not only because she didn't want to see the swine again, but because she was afraid he would bump his head against Travis's fists again.

A small smile curved her mouth as she turned onto Mountain Falls.

"It's like a picture...." Faith said dreamily.

"It's better than a picture. It's like a fairytale with smoke bubbling out of the chimney – and you get to live here," Grace shook her head with admiration.

Angel didn't respond because secretly the best part about living on Mountain Falls wasn't the scenery or the beautiful cabin, it was Travis.

She had never known that love could be so consuming, so rewarding or so generous. She had never realized that one's whole world could revolve around someone else's happiness. Travis had not only been patient with her to fall in love with him, he had been an utter gentleman until the day they had declared their feelings for each other.

Something they now did every single day.

The door opened and Travis stepped out onto the porch, a bundle of joy in his arms and a smile on his face.

Angel's heart swelled with love, knowing that Jacob was blessed to have the best father any child could have asked for.

"He's not raising it like one of his calves, is he?" her mother asked in a teasing tone of voice.

Travis came down the porch steps and laughed. "Why not? As long as you keep them warm, fed, and loved, they're both happy."

Laughter filled the air as Angel's family reconnected with her new family. She glanced up at the cloudless winter sky and thanked the Lord for more blessings than she could ever have hoped for.

GRACE'S HEART



OceanofPDF.com

THE BRIDES OF MOUNTAIN FALLS

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 14 JANUARY 1896

Few people understood why Grace would spend two hours on her appearance ahead of a simple trip to the post office.

Even fewer would understand that it simply signified who she was.

Grace Jones wouldn't call herself vain, but nor was she blind to her beauty. She had been blessed with thick auburn locks that had a natural curl most women spent hours creating. Her eyes were striking and graced with thick dark lashes. She had her mother's slim build but her father's height which resulted in the perfect frame in which to drape with the latest fashions.

It also helped that she had perfect posture and of course a striking smile that could stop any person on the street.

Grace couldn't fathom going out without taking the time to do her beauty justice, otherwise, it would simply be a disgrace to the beauty God had blessed her with.

Unlike her younger sister, Faith, who only cared about playing piano and making music, Grace loved fashion and looking pretty.

Unlike her eldest sister, Angel, who had always dreamed of being a teacher, Grace only had one dream.

She dreamed of becoming a trophy wife to a rich businessman. Someone who could afford her taste in fashion, someone who could provide her with an even more comfortable life than the one her parents had provided. A man with a high ranking in society, a man to whom others would look for advice or mentorship.

Grace knew that men like that didn't come around every day, and when she did meet him, she wanted to look her best.

Even if it was on her way to the post office.

Ever since her sister Angel had moved out west to the small town of

Waterfall, Grace frequently visited the post office to mail her letters. Of course, she could just leave them in the mailbox for the postman to collect, but that wouldn't give her the advantage of taking a stroll about town.

Besides, the post office, was right next door to her favorite garment shop.

She walked into the post office, her chin slightly lifted as if to infer her social status, her perfectly practiced smile in place. "I'd like for you to mail this, please."

The young man behind the desk faltered for a moment when he looked up. His reaction to her beauty flattered Grace, but she would never be interested in a lowly post office desk clerk.

"Of course, ma'am. I'll... I'll... I'll.... Make sure it gets sent on the first train tomorrow," the man stuttered as he accepted the letter from her.

"Very well. Now, did any mail happen to arrive for me?" Grace asked glancing around the post office at the few dock workers, a woman with two crying children, and an immigrant that was trying to explain something in a different language. The cacophony of noise irritated her.

"Yes. I think... I think... I think we got somethin' in this morning," the man stammered as he reached behind him. "Here you go, ma'am."

Grace's smile split her face in two. The smile she kept for special occasions. Although this wasn't a special occasion, she needed to practice it now and then. "Thank you very much. And it's Miss."

She turned and walked out of the post office, knowing the desk clerk would remember her long after she'd forgotten she'd stopped by today. She glanced at the letter and her heart jumped with excitement. It was a letter from Angel.

Although it had been a little over two years since her sister had left Boston to marry a rancher, Grace still missed her every day. Angel understood her, Angel loved her, and Angel had always been her best friend.

She was happy that Angel had found love and now had a little son named Jacob, and even that her sister had discovered her love for gardening, but

Grace just wished her sister could've lived closer.

A heavy sigh escaped her as she crossed the street. She wouldn't admit it, but she envied Angel's life. Not her life on the ranch or her position as headmistress at the small school in Waterfall, but the love Angel shared with her husband.

When Grace and her family had traveled West for the wedding, she only had to look at her sister once to know that Travis Scott was the best husband her sister could've asked for.

Lost in thought, Grace bumped into a couple. She laughed softly and turned to apologize when all the blood drained from her face.

"Grace, are you all, right?" Mitchell asked holding out a steadying hand.

Grace almost jumped away from his hand as if it would burn her. "I'm fine, thank you."

"I'm so sorry, Miss, I didn't see you there. I do apologize."

Grace glanced at the woman at Mitchell's side and felt a wave of nausea rush over her. It wasn't just because the woman was *with* Mitchell, it was because her belly was swollen with child.

"I'll be fine, and it was my fault as well. Have a lovely day," Grace said quickly, her best society smile in place before she turned and hurried away.

Regardless of going in the wrong direction, Grace knew she had to put as much distance between herself and Mitchell as possible.

Grace had never made a fool of herself over a man before, but she knew that she had with Mitchell. He was a wealthy aristocrat who had landed in the social circle in Boston at almost the same time Angel had left for the West.

Although Grace had known that Mitchell was engaged to an heiress from London, she had done everything within her power to catch his attention. She had attended dances and gone to social events and every time she'd made sure to spend a little time with Mitchell.

Just when she had been certain that Mitchell was ready to break off his engagement and court her instead, he'd announced his wedding date.

He had been married for more than eighteen months and now his wife was pregnant.

It had taken Grace some time to accept that she and Mitchell simply weren't meant to be, but oh how wonderful life would have been as Mitchell's wife. She wouldn't have had a single care in the world. Even swollen with child, she would wear the best fashions to make sure everyone knew her husband could afford them.

But Mitchell was now a married man and every time they happened across each other, Grace could almost feel his pity when he looked at her.

As if he pitied her for not having yet found a husband.

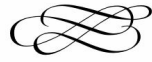
A huff of agitation escaped Grace as she stepped right into a puddle of mud.

This day was going from good to bad to worse.

Perhaps she should just get home and read Angel's letter and forget about the world for a little while.

Although she sincerely hoped the world wouldn't forget about her.

CHAPTER 2



Faith was playing the piano in the drawing-room, the beautiful notes traveling upstairs to Grace's bedroom as she sat down to read Angel's letter.

Only Angel knew how disappointed she had been when Mitchell had gone ahead with his wedding. Only Angel knew how Grace still mourned the life she could have had with him.

She opened Angel's letter and began to read her sister's loving words.

MY DEAREST SISTER,

IT WAS SO nice to receive your letter, I loved hearing about your new dress and the perfectly matching hat. If I only had one ounce of your taste in fashion, I would be forever grateful. But then God gave us all different talents.

I truly believe that my talent is teaching children.

Oh, Grace, I can't even begin to explain how my students delight and entertain me. Every day is a new challenge with new questions and eager minds wanting to learn everything I can teach them.

Jacob of course has turned into a sponge. At almost eighteen months he's busier than a bee in a bonnet. He's walking as if he's done it since birth, almost running after Travis whenever Travis goes to the horses.

Did I tell you about the horses?

Oh, dear, I don't think I have. Travis has decided to begin breeding his own line of horses. He's brought in another ranch hand to help with the operation, but we're expecting the first of our foals in a few months.

Spring time. The time of calves, foals, and flowers.

I never thought I'd enjoy living on a ranch, or even working in a garden and yet it feels as if God had led me exactly where He wanted me to be.

How about you < Grace? Where is God leading you? In your letters, you speak about fashion, and social dances, but you never speak the truth that is in your heart. I know it's been a long time, but are you still feeling rejected by Mitchell?

My dear sister, I know how everyone kept complaining about how I should find a husband. I know how horrible it feels when mother introduces you to every bachelor she comes across, so you can be honest with me.

I wish for you the love I have with Travis, Grace. I wish for you a life filled with riches that money can't buy, but most of all I wish for you happiness.

ALL MY LOVE,

Angel

GRACE LET out a heavy sigh as she set Angel's letter aside. She appreciated Angel's words of kindness and her sympathy over Mitchell's rejection, but she didn't like being asked questions she didn't know the answers to.

What did she want from her life?

Grace knew that she wanted a wealthy husband, all the latest fashions that money could buy, and a beautiful house that bespoke their wealth.

But she didn't tell her sister that. Angel would chasten her for her greed for materialistic things. But Angel didn't understand that Grace had no other interests but fashion and courtship.

Love?

Her brow creased at the thought. Perhaps love was something she wanted, but she wanted security and wealth more than she wanted love. She had never felt any affection for or attraction towards Mitchell, only an inherent attraction to his wealth and place in society.

Did that mean she was shallow?

"Grace, Mother said you must come down for tea. Someone wants to meet you," Faith's voice carried down the hallway.

Grace let out a heavy sigh. Whenever her mother had someone wanting to 'meet' her, it was sure to be just another attempt at matchmaking. Grace checked her appearance in the mirror before she headed downstairs to see who her mother's latest match would be.

She had barely stepped into the drawing-room before she felt her stomach turn and toil at the sight of her mother's guest.

The newspaper crier.

"Mother?" Grace asked stiffly. "Did we forget to get the newspaper for Father today?"

"Grace," Elizabeth Jones ignored her daughter's sarcastic retort. "I'd like for you to meet Rory McKraggin."

"A pleasure," Grace curtsied slightly as her mother had taught her.

"No, no, miss, the pleasure is all mine," Rory McKraggin said coming to his feet. He turned to her mother. "She's just as pretty as you said, ma'am."

"Of course she is," Elizabeth Jones agreed with an easy smile.

"Mr. McKraggin has recently moved to Boston from Scotland. His family owns quite some land there. He even carries the title of a barrister."

Grace kept her smile in place. “Then what may I ask is a barrister doing as a newspaper crier on the corner of our street every morning.”

Rory shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat. “There were problems with one of the servants in the castle. A misunderstanding, that’s all. I’m simply waiting for matters to settle down back home before I return and take my rightful place as Barrister.”

“So you’re not a barrister now?” Grace asked carefully.

Rory laughed and shook his head. “No. Not at the moment. At the moment I’m a proud newspaper crier.”

Grace wasn’t sure who was more disappointed, she or her mother. Elizabeth Jones had clearly not asked enough questions before inviting the newspaper crier home to tea. Now her nose was turned up slightly as if a stench had been carried into her drawing-room.

Grace turned to her mother with a sweet smile. “Mother, you do remember our appointment at the dressmaker in a quarter of an hour?”

“My my, would you look at the time. Thank you so much for coming, Mr. McKraggin, but I completely forgot about our appointment.”

“I could come back tomorrow if that would be more suitable?” Rory offered.

“That won’t be necessary, thank you.” Elizabeth stood up and showed Rory to the door. As soon as she closed the door behind him, she turned to Grace. “I’m so sorry.”

Grace let out a chuckle. “Mother, your attempts at finding me a husband have become quite pathetic.”

They shared a laugh, but Grace already knew it would only be a matter of time before her mother tried again.

CHAPTER 3



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 2 FEBRUARY 1896

After Angel's latest letter and the disaster with Rory McKraggin, Grace realized that if she didn't take her future into her own hands, her mother would. Heaven only knew what type of man her mother would try to match her with next.

She remembered Angel had mentioned that she had found Travis's advertisement in the Matrimonial Times. At the time, Grace had thought it desperate for her sister to write to a stranger in search of love.

But now, she couldn't help but wonder if Angel hadn't been right in doing just that.

There were no wealthy single men in Boston and those that were available were available for a reason. Either they had a drinking problem, gambling debt, or such an atrocious reputation for people to avoid associating with them.

Instead of going herself, afraid that she would be seen, Grace asked one of the maids to procure a copy of the Matrimonial Times for her. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she hoped that perhaps there would be an advertisement for a wealthy man looking for a trophy wife.

Preferably in Boston, of course.

Grace couldn't imagine leaving the city. She was made for the busy streets and latest fashions from all across the world. She wouldn't settle for anything less.

It was late afternoon when the maid slipped the newspaper underneath Grace's door. She snatched it up and began to read, eager to see if she had missed a bachelor in Boston. Perhaps if she found a man of her own choosing, her mother would stop introducing her to bald, boring, old men. Or young, handsome and skinflint men.

She read through all the advertisements, chuckling at how ridiculous some of them were. A man who could only offer his heart and the shelter of a tent. Another was looking for companionship in a woman who could carry her weight in his lumber yard.

Some of the men seemed downright desperate.

She was just about to give up when she saw an advertisement from someone in Meadow Views, Indiana. Grace wasn't sure if it was because Angel now lived in Indiana that the advertisement caught her eye, but she found herself reading it twice.

UP AND COMING Banker seeks the perfect Companion to be his Future Wife

DAVIS STONE is a self-made man in his own right. As the owner of the bank in Meadow Views as well as a few properties in this very same town, Davis is now planning on his next achievement of becoming the town's mayor.

He is seeking an appealing young lady as his companion in both life and his journey to success. Someone well-spoken who can interact comfortably in society and wouldn't mind hosting events for his business partners and colleagues.

As the future Mrs. Davis Stone, the young lady of his choosing would enjoy the luxury of his double-story home in town. Although Mr. Stone dreams of starting a family soon, a nanny would be appointed to help with the care. Mr. Stone also takes pride in having his home tended to by numerous servants.

He lives in Meadow Views with his mother and hopes that his future wife could live up to his mother's standards. If you feel that you are suitable and could portray the role of a Mayor's wife with stature and respect, then Davis Stone is waiting to hear from you without delay.

GRACE READ the advertisement again and felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Why hadn't she thought of the Matrimonial Times sooner? Davis Stone was exactly the character of man she wanted in a husband. Someone wealthy with a standing in society; someone who was running for Mayor.

She reached into her drawer for her stationery and began to write to Davis. No one could portray the role of a mayor's wife better than her.

As for the children, she didn't mind having a whole brood of them if there were servants and a nanny to care for them, while she cared for herself.

After all, a Mayor's wife had to look exceptional at all times.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 8 MARCH 1896

“*I* have an important announcement to make,” Grace said, lightly pinging her fork against her crystal glass.

She immediately had the attention of both her parents and her younger sister at the table. Dinner time in the Jones house had always been the time for announcements or important conversations and today, Grace had some very important news to share with her family.

“We know that Mitchell’s wife is expecting,” Faith teased her from the side.

“Mitchell? Mitchell who?” Grace fawned with a shrug.

Faith’s eyes widened with surprise.

“So tell us this important announcement?” Elizabeth coaxed her middle daughter. “Then I have to tell you about the luncheon suitor I set up for Friday. A nob stitcher, he makes wigs for the courts.”

“A nob stitcher?” John Jones, the patriarch of the family, asked with a frown. “Why would you arrange for Grace to have lunch with a nob stitcher? We don’t need wigs.”

“Can we please forget about the nob stitcher; I have something to say. Firstly, I’m not going to lunch with the nob stitcher,” Grace said firmly as she glanced at her mother. “Secondly, I think I might be falling in love.”

“With who?” Faith asked, surprised.

“His name is Davis Stone. He is a banker from Meadow Views, or should I say he owns the bank and quite a few properties in town. He’s also running for Mayor come fall,” Grace said, pleased with herself.

“Meadow Views? Where is that? I haven’t heard of a town by that name,” her father asked, confused.

Grace nodded. “That’s because it’s in Indiana.”

“No! You’re not going to leave us as Angel did to marry a stranger we’ve never even met?” her mother asked, horrified.

Grace shook her head. “At this time, we are not yet engaged, but I guess it is only a matter of time. Mother, you want me to find a suitable husband, don’t you? I’m not interested in newspaper criers or nob stitchers or any of the other men you have in mind for me. I want to marry someone who understands my needs and respects them.”

“Your need for new clothes, then?” Faith asked with a teasing smile.

“It’s expected of a mayor’s wife to look presentable at all times. Where is the harm in doing what I do best?” Grace asked with a shrug.

“And this Davis Stone, do you believe he will make you happy? That you can fall in love with him?” her father asked carefully.

Grace thought for a moment before she nodded. “Father, I do believe that I can be happy with him. He can offer me a very comfortable life and I believe that once we meet, we might even fall in love. I just feel that I have to follow my heart when it comes to my future. I appreciate all the trouble Mother has undergone to help me find a suitable match, but I’m afraid none of them have appealed to me in the least.”

“Because they were either bald, fat, blotchy, red-faced, ugly-teethed, or had thinning hair,” her mother snapped. “Grace, you do realize that beauty is only skin deep. One day you’re going to wake up and your beauty will have faded, do you then want a man beside you who would rather find a pretty young wife or a man who loves you for who you really are?”

Grace didn’t like her mother’s tone of voice or her harsh words. “Mother, that’s not what I meant.”

“What your mother means,” her father began patiently. “Is that you can find the right man who says all the right things and does all the right things, simply to win your heart and to have a beauty like you by his side. You should caution your heart against men like that. That’s all.”

“Did you send him a picture of yourself?” Faith asked, curiously.

Grace laughed. "Of course I did, I had to make sure he'd write back."

"Oh, Grace," her mother shook her head. "Just promise me you'll be careful. I'm glad it worked out for Angel to find someone in the West, but just because it worked out for her, doesn't mean it will work out for you too."

"Can't you just be happy for me?" Grace asked, feeling as if her parents and her sister were everything but supportive."

"Of course we're happy for you. And if you really think that Davis Stone is the right man for you, then we'll support you all the way to the train station when you leave. But you can't blame us for being just a little protective of you. You've always been easily flattered and flattery isn't something you can rely on for the rest of your life."

"Well noted," Grace snapped.

"But if it does work out," Elizabeth's face lit up with a warm smile. "You'll be a mayor's wife in a small town. That's about as high as society goes in small towns."

Grace felt excitement bubble in her chest. "I know, I'll be Mrs. Mayor."

Faith shook her head with an indulgent smile. "You're right, Grace, you've been preparing for this your whole life."

For the next hour, Grace, Faith, and her mother talked about what it would be like to be a mayor's wife. The more she told them about Davis Stone, the more her mother seemed to like him. By the time they were finished and it was time to head to bed, Grace knew that she had found the perfect partner.

She planned on writing to him that very night, to tell him how pleased her family was with their correspondence. Perhaps once Davis learned that her family approved, he might consider proposing to her a little sooner.

Grace fell asleep with a head full of dreams of life as a Mayor's wife.

CHAPTER 5



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 10 MARCH 1896

“*Y*ou shouldn’t go out today, not in this weather,” Faith warned as Grace walked into the living room.

“I am wearing a coat. Besides, it’s not that horrid out.” Grace pulled on her gloves ignoring the howling wind outside the window.

“It’s a storm, Mother said it’s going to be a big one. The wind is coming from the wrong direction,” Faith warned again.

“Why don’t you fiddle with your piano keys and I’ll send a letter to my future husband?” Grace snapped irritably.

She loved her baby sister dearly, but just as Angel had always had her nose buried in books, Faith hardly spent any part of her days out from behind the piano. Besides, she didn’t want to wait another moment to send her latest letter to Davis.

After telling her family about him, she was eager for Davis to know that her parents approved of their correspondence. If she wanted to become the future wealthy Mrs. Mayor of Meadow Views, she had to make sure she kept Davis’s interest.

For that reason, she had included another photograph of herself which showed her with her hair swept up, wearing one of her best dresses. It was the prettiest photograph she had and had been taken at a society dance a few months before.

“Well, just be careful,” Faith retorted with a pout.

As soon as Grace stepped outside, she wondered if her mother hadn’t been right. The wind was coming from the wrong direction and it was blowing with such ferocity that any attempt at keeping her styled hair in place proved useless.

Grace kept one hand on her hat to try to keep it in place as she leaned

forward and walked head-on into the wind. The post office wasn't far and she wouldn't be long, she reminded herself. And if the wind really did turn into a snow storm, which was late for this time of year, she could ride out the worst of it in her favorite dress shop.

When she arrived at the post office, she was surprised to find it all but empty. The desk clerk stammered and stuttered his way through his words as he explained that everyone was home, waiting for the storm to ride itself out.

Grace threw her head back and laughed. "It's hardly a storm out there."

"Might be...be...be...come one," the desk clerk said with a cocked brow.

With her letter sent, Grace walked out of the post office, surprised to see flurries of snow riding on the sails of the wind. Perhaps it might become a storm, she reasoned as she began her walk home.

She heard a horse cry out on the street, refusing to pull a carriage another step even as the sound of a baby's wails drifted to her on the air. It was a strange day, she reasoned as she kept struggling to walk against the wind.

It was as if even nature feared a little wind and snow.

Grace shook her head and turned the corner. The wind rushed at her so fast that it took her breath. If she had been doubting the storm before, there wasn't any doubt left in her mind now. She had been struggling to walk against the wind, but now it was clear that had only been a breeze blowing through the street.

Met head-on with the monster, she struggled to put one foot in front of another. The wind snatched her hat away and Grace turned to run after it. She didn't check the crossroad for carriages or horses, just ran mindlessly after one of her favorite hats. It tumbled on the ground before it was lifted by the wind again, only to be dropped a few yards further on.

Grace finally snatched it up and held it to her chest. "Don't you go running off like that," she said to the hat as she brushed the dirt and snow from it.

She didn't see it coming, didn't even hear it snapping over the wind's

loud howls. She simply felt the impact of something against her head, followed by the blinding pain. Her vision began to blur as she turned to see what had hit her from behind.

A branch had been torn from a tree, now hanging loose and dangling this way and that with the wind's gusts. Grace reached for the back of her head, where she had felt it hit and wet heat covered her hand.

She was bleeding, she realized, as if she wasn't there at all. Deep down she knew she had to do something, run or seek shelter, but she couldn't move.

This time she saw the branch coming. She told her legs to move, but they didn't budge. She watched as the branch picked up speed and swung right at her.

At the last minute she tried to dive towards the road to avoid it, but it was too late.

She felt it slice across her face, even as she smelled the scent of fresh blood. Then she felt it rip, as the wind tugged it back the other way again.

The pain was more excruciating than anything Grace had ever experienced before.

"Help...." she cried out, but it came out as a soft whimper.

Everything around her began to fade, the edges blurring as her vision turned to black.

Grace couldn't stop herself from falling, she couldn't seek shelter from the storm, and she couldn't stop the searing pain in her left cheek.

Finally, she just gave in to the darkness and the pain until it all disappeared.

CHAPTER 6



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 12 MARCH 1896

“Grace, can you hear me?”

The voice sounded far away and then it sounded close. Grace wasn't sure why it sounded so strange. She tried to move, but every single muscle in her body hurt.

“Grace, if you can hear me, open your eyes.”

It was her mother's voice, she realized. She drew in a breath and tried to open her eyes. It was hard at first, but she finally managed. Only when she opened her left eye completely, did she feel the tug of pain.

“Mother?” Grace asked, realizing she was in the hospital.

“Thank heavens, you're awake. We were so worried. You've been sleeping for almost two days,” Elizabeth explained as she squeezed Grace's hand. “How are you feeling?”

Grace frowned, her throat was dry and she was in pain. “What happened?”

“An accident, my dearest daughter, a terrible accident,” Elizabeth said. She looked at Grace's face and a few tears slid over her cheeks. “You were out in the storm and a branch struck you down. The people that brought you to hospital... they said it was brutal how that branch struck you before it came back and struck you again.”

“Hospital?” Grace asked, confused. “A brand...” she trailed off remembering something about a branch and the stinging pain behind her head. She reached for the back of her head and realized her head was in a bandage.

She had been so confused about where she was that she hadn't even realized that a bandage covered most of her head and her face and even part of her left eye.

“How bad is it?” she asked, turning to her mother.

Her mother sniffed and cried. “It’s not too bad. You’ll be all right. Now that you’re awake, you’ll be just fine. It’s just a cut, that’s all”

“Did I cut my face?” Grace asked as her hands traveled over the bandage. She felt the pain underneath the bandage on her left cheek. “Did I cut my face?”

“Let’s not worry about that now, Grace. The most important thing is that you’re all right. Heaven knows we thought we were going to lose you...” her mother trailed off tearfully.

Grace rolled away from her mother. “I’d like to be on my own for a while.”

“But Grace, you just woke up....” her mother argued.

Grace ignored her. Her mother didn’t understand what it was like. She felt battered and bruised and judging by the searing pain in her cheek, her beauty had been tarnished forever. She didn’t want to sit and listen to her mother tell her how grateful she should be to be alive.

She already knew she would never be the Grace she had been before the storm.

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, her parents and Faith often visited her. No one spoke of her injuries, only how glad they were that she was healing. Grace still felt a little weak, but the headaches had mostly subsided.

The doctor turned up in her room on the fifth day. “Time to change those bandages, my dear.”

Grace had been both aghast and fearful of the moment she would be able to see her injuries for herself. Up until now, she had tried to imagine a small cut on her left cheek.

She sat up and waited patiently as the doctor began to remove the bandages.

“There, that already looks much better. We’ve prevented infection for now and from what I can tell, there won’t be any problems with the healing. I think you’re ready to go home.” The doctor carefully cleaned her wounds but when he reached for the ointment, Grace shook her head.

“I’d like to see,” Grace said firmly, glancing around the room for a mirror.

“Of course,” the doctor nodded. He pulled a small mirror out of his medical bag and handed it to Grace. “See, it’s healing beautifully.”

Grace drew in a steadying breath before she looked at herself in the mirror. A gasp of horror escaped her at the twisted and torn face reflected back at her. She shook her head as tears began to stream over her cheeks. “It’s horrible, why didn’t you fix it?” she demanded of the doctor.

The doctor frowned. “Now, Grace, if you knew what it looked like when you came in, you would understand how much better it is. It’s just a scar, I bet you no one would even notice it.”

Grace gasped. “A blind person would notice it!”

From her hairline, right down to the curve of her jaw, a long-ragged cut had peeled away her skin. The edges, although not infected, were red and seemed angry. Even her eyelid had suffered in the process. The scar looked as if someone had taken a blunt knife and dragged it over Grace’s face.

For a woman who had prided herself on her beauty her whole life, it was a death sentence.

“You should’ve just let me be...” she trailed off setting the mirror aside.

“A scar isn’t worth losing your life over,” the doctor said firmly. “In time it will heal and you’ll come to accept it. Just remember you’re alive, that’s enough to be grateful for.”

“Says the man who’s probably been short, fat, and bald his whole life,” Grace snapped.

The doctor cocked his brow with anger. “I know you’re upset, but remember I am here to help you. If you’d rather go home and take care of

that wound yourself, allowing it to become infected and eat away at more of your pretty face, there is the door.”

Grace’s eyes widened with surprise. No one had ever spoken to her in that tone of voice. For the first time, she realized how privileged her beauty had made her. It was a hurtful realization, especially now that she no longer had her beauty to fall back on.

“I’m sorry. I’m just upset. Thank you for your trouble.”

The doctor nodded before he began to apply the ointment. Her skin was tender around the cut as he slathered on the ointment. When he was done, he handed her the tub. “Here, apply these three to four times a day. Try not to cover it up, fresh air is as important to healing as is a good attitude.”

Grace smiled sadly. “Do you think the scar... do you think in time it might go away?”

The doctor sighed heavily. “In time its color will lighten, but I’m afraid it won’t ever completely go away. I’ve sent word for your family to collect you today. If there is anything else you need, you’ll let me know.”

Grace nodded before the doctor left her on her own. She couldn’t stop the tears that slowly began to seep from her eyes. Her whole life’s plan had been centered around her beauty and now she was scarred, ugly, and broken.

No one would ever stop twice to look at her beauty again.

Instead, they would stop and cringe at the long scar that mutilated her face.

CHAPTER 7



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 15 APRIL 1896

A little more than a month after her accident, Grace stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom and inspected her scar. The doctor was right, the color had begun to lighten. Instead of the angry red line that had run down her face in a jagged line, it was now pink.

It was still horrible.

When she had arrived home from the hospital her parents and Faith had made sure that all the mirrors in the house had been covered. Grace had appreciated their kindness, because at least for the first few days she wasn't constantly reminded of how ugly she had become.

But little by little the mirrors had been uncovered, and every time Grace walked past one, she was reminded of the storm and the tree that had stolen her life's dreams and her beauty from her. Some of her friends had come to see her during that first week, offering condolences and help of any kind.

But no one had returned to visit a second time.

Grace felt betrayed by not only fate but by her friends. Had her beauty been the only reason they had been friendly with her?

Her parents and Faith tried their best not to stare, but Grace accepted it was only natural. A person's eye was drawn towards the unusual, and there was nothing usual about Grace's face anymore. She found herself withdrawing more and more, refusing to even leave the house.

Because every time she did leave the house, she would be stared at.

Children would stop on the street and point at her. Grown men would laugh and tease her. And the woman... they were the worst. They would snicker behind their handkerchiefs, probably relieved that Grace was no longer the beautiful woman she had once been.

She had written to Angel for the first time since the accident and had yet

to receive a response. She knew that Angel wouldn't judge her by her appearance but the doubt still seeped in as the days went by.

It was late on a Friday afternoon when Faith bounced into her room with a bright smile. "It's here, Angel's letter."

With relief and excitement, Grace quickly accepted the letter and tore open the envelope.

Faith laughed before she left and gave Grace a little privacy.

MY DEAREST GRACE,

I WAS SO TERRIBLY sorry to hear about your accident. Mother and Father were devastated at first, thinking you might not survive.

Much to my delight, I was grateful to hear of your recovery.

I understand that the scar you describe might be unsightly, but Grace, it's just a scar. Beauty never lasts forever, not even a flower can forever hold its bloom.

Do not let this scar keep you from living your life. Don't let it stop you from following your dreams. You have a beautiful heart, Grace, one you've always kept hidden behind your beauty, but now it's time to rely on your heart for the answers.

The friends that don't come to visit were never really your friends. The people that stop and stare, it's curiosity, it's natural. Don't scold them for it, rather have patience with them and show them kindness.

God tests us all in different ways, Grace. Have you considered this to be a test of your character perhaps?

You have always been beautiful and outgoing, everyone wanted to be close to you – to bask in that beauty you exuded with your charm. Perhaps this is a challenge for you to demonstrate that without beauty, you can still be

strong, charming, and kind.

I wish I could be there to hold you close. To tell you what a wonderful woman you are and what a wonderful wife you'll make someday. But since I'm not, consider this my empathy. I know you must be devastated, but devastation always leaves room to start over.

Start over, Grace, this time on your terms.

LOVE,

Angel

GRACE READ the last part of the letter again and frowned. How was she supposed to start over if she didn't even know what she wanted from her life anymore?

She thought of Davis and the letters they had written to each other. She hadn't told him about the accident or her scar, but she knew she didn't have to. Through their correspondence, it was clear that Davis had come to care for her.

Surely, he wouldn't care about an unsightly scar.

Perhaps Angel was right. It was time for Grace to start living her life on her terms. It was time to encourage her relationship with Davis so that she could leave Boston once and for all.

She would miss her family dearly, but she wouldn't miss the snickers and gossip of women she used to call her friends.

She reached for her stationery and began to pen a letter to Davis. This time she didn't speak about the life of wealth they planned to share, instead, she wrote to him about her dreams for the future. Dreams of having a kind husband and well-mannered children.

For a moment she considered telling him about the accident but quickly

decided against it. If Davis was truly the honorable kind and loving gentleman he toted to be, a scar wouldn't mean anything to him at all.

By the time Grace had finished writing the letter, she had sent up a prayer that when Davis wrote back, it would be to ask for her hand in marriage.

She was done sitting around and feeling sorry for herself; it was time she moved on to become the Mayor's wife as she had dreamed of being.

She caught sight of her scar in the mirror and quickly turned away from it. Before she became the mayor's wife, she would need to find a new way to style her hair in a manner that would hide her scar from the world.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



OceanofPDF.com

BOSTON – 29 APRIL 1896

*M*y dearest Grace,

I APPRECIATED your last letter more than I can say. Whenever I read your words, I find myself eager for us to start our life together.

I've told my mother about you and showed her your picture. She also agrees that we will make the perfect match. In time we will be the most powerful married couple in Meadow Views. I get excited just thinking about having you by my side at all the community events we will host.

I am tired of writing to you and dreaming about our life together, Grace. It's time for us to meet. I know with all my heart that you are the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I know that you will be a wonderful wife, and a supportive partner and that one day you will be a great role model for any children we might be blessed to call our own.

Please do me the honor of accepting my hand in marriage. I promise to care for you, cherish and protect you, for all the days of our lives.

With summer on the horizon, the time is right for you to make the journey West. I've enclosed enough money for your journey as well as any essentials you might need. I truly hope that you will accept my offer of marriage and that soon we can be united.

Mother will act as a chaperone when you arrive in Meadow Views. We would not want your reputation tarnished before our wedding day. I can arrange for us to be wed within two weeks of your arrival.

Of course, you can send for a dress from any dressmaker of your choosing for the big day. After all, it will be an event that Meadow Views will

remember for years to come.

I hope that I will have your parents' blessing for our upcoming nuptials, and please do invite them to the wedding. I will ensure that they have comfortable accommodation during their time in Meadow Views.

I HOPE to hear from you soon, my love.

ALL MY LOVE,

Davis Stone

GRACE RACED down the stairs and into the drawing-room where her parents were enjoying a glass of Scotch. "He proposed!"

"What?" Elizabeth asked coming out of her chair.

Even Faith abandoned the piano to see what the fuss was about.

"Davis Stone, he proposed. He sent me money for my train fare and essentials. He even said I could order a dress from a dressmaker of my choosing for the wedding!" Grace cried out with excitement.

The corner of her eye caught her reflection in the mirror and she quickly looked away. For a few seconds, she had forgotten about the scar that had ruined her appearance.

But Davis wouldn't mind, she assured herself.

"Let me see that?" her mother asked, reaching for the letter.

Grace stood by as her mother read and felt her excitement build when her mother began to smile. "It's true, he's proposed. Oh, Grace, how wonderful!"

"Now we lose another daughter to the West." John Jones sighed heavily although he held up his glass in a toast.

"You're not losing me, Father; you're simply wedding me off," Grace

announced. "He's asked you to attend the wedding. He'd make sure of the best accommodations, of course. Will you come?"

"Of course we'll come," Faith answered on behalf of her parents.

"As soon as you have a date, we'll start making the arrangements," Elizabeth assured her middle daughter. "I told you that scar was no more a stain on your future than a bump in your past."

Grace's hand touched the scar that had lightened with time, but still caught her eye every time she looked in a mirror. "Davis won't care about my scar. He only cares about me."

"And that's how it should be," her father agreed.

"Will you be inviting Angel and Travis as well?" Faith asked eagerly.

Grace nodded. "I thought about it. Meadow Views isn't far from Waterfall. I thought I might surprise her with a visit and invite her in person."

"That sounds like a wonderful plan!" her mother exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "At least you two will be close enough to be able to visit often. You can even raise your children together."

Faith snickered. "Now I suppose I need to find a cowboy in the West and then we can all settle down in Indiana."

Grace lifted her chin. "Finding the right man isn't that easy."

"I am so happy for you. Can you imagine Mitchell's face when he learns you've become the wife of a mayor?" her sister added with a salacious grin. "Jealousy will not begin to describe it."

Grace shrugged. She hadn't given Mitchell or his pregnant wife much thought since her accident. Not because she didn't care, but because she couldn't imagine the disgust on Mitchell's face if he had to see her scar.

"I don't care about Mitchell," Grace said more for her own reassurance than for her family.

"This certainly deserves a toast," her father announced. He poured Faith and Grace each a small thimble of wine. "To my beautiful daughter Grace and the beautiful future that awaits her with Davis Stone, future mayor of

Meadow Views.”

Grace laughed at the last part. Clearly, her new position in society appealed to her parents as much as it did to her. She carefully tugged a few strands of hair over her left cheek and lifted her glass in a toast. Although her hair obscured her vision, she knew it helped to hide her scar.

If she was going to be in the public eye, then this was going to be a gesture she'd have to start practicing.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



OceanofPDF.com

MEADOW VIEWS – 15 MAY 1896

She had watched as the landscape had changed as the train headed westward. Mountains curved into valleys, valleys into plateaus, and plates into wide-open spaces of the west.

Grace had traveled most of this route before when they attended Angel's wedding in Waterfall, but when the train curved to the right it took her on a different route, one she had never seen before.

Her excitement was only slightly dampened by her fear of what her new husband would look like. She hadn't met him or even seen a photograph of him, but Grace hoped he would be as handsome as he had been charming in his letters.

When she boarded the train in Boston, she had made sure to secure a seat by the window. One that would hide her face from the rest of the passengers. The last thing she needed on this journey was to be reminded of how terrifying her scar looked.

Now that some time had passed, Grace could admit that it looked as if someone had taken a saw to her face. It was hard to believe that a stray branch during a storm had wreaked such havoc on her perfect features.

Grace still flinched when she saw herself in the mirror, she couldn't expect strangers not to react to the gruesome red line that scarred the left side of her face. She had practiced concealing the scar with a few of her thick auburn curls, but as soon as Grace forgot to keep them in place, her scar would be revealed.

Gone were the days of ribbons and intricate braids that in the past had flattered her face. Now, she wore her hair down all the time.

Quite a few things had changed since her accident, Grace realized as she watched the landscape with its rocky outcrops through the window of the

train. She had focused her whole life on being the prettiest girl in the room, only now to realize that without her beauty, she doubted she had anything else to offer.

Regardless of those doubts, Grace had also come to realize how shallow some of her friends were. People she had thought were her nearest and dearest, had quickly turned their backs on their friendship once they had seen the scar left by the accident.

Her family loved her regardless.

But Grace didn't just want her family, she wanted friends, and more than anything she wanted the approval and unconditional love of her future husband. And she knew without a single doubt in her mind that Davis would accept her the way she was.

He knew her heart better than anyone.

In their letters, they had revealed their dreams to each other and through those letters Grace had found herself falling in love with Davis.

The train began to slow as it reached the next town. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized this was her stop.

Finally, she had arrived at Meadow Views.

She took in her new town as the train slowed to a stop at the platform. The town was very much like the small town of Waterfall, near which Angel lived, only bigger. The streets were dusty, and the buildings seemed beaten down by weather and time, but here and there was a fresh coat of paint that held promise for the future.

Just like Grace was ready to embrace her new future.

She climbed off the train and waited for her luggage. The conductor offered her a toothless smile as he set her luggage at her feet. "Here you go, miss."

Grace turned to him with a striking smile. "Thank you so much. Do have a safe journey further."

The man's eyes widened with shock and horror as he took a step back.

Gone were the fawning toothless smile and kind eyes, he was horrified. “Yes, miss.”

With that, he turned and all but ran back to the train. Grace sighed, refusing to let his actions ruin her arrival in her new town. She quickly arranged her hair so that it would cover her scar before she turned to search for Davis.

There wasn't a single person or wagon waiting at the platform.

For a moment her heart stopped, fearing that Davis had changed his mind without letting her know. She was a stranger in this town and if Davis wasn't going to meet her, she didn't want to beg for accommodation for the night.

Perhaps she should've done as her parents had suggested and saved some of the money he'd sent her instead of spending it all on new clothes.

Fear had started to crawl up her spine when a young lady rushed towards her from across the street.

“Are you Grace? Grace Jones from Boston?” the girl asked breathlessly.

“Yes, yes, I am,” Grace said lifting her chin just enough to seem important.

“I'm Cindy, it doesn't really matter who I am. What matters is why I am here. Mr. Stone sends his gravest apologies for not being here to meet you himself. He is in a meeting with the town council and, as always, Big Bob from the bar has received so many complaints against his establishment that the meeting's just spiraled out of control.” Cindy laughed. “What I mean to say is, welcome to Meadow Views. I'll take you to Mr. Stone's house where Mrs. Stone is awaiting your arrival.”

Charmed by the girl's energetic babbling, Grace laughed. “I understand completely. An important man like Mr. Stone has to attend to business first. Will my luggage be collected later?” Grace asked glancing at her steam trunk and large carpet bag.

“Yes, you can just leave it here. Mr. Stone will send someone for it,” Cindy assured her.

Grace nodded, enjoying feeling important. Her future husband will arrange it, she thought with a smile as she followed Cindy into the dusty streets of the town.

Two men on horses charged by, kicking up dust which made Grace cough.

“Sorry, we have rules about that, but the current mayor isn’t doing anything about it.”

“When Davis Stone is Mayor, the matter will be attended to,” Grace assured Cindy.

They walked past a few shops on the Main Street before Cindy turned to the right into a side street. Right at the bottom of the street stood a beautiful double-story house with a balcony from which you could see the whole town.

“Welcome, Miss Jones, that’s your new home,” Cindy said pointing towards the house.

Grace smiled feeling as if she had finally arrived in the life she had been made for.

CHAPTER 10



“*A*h, you must be Miss Jones. Please, do come inside. My son has told me so much about you. I’m Maisy, Maisy Stone.” Maisy welcomed Grace with warmth as soon as she opened the door.

Although she was in her late fifties with greying hair, the expensive pearls around her neck along with the lavish dress she wore made it clear that she had very good taste; expensive, that is.

Grace smiled warmly at her future mother-in-law. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. Davis has only told me wonderful things about you.”

“I’m flattered. You must be terribly tired after your journey. Would you like to rest before Davis comes home, or would you mind a cup of tea?”

Grace glanced around the beautiful foyer. “I wouldn’t mind some tea, to be honest.”

Maisy nodded in agreement. She all but shut the door in Cindy’s face before she picked up a small bell. She rang it twice before a maid came rushing into the foyer. “Mrs. Stone?”

“Tea for two, please. Do be careful not to chip my China this time,” Maisy said in a biting tone before she turned to Grace. “It does so bother me when they treat fine China as if it were just your regular merchant crockery.”

Grace smiled as she followed Maisy into a beautiful drawing-room. Although her parents had given her a comfortable life, not even her mother

owned real China. “You have a beautiful home, Maisy.”

“I know. It’s taken me years to achieve this... how can one put it...”
Maisy glanced around in thought.

“Atmosphere of elegance and poise?” Grace suggested.

Maisy turned to her with a beaming smile. “That is a perfect description. Oh, Grace, I do think you and I are going to get along just fine.”

“Here you are, ma’am.” The servant girl returned with a tray.

Grace smiled gratefully before she helped herself to a cup of tea. She took a seat on the lounge by the window, enjoying the afternoon sun. The tea was perfectly brewed and the China cold and dainty in her hands as she took a sip.

She let out a contented sigh of relief. She had finally reached her destination and from now on she would live in elegance and poise and drink from real China. A smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she turned to Maisy.

Only Maisy was no longer smiling. Her eyes were wide with horror, her cup clattering in her saucer as she struggled to put it down.

Grace felt her heart skip a beat realizing Maisy had noticed her scar. She quickly covered it with a few strands of hair and smiled at Maisy. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Hurt, I’m not worried about that. I just... Davis didn’t mention it, that’s all. Were you attacked by wolves?” Maisy asked without pretense.

Grace kept her smile in place. “No, unfortunately, a stray branch during a storm, that’s all.”

“Oh goodness, it really does mar your face terribly, doesn’t it. I can imagine you were beautiful before that happened,” Maisy offered with sympathy.

“It’s only a part of me, my scar doesn’t determine who I am,” Grace said a little stiffly. “The piano, do you play?”

Maisy shook her head, clearly still intrigued by the scar. She tilted her neck this way and that to get a better look, but Grace made sure that her hair

stayed in place by tilting her head at just the right angle. She didn't want to talk about her scar and she didn't want Maisy pitying her for it.

"I... uhm no. I don't play. Davis hoped that one day his wife would know how to play. Do you?" Maisy asked hopefully.

Grace laughed. "Not at all. Although my youngest sister, Faith, has quite the talent."

"Right," Maisy said nodding but clearly not paying attention at all.

Suddenly Grace couldn't wait for Davis to arrive home. She knew that he wouldn't mind her scar and that he would quickly make sure that his mother didn't stare at it the entire time.

She tried to make conversation with the older woman but it was as if nothing interested Maisy now apart from her scar. Rather irritated and feeling slightly offended by her repulsion to it, Grace decided to focus on her tea instead.

The servant girl returned to fetch their cups and noticed the scar. She gasped with wide eyes before she quickly escaped the room.

Grace kept her smile in place wondering why she had thought it would be different in Meadow Views. Just because the scar wouldn't bother Davis, didn't mean it wouldn't bother everyone else she met. She had fled from Boston because of the staring and the pointed fingers and now she was beginning to wonder if she was going to experience all that right here in Meadow Views?

Doubt began to circle her fears. This wasn't what she had looked forward to. Her future mother-in-law's unabashed horror, the maid's repulsion, and she hadn't even had a chance to meet Davis yet. Would he be horrified and disgusted too?

And even if he wasn't, how could he stop the entire town from staring and pointing at the ugly gash that scarred her face?

CHAPTER 11



Davis Stone sighed as the meeting continued. Usually, he enjoyed meetings, especially the meetings where he was asked for his opinion, but today he wanted to get home.

He checked the time on his pocket watch and decided it was time for the matter to be dealt with instead of discussed. The town council, consisting of Davis and a few other business owners on the thoroughfare, along with the priest, had met after numerous complaints had been made about the livery.

Davis understood the need for a livery, but he had to agree that the complaints were valid. The livery was upwind from town which meant the entire town suffered the stench during the hot summer days.

“I call the meeting to halt with a solution for the problem,” Davis said with the air of authority he was hoping to have once he became mayor. Mountain Falls didn’t yet have one, but the upcoming voting would secure them a mayor, and Davis couldn’t wait to take on the position.

“What do you suggest we do?” the livery owner asked looking weary.

“The livery should close down at its current location. I’m sure everyone here will agree it is in the town’s best interest that it moves to the southern end of town. That way the summer winds will take the scent away from town,” Davis explained.

“I can’t afford to rebuild,” the livery owner complained.

“I’m sure that everyone here won’t mind helping?” Davis glanced around the table making it clear he expected everyone to contribute.

A few nods circled the table which brought a large smile to Davis’s mouth. It was like leading a flock of sheep, he thought to himself. None of them could make a decision but were happy to follow anyone that took the lead.

That’s why he needed to take the lead.

“Very well, it’s settled then. The town will provide you with land south of town, and the town council will assist with rebuilding,” Davis confirmed firmly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an important matter I need to tend to.”

Davis gathered his things and all but ran out of the meeting. He couldn’t wait to get home and finally meet Grace. Their small town of Mountain Falls wouldn’t know what hit them when they laid eyes on Davis’s future wife.

She was graceful, beautiful and the perfect trophy wife for a man who intended to become Mayor with future sights on the position of governor of Indiana.

He made it home in record time, excitement bubbling through his veins at the thought of laying eyes on his beautiful companion from Boston. By now she should be rested and eager to meet him as well, he thought as he opened the door.

He had barely stepped inside when his mother came rushing towards him from the drawing-room.

“Davis, you should’ve told me!” she hissed under her breath. “It’s horrifying!”

Davis frowned. “Ma, what are you on about? Where is she?”

“I sent her upstairs to rest, I couldn’t stand looking at it another second. You said she was beautiful, a trophy wife to your position as mayor. This seems more like a rendition of beauty and the beast, and you’re the beauty!” His mother shook her head, clearly disappointed.

Confusion made Davis shake his head. “Ma, please calm down. You’re sounding delirious. It must be the heat.”

“Ha! You’ll see for yourself over dinner,” Masie Stone snapped before she swirled on her feet and walked away.

Davis shook his head, wondering if he couldn’t send his mother somewhere for a short period. He loved her more than life itself, but she tended to be exhausting. More so in recent years. The last thing he needed while he fought for the position as mayor was to have his mother lose her sanity.

He dragged a hand through his hair and headed to the drawing-room where he poured himself a tot of scotch. A good swallow burned down his throat as he checked his pocket watch again. Dinner would take place in less than an hour, giving him enough time to freshen up before he met Grace Jones in person.

Almost an hour to the minute later, Davis stepped into the dining room. Just as he had asked, the finer crockery had been used and the silver had been polished to a fine shine. He assessed the table and smiled at the second place that had been set to his left.

Grace’s place.

His mother joined him with a narrowed look and took a seat.

Before Davis could tell his mother not to make it an unpleasant evening, they both turned at the sound of footsteps.

Grace stepped into the dining room and her beauty and lovely dress had Davis catch his breath. She was the perfect trophy wife. Every single man in town would envy him his beautiful companion, he thought with a smile as he stood up.

“Grace, it’s such an honor to finally meet you,” Davis said reaching for her hand. He brushed a kiss over the back of her hand before he stood back and met her gaze.

Her smile was captivating as she shyly glanced away from him. “I’m glad

to finally meet you too.”

She moved around him and took a seat at the table.

Davis still wasn't sure what his mother was on about until Grace turned to look at him. “You have a beautiful home.”

Before Davis could stop himself, he gasped with horror. “What happened to your face?”

Grace quickly looked away. “I had... an accident a couple of months ago. A branch during a storm... I barely survived.”

“That's horrible,” Davis said looking at the scar, instead of sympathizing over the accident.

“It was,” Grace agreed.

Davis didn't need another second to understand what his mother had meant. There was no way he could marry Grace. She would become the town despot. Everyone would be snickering up their sleeves about the mayor's horrifying wife.

Just like his mother had said, he would be the beauty to her beast.

“Shall we eat?” Maisie asked, ringing a bell.

Davis nodded, struggling to draw his gaze from Grace's face. The jagged scar looked as if someone had taken a hacksaw to her face. Her one eye drooped as the skin had twisted and twined to recover from the cut.

“Dinner is served, Mister Stone.”

Davis no longer had an appetite for his food or his future wife.

CHAPTER 12



Grace had been so excited to meet Davis. In her heart, she had truly believed that he loved her. She had truly thought that her scar wouldn't change his feelings for her.

But the moment he had set his gaze on her face, she had felt the condemnation, the horror, and the disappointment. It was clear she wasn't the woman he had expected.

From his letters, he had sounded so loving and caring, that Grace didn't stop to consider for one second that he might reconsider his proposal now that she had a jagged scar running down her face. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye and could almost see the ice wall that had flown up between them.

Gone were the soft words and dreams of the future.

Her heart broke as she pushed the peas around on her plate. She had so looked forward to a nice, cooked meal after traveling for days, but now she wasn't hungry at all. Instead, the judgment at the Stone dining table weighed on her like a heavyweight.

She had fled from Boston to escape the judgmental looks accompanied by horrification, only to arrive in Mountain Falls and experience the same from her future husband and mother-in-law. She managed to bite her tongue hard enough to keep back the tears, but that didn't mean her heart wasn't breaking.

She listened absently as Davis and Maisie discussed the meeting he had attended in town. They spoke of the stench from the livery with the same disdain with which they had treated her scar.

If she hadn't been so excited to come to Indiana, she would've packed her bags right there and then to go back to Boston. But she couldn't go back to Boston. How could she return to the place from which she had fled? Where all her friends had alienated her? A place where she was consistently reminded of what her life had been like before the accident.

Regardless of all that, how could she go back and tell her parents that her future husband found her too ugly to look at?

She remembered a time when women and men would stop on the street to look at her. A time when her beauty was admired, her style sought after. Now, no one even noticed her style, instead they only noticed her scar.

On the train, she had thought that if she had a man that loved her enough to accept her for who she is, that in time she could accept that she was no longer the beauty that she had once been. But now she realized that no man would ever love her.

They couldn't even look at her.

Now and then Davis would look at her and quickly return his gaze to his plate. As if he couldn't stand to look at her. She felt small and worthless and wished she had never come to Indiana at all.

Once dinner was over, Maisie asked to have a word with her son. They disappeared into the drawing room for a few moments before Davis returned. "Ma sends her wishes for you to have a good rest. Will we retire to the drawing-room?"

"That sounds nice. Thank you, dinner was wonderful," Grace said as she stood up before following Davis into the drawing-room. He didn't even acknowledge her compliment.

As she walked into the drawing-room, she couldn't help but feel anxious. Davis was nothing like the man she had come to know through the letters.

Instead, he was cold, distant, and clearly not attracted to her at all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



“Please, have a seat. Would you like some wine?” Davis asked as he poured himself a drink. He needed a stiff drink for the conversation he was about to have.

“No, I’m fine; thank you for asking,” Grace answered quietly.

Davis’s shoulders were stiff, his entire body screaming that he couldn’t stand to be close to her.

He drank down his drink and poured another for courage before he took a seat by the window.

She waited for a few moments until he finally met her gaze with a frown. “I’m sure you understand that I feel a little misled. The photo you sent me... that was who I was expecting.”

If he had slapped her, he would have hurt her less, Grace thought to herself, struggling to hold back the tears. “I’m still the same person. When I sent you that photo... it was before the accident.”

“Then you shouldn’t have lied,” Davis said with a shrug. “You should have been honest about your injuries and how they affected your appearance.”

Grace frowned shaking her head. “I thought you cared about me?”

“I do, at least, I did until I realized tonight that you lied to me. I told you about my aspirations for the future. I explained to you that I needed a

companion by my side who would support my political career,” Davis reminded her with a firm look.

“And I want to be that companion. I didn’t lie to you, Davis, I simply thought it wouldn’t matter,” Grace replied quietly.

“I can’t have someone standing by my side that the whole town will make fun of. It will detract the attention from me and my political views and aspirations for this town. Surely you understand that to have a freak as a wife will get me nowhere?” he said the words as if they tasted sour.

“A freak? Is that what you think of me?” Grace was out of her chair, feeling more bruised and battered than she had felt after she had come to in hospital.

“Of course I don’t think that, but everyone else will. Look, you know your impediment is unsightly. Let’s not fool ourselves. I can’t have a wife with such a deformity and I’m sure you’d rather not live in the public eye,” Davis said matter of factly.

Grace frowned shaking her head. For a moment she considered showing Davis that if she styled her hair correctly her scar wouldn’t even be visible, but she simply didn’t have the willpower to try and convince such a selfish and shallow fool of anything. “You’re right, my deformity as you call it, will impede your career. What do you suggest we do? Would you like me to move into the cellar or the attic and hide there for the rest of my life?”

Davis guffawed. “Of course not, that would be ridiculous. I’d rather you just leave. That way no one in town would’ve seen you, except for my mother and my assistant. It would be best if you leave before more damage is done.”

“Leave?” Grace asked confused. “But I just arrived. Where do you suppose I would go?”

“I’ll pay your train fare to anywhere, as long as you board tomorrow,” Davis said simply.

Grace felt her heart sting with pain even as tears welled in her eyes. She

couldn't go back to Boston. No one there wanted to see her, only her parents and Faith could stand her company since the accident.

"So that's it then, I've come all this way and I'm simply not pretty enough to be your wife?" Grace tried to hold onto her temper, but withholding her tears was only making her temper worse.

"I wouldn't put it that way, but yes, you're not suitable as a wife." Davis shrugged as if they were discussing a stray dog. "As I said, I'll pay for your train fare, you just need to tell me where you would like to go."

"Waterfall," Grace said without thinking.

"Waterfall? But that's barely a two-hour journey by stagecoach. Why would you want to go there?" Davis asked, confused.

Grace squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. "Since I'm not suitable to be a wife, you're not suitable to know of my plans. You can arrange a stagecoach to leave after breakfast."

Grace stood up and walked out of the drawing-room without looking back. As soon as she was in her room, she shut the door and allowed the tears to fall. She had nowhere to go and nothing to do, but she knew that her sister, Angel, would take her in until she had other plans. At least living on her sister's ranch would be better than going back to Boston.

She began to pack all the things she had unpacked just hours before, eager to leave Mountain Falls. For the first time in her life, Grace realized that some people only judged you by your appearance.

Guilt washed over her as she realized that until she had her accident, she had been one of those people. She had been shallow, only living for her appearance. She had pitied people who hadn't been born with her beauty or striking features.

Tears spilled over her cheeks as she realized what a horrible person she had been.

She could blame Davis Stone for his judgment all she wanted, but a few months ago she had been a *Davis Stone*.

She finally fell asleep, exhausted and emotionally battered as her past haunted her. But sleep wasn't restful. Instead, she had nightmares of what her future would be like.

A future where she would be treated as she had treated people all her life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



The following morning when Grace woke up, it was with a headache and a pit of anxiety in her stomach. Her nightmares had been so vivid that she had feared she would never escape them. She dreamt of going to a society dance and sitting in a corner while the other girls discussed how horrid she looked. How they laughed into their handkerchiefs as no one asked her to dance.

She dreamt of being poor and not having a single penny to rub together. How her clothes were haggard and worn, and how people judged her by them.

Nightmare after nightmare, Grace was reminded of the horrible person she had been. In the early hours of dawn she had woken up and prayed for God to forgive her. She had prayed that somehow, somewhere, someone would accept her.

She had prayed for friends that didn't judge her and a future where she was accepted regardless of her scars.

Feeling drained and emotional, she dressed in her travelling clothes and began to put her things together. She didn't go down for breakfast with the Stones. She'd had enough of their judgment and awkward conversation the night before.

Instead, she snuck into the kitchen and begged the cook for a slice of

bread. The old woman was kind and didn't even wince at the sight of her scar. Instead, she offered to pack a small hamper for Grace for her journey.

Clearly, word had spread among the help that she was being sent away. Shame made her rush back to her room.

She spent her last hour there amongst the beautiful things and furniture, wondering if she would ever have such luxury again. On Angel's farm, there were no luxuries to be had, but she was loved and accepted.

Right now that counted more than any pretty dress or imported bureau.

A knock on the door startled her but it was soon followed by Davis's voice. "The stagecoach has arrived. It will leave when you're ready."

Grace didn't hesitate, she grabbed her things, knowing that Davis wanted her to leave just as much as she wanted to go. She plucked open the door, stuck her chin out defiantly, and smiled at him brightly. "Good morning, Davis, I'll just be on my way then."

Clearly, Davis wasn't expecting her defiance or the arrogant way she spoke to him. He had probably expected a mess of tears and pleas.

Grace refused to give him the pleasure. She knew that once she was in the stagecoach she would probably fall apart, but she wouldn't do it in front of Davis or his judgmental mother.

"I uh... best of luck for your journey then," Davis stammered in surprise.

Grace nodded. "Best of luck with finding your next trophy wife. I hope she is as unpleasant as she is beautiful. I hope she judges you by the same measure you judge her and I truly hope that you will find no joy together."

Grace knew she was being rude, but she didn't care. Davis Stone had kicked her to the side of the dirt road as if she was no better than a beggar. He deserved her wrath.

She climbed into the stagecoach, relieved to be rid of Davis and his mother, and didn't even bother to look back as the stagecoach began to move.

As soon as they reached the edge of town, she allowed the tears to fall. She didn't cry for Davis or the life she wouldn't have, instead, she cried for

all the people she had judged in the past. She cried for all the horrible things she had whispered to her friends about other girls and she cried for not having the courage to go back to Boston to apologize to them in person.

Somewhere between Meadow Views and Waterfall, the crying subsided. Grace couldn't help but wonder if Davis's treatment of her hadn't been God's way of punishing her. Perhaps God had known that Grace wouldn't realize the errors of her way unless she experienced the same judgment.

Right there and then she promised to become a better person. She vowed never to judge again, to always be kind, and to accept that true beauty came from within. Even a handsome man like Davis Stone could be ugly when his heart was ugly.

A heart that was putrid with hate, vanity, and selfishness.

"Mountain Falls coming up in the distance," the stagecoach driver called from his seat.

Grace turned and looked out the window, grateful to see the familiar town come into view. She had only visited it once with her parents over Angel's wedding, but even once had been enough for it to feel welcoming to her now.

For a moment she regretted that she hadn't had the time to let her sister know she was coming, but she knew Angel wouldn't mind. Angel would be happy to see her, regardless of her new scar or the circumstances.

The stagecoach driver stopped in town and came around to the door. "Here you are, miss."

Grace smiled. "Thank you. Might I be so forward as to ask you to continue for another mile out of town? My sister's ranch is there. I just can't imagine walking all that way with all my luggage."

The driver offered her a toothless grin. "I'll drive you anywhere you want, Miss, but it's extra. Mr. Stone only paid me to bring you here."

Grace considered what little money she had left and shook her head. "I'll be fine, thank you."

She climbed out of the stagecoach and waited for the driver to set her

things down. It would be a long challenging mile, but she'd make it. She wasn't about to beg a stagecoach driver for a favor, especially not one who would have the pleasure of relaying it to Davis Stone.

She watched as the stage coach drove away and let out a quiet sigh. She was only a mile from her destination, but she had a feeling the worst was yet to come. Glancing at the steam trunk and the carpet bag, she realized it would take her hours but she was up for the challenge.

She began walking, stopping every few yards to rest her arms that ached from dragging her luggage before she set off again.

About half a mile down the road she heard hooves clip-clop behind her. They slowed until the horse finally came to a standstill beside her.

"Are you lost, miss?" the man asked from the seat of the wagon.

Feeling tired, angry, and heartbroken, Grace wasn't in the mood to be friendly or to hide her scar. She looked up at the man without even attempting to tilt her scar away from him. "No, I'm not lost. I'm exactly where I need to be, or a half-mile from it. Thank you."

The man held up his hands with a smile. "Then I'm sorry I bothered you. I'm headin' in that direction myself if you'd like a ride?"

Grace wanted to be proud but she was exhausted. "Are you passing Mountain Falls Ranch?"

The man's smile widened, not a hint of a grimace in sight as he met her gaze. "Just so happens that's where I'm headed. I'm Cooper Taylor, ranch hand at Mountain Falls. You know the Scotts?"

Grace nodded. "I'm Angel's sister. Mind helping me with my luggage?"

The man jumped off the wagon and after loading her luggage, he helped her up. "Cooper," he introduced, holding out his hand.

Grace shook it lightly. "Grace Jones."

He took the reins and called to the horse. Grace glanced at him with curiosity. He was the first person she had met who didn't frown or look horrified at the sight of her scar. He simply didn't react to it all.

Perhaps he hadn't seen it, she reasoned as the ranch house came into view.

A quiet peace settled over her shoulders as if everything would be all right now that she had arrived.

She let out a quiet sigh and felt a smile curve the corners of her mouth. Angel would know what to do, Angel would take her in and Angel wouldn't care about her scar.

Just like the man beside her.

The past few days washed over her bringing back all the emotions that had pummeled her. She tried her best to hold them back, but as Angel came rushing out of the house with a look of happy surprise, the flood gates simply opened.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 16 MAY 1896

Angel had been standing by the window doing the dishes when she'd seen Cooper return from town. At first, she had thought Brandy was with him but as the wagon drew closer, she couldn't help but recognize the unique shade of her sister's hair.

Curious and confused, she had stepped outside, but nothing could've prepared her for the sight of her sister bawling on the wagon. She ran towards the wagon, climbing up on Grace's side and wrapping her arms around her sister before she turned to Cooper. "What did you do?"

Cooper held up his hands. "Nothin'. Gave her a ride from 'bout a half-mile back. She was fine until a minute ago."

"Go fetch Travis," Angel demanded as she held her sister.

Grace wept loudly, her tears soaking through Angel's dress as she refused to let her sister go. There would be time for questions later, but right now all her sister needed was to know she was there.

She was safe.

She was with family.

The last Angel had heard, Grace was traveling to Meadow Views to become the wife of the future mayor. She had no idea what had happened, but clearly, her sister was devastated.

When the tears finally subsided, she pulled back and searched her sister's eyes. It was hard not to notice the jagged scar that Grace had written to her about. Although it marred the one side of her face, Grace was still the most beautiful person Angel knew. "What happened, Sister, are you hurt?"

Grace shook her head. "I'm not hurt."

"Thank the Lord. Let's get you inside, I'll make you some tea and you can tell me what happened," Angel said taking control.

Travis had quietly removed Grace's luggage and taken it into the ranch house.

Together Grace and Angel walked up to the house. Angel didn't let go of her sister's shoulders once. She wanted to protect her sister against whatever had made her so emotional, but she knew it was probably already too late.

She sat Grace down at the kitchen table while she quickly put on a fresh pot of tea. As soon as the time the tea was brewed, she joined Grace with a questioning look. "Aren't you supposed to be in Meadow Views?"

Travis walked into the kitchen, glancing at his wife for permission to join them before he took a seat.

Grace nodded. "Yes, I was..."

"If you'd rather I leave," Travis offered.

Grace shook her head. "No, it's all right, you can stay."

Angel smiled at her husband from across the table, knowing that he would offer support in any way he could. She had come to Waterfall to become a teacher, marrying Scott as an instrument to make her dreams a reality.

Instead, she had fallen in love with the most wonderful man. She only had to look at her sister to know that Grace hadn't been so lucky.

GRACE WAS grateful she was at Angel's home, but she knew they expected an explanation. She looked up and met Travis's gaze, waiting for him to flinch. Instead, he offered her a welcome smile.

"It's good to see you, Grace." Travis's smile broadened.

He didn't mention her scar, didn't focus on it, and didn't seem repulsed by it.

It felt strange to be looked at like a normal person again, Grace thought gratefully. She drew in a deep breath and began to tell them what had transpired over the last twenty-four hours. When she was finally done, it was

Travis who spoke first.

“If I wasn’t a reasonable man, I would’ve headed to Meadow Views right now to give that fool some scars of his own.”

Grace chuckled through her tears. “Thank you, but he simply isn’t worth your trouble.”

Angel nodded. “He isn’t. But I agree, that fool doesn’t deserve you. What a selfish and rude man.”

“He wasn’t in the letters...” Grace trailed off.

“Well, you’re here now and that’s all that matters. We’re happy to have you,” Angel said reaching for her sister’s hand.

Grace nodded gratefully.

“Angel is right, you can stay as long as you want. We have more than enough room,” Travis agreed.

Grace couldn’t help but feel relieved. She had known her sister wouldn’t turn her away, but she hadn’t known she would be welcomed with open arms by Travis. “Thank you.”

Jessica, Travis’s mother, joined them in the kitchen. “Grace, isn’t it? How nice to see you again.”

Grace smiled up at Angel’s mother-in-law who had little Jacob on her hip. Her nephew had grown so much, it was clear that ranch life was good for them. “It’s nice to see you, too, Mrs. Scott. And you, little Jacob.”

“Please, it’s Jessica,” Mrs. Scott walked closer and gave Grace a one-armed hug. She smiled up at the older woman and waited for her to flinch, but she just held Jacob out with a smile. “Would you like to play with your nephew?”

Grace laughed as she accepted Jacob.

A few hours ago she thought she would never be accepted or loved again, and now here she was in her sister’s kitchen feeling like a normal person again.

No one had reacted to her scar, not even little Jacob.

For the first time since the accident, Grace felt like she could be herself again. She breathed in the scent of little boy, sunshine, and dust and thanked the Lord quietly that He'd led her here.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 2 JUNE 1896

“*A*ngel, I’m bored. I can’t just sit here all day and watch you and Jessica and Travis and all his ranch hands work while I’m doing nothing. You have to let me help,” Grace complained over breakfast.

Her sister cocked a brow and shook her head. “You’re a guest. Guests don’t work.”

“Guests also ask to come and visit; they don’t just show up. Guests also usually have an idea for how long they’re going to visit,” Grace replied with frustration.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. We enjoy having you here,” Travis commented from his side of the table.

“I know, but I want to feel I’m at least pulling my weight. Between Angel and your ma, there aren’t any house chores they let me help with. Except for watching Jacob now and then, I’m at loose ends.” Grace sighed heavily. She turned to her sister with a pleading look. “I already told you I can’t go back to Boston just yet. Mother and Father will pity me and everyone will stare at me again. I like it here and I’m grateful I can visit until I know what my next step is, but I won’t become a burden. If you don’t let me help, I’ll simply have to leave.... And go back to Boston...”

Angel and Travis shared a look. Without saying a word it was as if they were having an entire conversation. Grace couldn’t help but wish to one day had a relationship like that. Travis shrugged; Angel gave a nod. Travis sighed, Angel smiled and finally they both turned to Grace.

“Right,” Travis said with a sigh. “If you really feel you want to help, we can do with some help with the horses. As you said, Ma and Angel have got the house covered, and the ranch hands are dealing with the herd, but Cooper is a little short on help when it comes to the horses. He’s breaking in a few

over the coming weeks, so if you could help with feeding, watering, and maybe just leading horses, it would be a great help.”

Grace had never worked with a horse in her entire life, but surely feeding and watering them couldn't be that hard. She could carry a pail of water, she thought with determination. “Great. When can I start?”

Angel laughed. “Is tomorrow too late?”

“Yes,” Grace insisted. “Can I go take a look after lunch? Then I'll be more prepared in the morning?”

“You're welcome to. But Grace,” Travis's voice held a hint of caution. “When it comes to the horses, just remember that Cooper is King. No one knows them as he does, so if you don't like being told what to do, then you might not want to do it at all.”

Grace laughed. “I'm not that stubborn.”

Angel's laughter begged to disagree.

“All right, I can be stubborn, but I won't be. Cooper is King and I'm just the hand that helps him.”

“Perfect.” Travis rewarded her with a smile.

COOPER TAYLOR HAD ONLY STARTED on the ranch a couple of months before. Travis Scott had brought him in to help break in new horses and to oversee the breeding. Cooper had worked horses all his life and simply loved it. When Travis approached him, he didn't hesitate to join the Mountain Falls Ranch. As one of the biggest ranches in the area, Cooper had known it would be a step up from the small ranch where he'd been before.

“Cooper, just the man I'm lookin' for,” Travis called out as he came down from the porch with Grace by his side.

Apart from meeting her on the day that she'd arrived, Cooper hadn't spoken a single word to Angel's sister. She was really pretty and Cooper usually found himself a little mute around pretty women. Not even the scar

on her face could detract from her beauty. In fact, he hardly noticed it at all.

“I’ve got good news for you,” Travis said as he approached him. “Grace here has offered to help you with the horses. Anything you need, she’s your woman.”

Cooper smiled at Grace, excited at the opportunity to spend time with her. “That’s mighty kind of you, miss.”

“It’s Grace, please,” she said flashing him a heart-stopping smile.

Cooper swallowed. “Grace.”

“Great, Cooper, you show her around this afternoon, and tomorrow she’ll start falling in with the work,” Travis said before he glanced towards the hills where the sun was shining bright. “I’ve got to check on the cattle, but we’ll catch up again later,” Travis said to Grace before he turned and walked away.

Cooper turned to Grace with a handsome grin. “Ready to meet some horses?”

Her laughter was like a healing balm to his soul. “I can’t wait!”

For the rest of the day, Grace followed Cooper around the ranch. She was curious and asked all types of questions, but Cooper didn’t mind. His pa had always said an inquisitive soul is a blessing. He had been afraid that she would be scared of the horses, but she surprised him by touching each horse. She rubbed their flanks or told them they were pretty; something he did all the time.

The horses basked under her attention, some even nudging her for more attention when they turned to leave.

By the end of the afternoon, Cooper found himself realizing two things as Grace headed towards the ranch house.

Firstly, she wasn’t afraid to work or to get her hands dirty. Regardless of her pretty clothes or striking beauty, Grace was an eager worker.

Secondly, he realized that he was going to have a much harder time focusing on his horses because for some reason he found himself focusing more on Grace than he’d ever focused on anything in his life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 18 JUNE 1896

“Where’s Grace?” Jessica asked as she joined Angel in the kitchen.

Angel was busy cooking dinner but from the woodstove, she had a clear view of Grace out in the yard with the horses. “There, she’s still helping Cooper.”

“Still, but it’s almost seven o’clock,” Jessica said.

Angel nodded. “She seems to enjoy it. I honestly didn’t think she would.”

Jessica laughed. “Family has a way of surprising us.”

“No, it’s not that.” Angel hesitated for a moment trying to put her thoughts into words. Although she and Jessica had gotten off to a bad start, they had become friends, more so than just mother and daughter-in-law.

When she finally had the right words, she began to explain. “From a very young age, Grace was very concerned with her appearance.”

“There’s nothing wrong with taking care of one’s appearance,” Jessica commented.

“No, there isn’t. But Grace... let’s just say that she had little interest other than her appearance. Whereas I read and Faith played the piano, Grace would spend all day trying on different dresses, different hats, different hairstyles... For her, her only concern was what other people thought of her. She always wanted to be the prettiest girl in the room, the most fashionable, the most admired...” Angel sighed. “I’m not saying my sister was vain or shallow, I’m just saying that...”

“She was a little self-absorbed?” Jessica offered.

“Yes, I guess that’s the right word. She was quiet – always judging people by their clothes, their hair, their general appearance. Of course, it never really bothered me and Faith because we understood her. But after the

accident...” Angel sighed heavily and shook her head. “Grace’s beauty was everything to her... when that tree branch scarred her face, she wrote to me that it ripped away her life. As if her life depended on her beauty. So I can only imagine that when she arrived in Meadow Views only to be turned away by a man who she thought loved her for who she was...”

“She was shattered.” Jessica nodded. “I can imagine. It must be hard for someone who had been so stylish and admired to suddenly lose all her admirers.”

Angel smiled sadly. “Yes, it was. But now... since she’s been here, it’s as if she’s changed. She’s wearing riding pants, a ratty shirt, and a sweat-soaked hat.” Angel laughed, shaking her head. “The Grace I used to know wouldn’t have been caught dead looking like that.”

“Perhaps she needed to learn that appearance is only skin deep. Just look how happy she is on that horse, she’s simply glowing,” Jessica said with a warm smile.

“She is and perhaps you’re right. I’m just happy that she’s no longer self-conscious. She’s truly changed for the better and she finally seems happy again. She hasn’t really been happy since the accident. My parents wrote to me often, telling me how concerned they were that we’d never see the ‘old’ Grace again.”

“It seems to me we’re looking at the new and improved Grace,” Jessica said touching Angel’s shoulder.

THE HORSE NICKERED LOUDLY and Grace began to laugh. “I know you only want to turn to the left, Teardrop, but that isn’t always possible.”

“She likes you,” Cooper said from the side of the ring.

Grace nodded. “Because I like her.”

Teardrop had been broken in a little over two weeks ago. Now that she allowed riders on her back, Grace had the privilege of teaching her manners.

When Cooper had asked her to climb on a horse the very first day of working with him, she'd thought she'd be six feet underground by sunset. But with his patience and skill, she quickly learned how to ride.

Something Grace never thought she'd enjoy. Riding was for men, not for women of class. And yet, Grace enjoyed working and riding with the horses more than she'd enjoyed anything in her life.

It had been a little more than a month since she had arrived at Mountain Falls and during that time, she had learned so much. She had learned to work with horses, she had learned to cook with Angel and her mother and she had learned that not everyone judged you by your scars.

Here on the ranch it was as if no one even noticed her scars. As if she could just be herself.

Grace allowed her body to move with the horse as the cantered around the ring and laughter bubbled to her throat. The person she was now was a far cry from the person she had been before her accident. Here she didn't care about what she wore or how her hair was braided because the horses depended on her.

Horses didn't care if your face was scarred, your riding pants were a little scuffed, or if you hadn't bothered to braid your hair at all. They simply cared that you were there.

Grace's eyes skimmed over Cooper as she passed him by. In a way, that applied to Cooper as well. Although they had been working side by side for weeks, he hadn't once stared at her scar or ask her about it. Cooper was unlike any man Grace had ever met. He was always kind, always friendly, and always ready to tease to compliment an achievement.

She enjoyed working with him and she enjoyed learning from him.

For the first time in her life, she respected and appreciated someone for who they were and not what they wore.

She didn't care in the least if Cooper's flannel shirt was a little faded by the sun or that his hat was stained with sweat. He didn't care about the latest

fashions or even have a big house, in fact, he lived with the other ranch hands, and yet she liked him more for it.

Cooper simply was who he was without making any excuses.

And to Grace, he was the kindest man she'd ever met. The way he treated the horses, the patience he showed while teaching her...

Grace thanked the Lord every night that He had opened her eyes to look past appearance and instead appreciate the person behind it.

"Come on, time to head on in for dinner," Cooper called out.

Grace pulled on the reins and stopped. She slipped one leg over towards the other one and slid down to the ground, almost losing her footing. Cooper's hands were around her waist in a second.

"Are you all right," Cooper asked, concerned.

Grace laughed at her own clumsiness. "I'm fine." She looked up and met Cooper's gaze and felt as if her whole world had just shifted.

For a moment her heart began to race even as her knees grew weak.

Her breath caught as she stepped back. "Thank you."

She glanced at Cooper with curiosity. She'd danced with numerous men in her life, but she'd never felt her entire body and soul respond in this way when she stood in a man's arms.

Suddenly, Grace wondered, what else there was about Cooper she hadn't noticed.

CHAPTER 18



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 28 JULY 1896

Cooper's only love had been horses for as long as he could remember. There was no animal gentler, kinder, or braver than a horse in his opinion.

He loved breeding them, training them, and watching them become trusty steeds.

In Cooper's mind, he trusted no human like he trusted his horses. A horse couldn't lie, it couldn't deceive you and a horse repaid kindness with obedience.

It had been his passion and his life's blood until Grace Jones had stepped into the ring with him.

From that first day, he had taken her around the ranch, Cooper had felt a curiosity grow inside him about the beautiful woman from Boston. While he taught her to ride, to train, and to care for the horses, that curiosity had turned to intrigue.

He never would've imagined the lost socialite he picked up on the side of the road would come to reign over his thoughts for almost every second of every day. After six weeks with Grace working by his side, Cooper was tired of denying it.

He had fallen head over heels in love with Grace.

The only problem was, that he would never be good enough for a woman like her. Grace came from a wealthy background; she was used to the finer things in life. She would never open her heart to a ranch hand that lived hand to mouth. One who found more pleasure in a horseback ride than a dance. A man who preferred to work with his hands and be repaid with a horse's loyalty than a man with a bank account fit to court a queen.

Until now, he had tried to deny the attraction. He had tried to convince

himself that in time the feelings would go away, but he was helpless to the calling of his heart. There was something about Grace he could no longer deny.

That something was that she had stolen his heart.

When he'd held her briefly in his arms more than a month ago, he'd known he wanted to hold her for the rest of his life.

But Grace was more besotted with the horses than she was with the trainer, Cooper realized as she led a foal around the ring. The foal was barely a year old, too young to break in, but Grace had decided there wouldn't be any harm in gaining its trust while it was young.

Cooper couldn't argue with her reasoning. The chestnut foal simply adored her. Whenever Grace walked into the corral, the foal would come to her, hoping for a treat from her hand. She was spoiling the foal, Cooper knew it, but he couldn't seem to stop her.

"You are simply the most beautiful creature I've ever seen, do you know that?" Grace asked the foal in a sweet voice. "I could spend the rest of my life just watching you."

Cooper's heart swelled in his chest. "I agree." The words slipped from his mouth before he could stop himself.

Grace stopped and turn to look at him, laughter waiting in her gaze. But as soon their eyes met, he could see that she saw the attraction in his eyes. Her eyes widened, almost with fear as she watched him. For a moment the foal disappeared, the sound of cattle lowing in the fields faded and it was just them.

Cooper held her gaze, hoping he could quietly communicate how he felt about her. He was afraid that if he tried to verbalize his feelings, she might never look at him again.

After a few moments, her eyes softened and a soft smile curved her mouth. Cooper knew it wasn't a guarantee, but he couldn't help but feel as if something had changed between them. He walked towards her and first

brushed a hand over the foal's head. The foal swung his head away, making it clear he preferred Grace's touch.

Cooper laughed. "I don't blame him. But I must admit I envy him just a little."

Grace's eyes widened with surprise. It was the first time Cooper made any attempt to show Grace how he felt. Her laughter was like water to a thirsty soul. "You do, do you?"

"Being led around by a beautiful woman?" Cooper teased. "Isn't that any man's dream?"

Grace's eyes narrowed with confusion. "Are you saying I'm beautiful?"

Cooper was surprised that she seemed caught off guard by the compliment. Surely, she had looked in the mirror? Surely, she knew how strikingly beautiful she was? It was only then that Cooper realized she was thinking of her scar. He stepped a little closer, the foal not liking his proximity. But Grace dropped the lead and allowed the foal to trot to the side of the ring.

Cooper brushed a finger over her cheek, the one with the jagged scar, holding her gaze the entire time. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on, the kindest, too."

He heard her breath catch and felt his heart skip a beat. She quickly took a step back and smiled at him in an offhand way. "I've got to get on with his training."

Cooper didn't mind that she was all flushed and flustered.

That meant she had felt it as well.

The magic that was so strong between them was almost tangible.

CHAPTER 19



Grace tried her best to give Travis and Angel their privacy, retreating to her room after dinner on most nights.

But tonight she needed a little time with her sister. She wasn't sure what she was going to ask, but she knew she needed her sister's advice about Cooper Taylor. Instead of retiring to her room, she went to sit on the porch. In the distance, she could see the lights from the ranch hands' bunkhouse.

Her mind circled over and over what Cooper had said that day. Did he really mean it?

Over the last few weeks, she had come to feel more for Cooper than just respect, she had come to admire him. If she was really being honest, she was attracted to him as well.

There was something very charming about the way he talked to the horses, about the way he treated them, and about the way he looked at her. At first, Grace had tried her best to ignore the attraction. After what had happened with Davis Stone, she had vowed never to trust her feelings again. She had believed that Davis loved her with all his heart and instead he had shattered hers.

She couldn't trust the feelings she had for Cooper because, if they were wrong, she would suffer a broken heart all over again. Only this time she

knew it would be worse.

She heard the screen door open and turned to see Angel stepping out on the porch. “Mind if I join you?”

Grace smiled gratefully at her sister. “I was hoping you would.”

“Something on your mind?” Angel asked, taking a seat.

“Actually,” Grace admitted with a small smile. “There’s something on my heart.”

Angel’s soft laughter wafted in the evening breeze. “Might it be a someone? A certain ranch hand named Cooper perhaps?”

Grace turned to her sister with a look of absolute surprise. “What? How did you know?”

Angel smiled as she reached for her sister’s hand. “Because I have eyes, and because I’ve known you your whole life.”

“Oh, Angel, I thought I could ignore it, but I can’t. I like him very much and today... he likes me too,” Grace admitted.

“Then that’s wonderful news. Cooper is a good man, a hard worker, honest and caring. Travis says he’s the only person he would rely on if his life depended on it, and that’s saying a lot.” Angel encouraged her with a smile.

Grace shook her head. “That’s the problem. He’s a wonderful man but he’s... he’s a ranch hand and I’m unsightly. It can never work.”

“You stop that right this minute, you hear!” Angel snapped with a hint of anger.

Grace’s eyes widened with surprise at her sister’s tone. “But it’s true.”

Angel shook her head. “No, it isn’t true. Firstly, the fact that Cooper is a ranch hand shouldn’t even enter the equation. All your life you’ve been obsessed with how you look and what you have. Where has that gotten you?”

Grace had hoped for empathy and support; instead, it felt as if she was experiencing her sister’s wrath for the first time in her life. “I uhm...”

“Nowhere. Clothes, houses, things... money can buy all of that, but

money will never make you happy. I know you've changed. You learned a hard lesson in Meadow Falls, so why should that bother you now?" Angel demanded.

Grace shrugged "It doesn't, that's my point. I don't understand why it doesn't matter. I've always wanted to live in a beautiful home with a room just for all my designer clothing but when I look at Cooper, I don't want that. That's what is so confusing. It's like he's taken my dreams and tossed them out the window. That terrifies me!" Grace admitted.

Angel's laughter was soft as she met Grace's gaze with a smile. "That's called love."

"No, but it can't be..." Grace trailed off when Angel held up her hand.

Angel nodded. "It is and, as for your second argument... Grace, you're right, you were prettier without the scar, but now – your heart is prettier. You care more about those around you, even the horses, than for your own appearance. Everything happens for a reason and perhaps the accident, Davis Stone, coming here... perhaps it all was so that you could meet Cooper Taylor. If he likes you and you feel the same way, don't let anything stand between you. Not the dreams you used to have or the scar you despise although no one cares. Follow the love in your heart and not your love for materialistic things."

Before Grace could agree or argue, Angel stood up and yawned. "I'm going to head to bed, but I know you'll do the right thing." She reached for Grace's hand and squeezed it. "You smile when he's around, that means so much more than you can imagine."

Grace sat on the porch, utterly and completely confused.

She'd hoped her sister would convince her that her feelings for Cooper were nothing. That falling in love with a ranch hand could only lead to disaster. Instead, Angel had convinced her of something else.

When you followed your heart, nothing mattered but love.

Not money, luxury, appearance, or status.

Only a resounding feeling of love that seemed to fill your entire body with joy.

The question was, was she brave enough to follow it?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 5 AUGUST 1896

Cooper stood by the water pail, waiting for water to fill the bucket while he watched Grace ride Teardrop around the ring.

Just like Grace, the horse had come a long way in the last month. They were both comfortable in a canter, a walk, and a trot. Cooper couldn't decide if he'd ever seen a more beautiful sight than a pretty woman on a strong horse.

His heart simply melted at the sight.

It had been more than a week since he'd indirectly told Grace how he felt. Ever since then she'd been a little different. She laughed easier, smiled at him quicker, and wished him a good evening every night when he left for the bunk house.

He might just be a ranch hand with a few dollars to spare every month, but when Grace smiled at him, it made him feel like the wealthiest man alive.

“Why do I get a feelin’ you ain’t standing there gawkin’ at the horse?”

Travis’s voice startled Cooper. He turned to his boss and friend and laughed. “That obvious, huh?”

Travis shrugged with a knowing grin. “Takes one to see one.”

“See what?” Cooper asked, momentarily baffled.

Travis slapped him on the back. “A man in love. You’ve got it even worse than I did. These Jones sisters sure have a way of making a man fall to his knees, it seems.”

Cooper was about to deny it but finally just sighed with a nod. “Even so, Cooper, you have all this to offer a woman. I’ve got the clothes on my back and a weekly wage. A woman like Grace deserves so much more than I can ever give her.”

Travis shook his head. “A woman deserves a man who can love her,

protect her and cherish her. That's all she needs. The rest of it... it just falls into place."

Travis whistled as he walked away, leaving Cooper to muddle through his words. He knew Travis was right but he couldn't help but doubt that he would never be good enough for a woman like Grace. He turned and found her saddling a second horse. Confused, he walked towards her with a pail of water.

"Going somewhere?" Cooper asked, confused as joined her.

Grace shrugged. "I've been riding Teardrop in this ring for more than a month. I think both of us are ready to go for a ride somewhere else."

Cooper shook his head. "You have no idea what she'll do once she's not in the ring. It's dangerous."

"You're right," Grace agreed with a charming smile. "That's why you're coming with."

Cooper was about to argue but decided against it. He could think of a million things he had to do and only one thing he wanted to do.

He wanted to spend time with Grace.

He set down the pail of water and swung into the saddle. "Well, are you coming?"

Her laughter made his heart skip a beat as she leaped into the saddle. "Let's go."

He started with a walk, making sure Teardrop wasn't going to dart towards the hills as soon as they left the yard. Slowly, he worked his way up to a trot before he set off in a canter.

Teardrop and Grace remained by his side the entire time. Both horse and woman adept and excited to explore new territory. Deciding to test their skills, Cooper headed towards a gradual incline that would lead them to the top of one of the smaller hills.

Just as he had taught her, Grace leaned forward as the horse slowly made its way up the hill. When they reached the top, her laughter was contagious.

“That was amazing!”

Cooper climbed off his horse and tied it to a tree before he moved toward Grace. He didn't ask, he simply held out his hands inviting her into his arms.

She hesitated for a moment before her eyes softened and her smile widened. She slid into his arms, resting her hands on his shoulders. “Thank you.”

Cooper smiled with a nod before he went to tie Teardrop to the tree alongside his horse. He walked over to where Grace was admiring the view, feeling honored to stand by her side.

“It seemed like you enjoyed it?” Cooper asked.

Grace nodded. “All my life I thought I belonged in a fancy house with fancy clothes and now... here... I realize that all of that is just things. I can't help but feel that this is where I belong. It probably doesn't make any sense...” she chuckled self-consciously.

Cooper turned to her and framed her face. “Of course it makes sense because you belong with me.”

Her eyes narrowed with curiosity. “Do you really feel that way?”

Cooper nodded. “Since the first moment I met you.”

“I... I need time to think about this, Cooper. I like you but I... I'm not sure about the future...” Grace admitted honestly.

Cooper felt a little crushed, but he didn't dare show it. He'd rather she be honest than lead him on and then break his heart. He reached for her hand and smiled into her eyes. “It's a good thing I'm a patient man. I'll wait until you are sure.”

Not another word was said. Instead, they stood on the hill overlooking the valleys and the ranch house in the distance. Grace might have her doubts, but Cooper knew that in time she would realize that she did belong here.

With him.

He vowed to pray for just that.

CHAPTER 21



“*I*’ve got a couple of things to do in town. While I’m gone you can start working with the foal. Just remember to pay attention to its ears. A horse tells you everythin’ it’s goin’ to do before doing it, you just gotta look and listen,” Cooper explained as he saddled his own horse.

Grace nodded, having heard the mantra numerous times since she had started working with Cooper. After their outride yesterday, she couldn’t help but feel a little more excited about the future. Her sister had been right, standing on top of that hill with Cooper’s hand in her hand, she had felt wealthier than she had ever felt before.

“Why don’t I go with you?” Grace asked, wanting to spend more time with him.

Cooper shook his head. “Naw, it ain’t a good idea. I’ll be quicker if I go on my own.”

“Teardrop and I can keep up. Come on, I haven’t been to town since I arrived. Usually it’s Angel and Jessica who go. I can help you with whatever you need to do and we can be back sooner?” Grace asked with a pleading look.

“Look, to be honest, I’d rather you stay.” Cooper shrugged as he slid the horse’s bit into its mouth.

Grace was about to try one last time when she realized h his reason for

not wanting to take her with him. It was as if someone had slapped her without even touching her. Her hand flew to her face to cover her scar.

“You’re ashamed of being seen with me, aren’t you?” she asked quietly.

Tears welled in her eyes as she waited for Cooper to answer.

Cooper turned to her with a confused look. “What?”

“You’d rather I stay because you don’t want people to see you with a monster. You don’t want anyone to know that we’re... we’re... close...” her voice cracked, feeling humiliated and heartbroken.

Cooper turned to her, facing her full on. “Do you really think that of me?”

Grace nodded. “Out here on the ranch where I have family, you don’t mind. As long as no one else knows, right? I thought you were different. I thought my scar didn’t matter; clearly I was wrong,” she snapped, allowing her temper to overwhelm her tears.

Cooper’s jaw clenched as he took a step toward her. “Your scar has never bothered me; I hardly even darn well notice it. I haven’t asked where you got it, because I don’t care. I’ve never cared!” Cooper said in a hard voice. “But you need to keep one thing in mind, Grace, if you don’t want people treating you differently over your scar, don’t use it as an excuse whenever you don’t get your way.”

Grace took a step back. She’d never seen Cooper look so angry or felt so offended in her entire life. “I don’t use it as an excuse.”

“Then what did you just do. I say I got things to do and you translate that as I’m ashamed to be seen with you. Your scar is your issue, not mine. It doesn’t bother me, but clearly it bothers you. Don’t make your insecurities my fault.”

With that Cooper hopped into the saddle before setting off at a canter.

Grace stood there for a moment, unable to move or to speak. Just a short while ago she had thought she might actually have a future with Cooper, but now she wasn’t sure she knew him at all.

She didn’t bother to fetch Teardrop or to do any of her chores. Instead,

she set off for the hill where they had spent time together the day before. By the time she reached the top, she was gasping for air, her lungs burning even as her legs shook from the exertion.

Tears streamed down her face as she stood on the hill overlooking the valley. Finally, she looked up at the sky and began to pray. *“Dear Lord, please, why do You punish me so? Why do You make me fall in love, only to have my heart ripped from my chest? I didn’t ask for this scar and yet it seems to revolt everyone I care for. Help me Lord, please help me to harden my heart against love forever...”*

She cried until she had no more tears to cry. When her tears were dry, she felt empty, broken, and torn. Like a vessel that would never carry anything but shame about the way she looked.

This time she couldn’t run to Angel, and Boston wasn’t an option. For some reason, a bible verse came to mind. One in the book of Peter she had happened upon just after her accident. A frown creased her brow as she remembered the verse.

What matters is not your outer appearance – the styling of your hair, the jewelry you wear, the cut of your clothes, but your inner disposition. Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle, gracious kind that God delights in.

That verse had brought her through so many challenges after her accident but now, not even that bible verse could console her. It didn’t matter how pristine her inner beauty was, on the outside she feared she would always look like a monster.

And even if they loved that monster, no one wanted to be seen with one.

COOPER HAD NEVER CARED about Grace’s scar, that was why it had angered him so quickly when she had accused him of not wanting to be seen with her. If it was up to him, he would parade her through town, with pride and joy.

But instead, he’d handled it wrong.

He only now realized that although her scar didn't bother him, she was clearly very insecure over it. He should've handled the situation better. He should've assured her that he didn't care about her scar, instead he accused her and had lashed out at her in a temper.

He leaned forward, keeping his head low against the horse's head as he raced towards town. He was furious with himself for saying the wrong thing. But he couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth.

The truth about why he was going to town.

The truth about why she couldn't go with him.

Cooper didn't have a lot to his name, but he did have his mother's wedding ring. A beautiful emerald ring that had traveled with his parents from Ireland when they had immigrated to America as newlyweds.

His father had spent his entire life as a horse trainer, working on another man's ranch. His mother, fell deathly ill after contracting Scarlet fever when Cooper was only sixteen. They had buried his mother on another man's ranch and all Cooper had to remember her by was her ring.

When he'd lost his father a few years later, Cooper had left the ranch with just the clothes on his back and the only possession he valued.

A possession he had refused to sell even when he had no food, nowhere to stay, and nothing to live off of.

He wanted to go into town alone to retrieve it from safe keeping. Then he wanted to stop by the merchandise store to buy a new hat; a woman's hat.

Because when he proposed to Grace, he wanted to ask her with his mother's ring and a new hat, one that would always shield her from the sun in just the way he wanted to shield her from harm.

Some might think him foolish but until a few minutes ago, it had seemed like a perfectly romantic proposal.

After their recent fight, Cooper couldn't help but doubt she'd even say yes.

Regardless, he continued to ride into town, praying that God would help

her forgive him and that Grace would finally understand that he loved her.
Regardless of her scars.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22



Sleep wouldn't come and ease her broken heart.

Grace rolled over in bed wishing there was a way to forget about Cooper. To forget about her scar and to simply cease to exist.

Because right now she didn't feel as if there was a reason for her to exist at all. Regardless of what the bible said, people, judged her by her appearance.

Even Cooper did.

Another tear slipped over her cheek as she hugged her pillow close. She had not told Angel what had happened, she had simply excused herself from dinner and retired to her bedroom. She couldn't stand the thought of telling her sister that another man had rejected her because of the way she looked.

In the dark, the moment she lifted her hand and traced her finger over the jagged scar, the sound of music drifted up to her window. Confused, Grace lay back and listened to the fiddle play. She glanced at the pocket watch on her bedside, wondering who would be making music so close to the ranch house at this time of night.

When a man's voice joined in, Grace felt her heart skip a beat.

She recognized that voice, the cadence of it, and the tone.

It was Cooper.

Curious, she listened as he sang *Home on the Range* to the

accompaniment of the fiddle. She didn't want to step up to the window, afraid he'd stop or see her scars and turn away. So she sat on her bed and listened as he sang.

When her door opened and Angel came in, she smiled at her sister with a loving look. "You're supposed to light a candle."

Grace frowned. "Why?"

"It's a Mexican tradition. If a man serenades you, it means he loves you. You have to light a candle if you love him back. We've had many seasonal ranch hands come through..." Angel explained as she handed Grace a candle and a box of matches.

"But today... we fought..." Grace explained in the darkness.

"And even after you fought, he is still standing at your window at midnight, singing to you." Angel left her with a smile.

When Cooper reached the final few notes, Grace prayed she wasn't making another mistake. Before she lit the candle.

Light permeated the room before she heard the resounding cry of joy coming from outside. "Yeehaw!"

Laughter bubbled from her throat as she rushed downstairs and out the front door. Before she could even reach the porch steps, Cooper came around the corner. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry we fought. I was wrong, please forgive me."

Grace laughed, her heart singing with joy at the sight of him. "You're forgiven."

"No, don't forgive me just yet. Let me explain. I didn't want you to come with for a reason, not because of your scar. Your scar doesn't matter to me, you're beautiful, timeless to me," Cooper said reaching for her hand. "I didn't want you to come because I wanted to surprise you."

"Surprise me?" Grace asked, confused.

Cooper jogged down the porch and around the corner before he returned with a brand-new hat. But instead of handing her the hat, he got down on one

knee. “I wanted to go alone because there was something important I needed to fetch. I wanted to retrieve my mother’s wedding ring from safe keeping to ask for your hand in marriage.”

Grace gasped as Cooper showed her the ring in his hand. “Cooper?”

“It was never about your scars; it was about proposing to you the right way,” Cooper explained.

“Propose?” Grace asked feeling a little faint with surprise.

Cooper nodded with a loving smile. “I planned it going something like this. Grace, you walked into my life like a fresh spring breeze. You stole my heart with your very first smile. I’ve come to love you with everything that I am and everything that I might ever be. I might never be wealthy, I might never have the social status you have, but I will always love you with all my heart. I ask you to wear this ring as a symbol of my love.”

Tears welled in Grace’s eyes as Cooper continued.

“I want you to accept this hat to protect you from the sun, and accept that I will protect you from anything and anyone else. I never knew what my future looked like, Grace. I still don’t know. I just know it has to be with you....”

Grace fell to her knees and curled her arms around Cooper’s neck. “Yes, yes. I’m so sorry about today. You’re right, my scar has never mattered to you. I blamed you for my own insecurities, it will never happen again.”

Cooper held her tight before he pulled back and met her gaze. “Can I slip my ring on your finger now?”

With laughter bubbling from her throat and her heart overflowing with love, Grace accepted Cooper’s proposal.

She didn’t care about possessions, wealth, or even status, all that mattered was that Cooper Taylor loved her. That made her richer than any aspiration she could’ve ever had before.

EPILOGUE



OceanofPDF.com

MOUNTAIN FALLS RANCH – 10 OCTOBER 1897

Rose stopped crying and allowed her eyes to finally flutter closed when Grace began to sing *A Home on the Range*. Where some mothers sang lullabies or others hummed, it was the only song Grace and Cooper used to soothe their newborn daughter when she was upset.

She rocked back and forth in the rocking chair, feeling content as the sun sank behind the hills in the distance. The colors of fire opal and amethyst blended in the sky as the sun's last rays kissed daylight goodbye.

The sound of hooves thundering towards the house made Grace's smile broaden.

Cooper was home.

Although they lived a short distance from the main ranch house, it was just far enough for both families to have privacy. Angel and Travis had surprised them with a home of their own as a wedding gift.

It was not big, but Grace didn't care. Her two-bedroom house with a large porch and woodstove was all she ever needed in the world.

That, and Cooper, of course.

She watched as he unsaddled his horse and put him out to pasture before he walked towards the house with what Grace had come to think of as a cowboy gait. In Boston, men walked around like peacocks, flashing their money and their expensive suits.

But her husband walked with purpose, not wasting a single ounce of energy by displaying his feathers. Instead, he reminded her of a stealthy mountain lion, ready to pounce at any moment to protect his cub and his wife, of course.

"How are my two favorite girls?" Cooper asked as he walked onto the porch. He dropped a kiss on his daughter's forehead before doing the same

with his wife.

“Just dandy. How was your day?” Grace asked as he sat beside her in the matching rocking chair.

“Busy, that foal of yours misses you. He’s becoming quite the problem without havin’ you around.” Cooper chuckled.

“Perhaps you can drive me up in the buggy tomorrow to visit with Angel, then I’ll spoil him a little,” Grace suggested.

Cooper nodded before he pulled off his hat. “Who would’ve ever thought pickin’ up a stray woman on the side of the road would result in this.”

Grace laughed and shook her head. “Who would’ve ever thought being chased out of Meadow Views by the future mayor would have me find you?”

Rose was fast asleep as Cooper reached for Grace’s hand. “God knew. He planned this all along. Threw us a few curveballs, a few balls of knotted twine...”

“And a branch,” Grace added gesturing to her scar.

“And a branch, but he knew that when we managed to get through it all, we would be sitting on our own porch watching the sunset with our beautiful baby girl.” Cooper sighed contently.

Grace explored the silhouette of her husband’s face and wondered if a heart could simply explode with love.

It was still hard to believe that on the same day she had thought she would never find happiness, Cooper proposed to her at midnight beneath a full moon. She had never given her scar much thought again after that day.

Cooper had been right. Just because it bothered her, didn’t mean it bothered anyone else.

Especially not anyone that mattered.

Their wedding had taken place only a month later, right there in the fields beside Angel’s home. Her parents and Faith had come all the way from Boston to attend. At first, her parents had been a little surprised to learn that Grace was marrying a ranch hand, especially given her penchant for the finer

things in life, but they had given their blessing only minutes after meeting Cooper.

The couple had moved into their new home a month later, grateful and excited about the future that awaited them. Neither had thought their future would soon be blessed with a beautiful baby girl.

As much as he was the perfect husband, Cooper was a wonderful father. He was patient and helpful and eagerly took care of their two-month-old daughter.

Now when Grace thought of Mitchell and Davis Stone, she knew she hadn't missed out on something, instead, she had been preparing for something. She had been preparing to find the right man, one who loved her regardless of her scars, to show her what true love really was.

Just as Grace had learned that true value wasn't in material items like clothing or possessions or even social status.

True value was in faith, family, and love.

She smiled lovingly at her husband and knew that she was wealthier than Mitchell and Davis Stone would ever be.

Because she had a hat to shield her from the sun, and a husband who loved her to shield her from anything else.

“What are you smiling about?” Cooper asked when a soft chuckle escaped her.

Grace shrugged. “My hat.”

“Your hat?” Cooper asked confused.

Grace nodded. “Rose will need one when she starts riding.”

Cooper smiled, reading between the lines. “And for everything else, she'll have us.”

FAITH'S HEART



OceanofPDF.com

THE BRIDES OF MOUNTAIN FALLS

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



“*I*’m so glad you agreed to come,” Annie Brook, Faith’s best friend, said as soon as Faith stepped through the doors.

Faith’s eyes darted around the room. Almost every young person in society was in attendance. Even as Annie weaved her arm through Faith’s elbow, Faith felt nerves coil in her belly. Ever since she could remember she had been overwhelmed in social situations.

She dropped her gaze to the floor, feeling her cheeks burn hot and red. “Annie, I shouldn’t be here.”

“Of course you should be here. You’re young, you’re pretty, and what better way to catch the eye of a handsome man with reputation and wealth?” Annie insisted on dragging Faith further into the room.

The ballroom was brimming with people. Faith never attended such social occasions. She preferred the safety of her home and the company of her piano to the music, voices, and laughter that surrounded her now.

Her parents and her sisters insisted it was simply because she was shy and that she would overcome it with age. But at the age of twenty, Faith was still painfully shy. Whenever she stepped into a room like this one, she couldn’t help but feel as if everyone was looking at her. As if she didn’t belong there.

Which was exactly how she felt.

“I think I should just go home. You don’t want to spend the whole night

dragging me along. I'm awkward and... I don't know how to act around men," Faith admitted quietly.

Annie's laughter flowed over her. Faith often wondered why they were friends. Annie was outgoing, bubbly, and pretty whereas Faith was quiet, often too serious, and too pale. Her body reminded her of a scarecrow and her hair was too light.

"You're not awkward. And when it comes to men, just be yourself. I've known many men who prefer timid girls like you over a talkative girl like me," Annie promised.

Faith let out a quiet sigh as she followed Annie further into the dance hall. Around her she heard people greeting her, some looking on with surprise to see her there. Had Annie not invited her in the presence of her parents, she wouldn't have come.

But with her parents and Annie insisting she should come, Faith had no option. Her mother had taken her shopping the very next morning for the pale pink dress that she wore now.

Annie stopped beside a group of women. Faith knew some of them from school and others through her sisters, but wouldn't consider any of them friends. She listened as Annie and the women discussed the men in attendance.

Faith's jaw almost dropped when the women began to divvy up the men as if they were candy in a Halloween basket. Once everyone had their eye on someone for the night, Annie turned to Faith with a curious look.

"You didn't say who you were interested in?"

Faith shrugged. "No one."

She recognized some of the names mentioned but she didn't want to make a fool of herself and agree to dance with any of them. Faith already knew she would either trip and fall over her feet or she wouldn't be able to get out a single word. Both had happened in the past.

Just another reason she shouldn't be here in the first place.

She and Annie stood at a table while Annie surveyed the dancing.

“Look, Faith, doesn’t that look like fun?” Annie said with a longing look.

Faith glanced at the door and nodded. “It certainly does.”

A few moments later a man approached them. Faith’s heart began to race even as her head began to spin. She didn’t recognize him but crossed her fingers that he wasn’t going to talk to her.

Relief washed over her when he asked Annie to join him for a dance. Faith stood and watched her friend dance, a broad smile on her face, wishing she could be more like Annie.

For a moment Faith couldn’t help but be envious. Regardless of what her friends and her parents thought, Faith wanted to find love. She wanted to have a family of her own and a man that loved her. But how would she ever find someone who would be willing to court a girl who couldn’t string two words together in the company of a stranger?

In the corner of the room, Faith spotted a beautiful grand piano. A smile curved her mouth even as her feet began to move in its direction. A band was playing beside it but Faith couldn’t seem to stop herself.

She moved around the piano and took a seat. The violinist looked at her curiously before he nodded, giving her permission to join in.

Faith’s fingers danced over the piano keys, the piano complementing the band. She felt her fear fade away. The knots her stomach untied as the music flowed over her and through her. Soon she had forgotten all about the dance and all the people present; it was just her and the piano.

Only when the song ended did Faith realize the band was no longer accompanying. She looked up only to see the musicians watching her with admiration, none of them playing their instruments. Even some of the dancing couples had stopped to look at her.

Faith felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. Her breath caught as her fingers began to tremble. She lifted them from the piano keys, her gaze darting through the dance hall for Annie.

Suddenly loud applause rang out through the room.

Feeling overwhelmed by all the eyes on her and the thundering applause, Faith moved away from the piano and all but ran for the doors. She pushed her way past people trying to compliment her, her only goal to get out.

When the cool evening air slapped at her skin, she drew in a deep breath and realized she was safely outside. Her parents' carriage wouldn't come for her for another two hours, but Faith didn't care.

She'd rather walk home than return to the dance.

As she had said when she arrived, she should never have come.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



As Claire de Lune filled the drawing room, Faith lost herself in the music. Debussy was one of her favorite composers. His music didn't just uplift the spirits, it reached the soul. It was as if he composed music that turned emotions into sounds.

Faith had never played the piano more than over the last few weeks. Ever since her return home, cold and early, on the night of the dance, playing the piano was the only time she managed to forget the way everyone that was anyone had looked at her.

Or how they had watched her run off like a scared little girl.

Annie and her parents had hoped that she would catch the eye of a handsome gentleman, instead, Faith had ensured that no man in society would ever look at her again. She had embarrassed herself. If only she hadn't been so shy and so overwhelmed by the applause.

She had gone over that moment a thousand times since and had thought of hundreds of ways she should've reacted instead. But it was too late now.

"Faith," her mother stepped into the drawing room holding an envelope.

Faith lifted her hands from the keys. "Yes, Mother?"

"A letter from Angel."

Faith's smile was instant as she walked toward her mother. "How I wish we could've spent Christmas with them this year."

“I know, dear, me too. But your father has too much going on at the bank and besides, you know this time of year makes for treacherous travel.” Elizabeth Jones smiled warmly at her youngest daughter.

“I know.” Faith nodded, accepting the letter.

Her mother disappeared through the door. Their brownstone was quite large and everyone had their own preferred room in the house. For Faith it was the drawing room because the piano was there. For her mother, it was the morning room. Her mother would invite friends over for lunch or sit by the window and read for hours. For her father, John Jones, it was his study.

Faith curled up on a chaise lounge and opened the envelope before drawing out the letter. Excitement washed over her as she recognized Angel’s handwriting.

MY DEAREST FAITH,

I WAS SO sorry to hear about your first dance that ended in disaster. I wish I could’ve been there for you. You have to remember that they weren’t looking at you because they were judging you, they were admiring your talent.

Ever since you first began to play the piano, your talent has been evident. I understand that you don’t like the attention, but with a talent like yours, you’re bound to be admired when you play in public.

Perhaps you should visit us again. Grace and I could take you to a dance in town, perhaps then you might feel a little more confident.

We miss you terribly. Grace and I were talking just other the day about how we used to play when we were young. I miss those days, but I know that we all need to move on with our own lives.

Speaking of lives, my life has been awfully busy. Jacob is chattering a mile a minute. None of the sentences make sense to any of us, but regardless,

he keeps talking. Travis is teaching him how to ride. My nerves are frayed at the edges, but I know Travis takes great care with him.

As for Grace, she is as happy as I've ever seen her. Cooper is truly a wonderful father. Little Daisy is now crawling and makes for quite a busy bee. When Grace isn't running after Daisy, she's exhausted from it.

How I wish you could be here to see your nephew and niece grow. I know Mother and Father would agree to you coming for a visit. Why not ask them?

As for the social engagements, you'll gain confidence in time and then you'll attend one again. The memory amongst members of society is only as long as it takes for new gossip to arrive – which in my opinion happens weekly in Boston.

I'll write again before Christmas but until then, play a Christmas carol and think of me.

LOVE,

Angel

FAITH PRESSED the letter to her chest and hugged it as if she was hugging Angel in the flesh. She moved back to the piano and began to play Angel's favorite Christmas carol. As she played the familiar notes she found herself dreaming of the life Angel and Grace had.

Both her sisters had found love in the West. First Angel had traveled West to marry Travis and become a teacher. Only a year later Grace had traveled West after being scarred in an accident during a snow storm. She had been devastated when her proposed husband turned her away because of the scar. But everything happened for a reason.

Grace had traveled to Angel who lived nearby and found herself falling in love with Cooper, Travis's good friend and ranch hand.

Now both her sisters were happily married with children of their own.

That was exactly what Faith wanted for herself, but until she could overcome her shyness, it was a dream she knew she would never realize. As if her hands were expressing her emotions, the Christmas carol flowed into a heartbreaking melody.

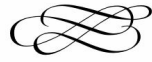
A tear slipped over her cheek as her heart ached in her chest. As her fingers danced over the keys she couldn't help but feel as if this would be all she would do for the rest of her life. She would live at home with her parents and play the piano for company.

She loved her parents and she loved playing the piano, but she wanted so much more from her life. She wanted to have the joy that her sisters had found.

She wanted love.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



A sigh escaped Faith the moment she stepped into the dining room.

The table had been set for four instead of three, which could only mean her parents were making another attempt at introducing her to an eligible man of the right stature from an acceptable family.

Ever since the disaster-dance as Faith had come to think of that horrible night in November, her parents had taken to inviting men known through acquaintances, to introduce to Faith. It didn't matter how many times Faith asked them to stop, her mother insisted it was for the best.

Faith was grateful that her parents weren't forcing her to attend another social event, but to have strange men at their dinner table at least every fortnight, was somehow even worse. At a social event, Faith could shrink into the background and avoid everyone; at their dinner table she had no choice but to be present.

"There you are," Elizabeth said with a warm smile as Faith walked into the dining room. A frown creased her brow as she looked at Faith's choice of dress. "Are you sure you want to wear that, dear? Liam Turner the 5th is joining us for dinner. His father is one of your father's investors at the bank. Your father arranged for him to come to dinner tonight. You want to make a good impression, don't you?"

Faith's brow furrowed. "Mother, please can you stop trying to play

matchmaker. It's not working, and it's just as uncomfortable for the poor men you invite as it is for me."

"Nonsense!" her mother exclaimed. "Henry Altenburg thoroughly enjoyed our company."

Faith sighed quietly. Henry Altenburg was a glutton that finished four plates of food and nearly fell asleep at the table.

"Go upstairs and change into the lilac dress, it brings out the violet in your eyes," her mother insisted.

Faith knew that to argue would amount to nothing. She turned and headed upstairs like a little girl being told what to wear for church on Sunday.

By the time she descended the stairs a second time, she could hear the unfamiliar voice of a man in the drawing room. Knowing that she was expected to join her parents for a glass of sherry before dinner, she summoned her courage and headed in that direction.

"Faith, there you are." John Jones beamed at his daughter. He met Faith at the door and took her hand before he led her to the stranger. "Liam, this is my daughter, Faith. Faith, meet Liam Turner the 5th."

Faith summoned a smile as Liam kissed her hand. She resisted the urge to ask what had happened to the first four Liam Turners.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Faith. Your father mentioned you were beautiful, but he didn't say you were breathtaking." Liam charmed her with a dashing smile.

Faith's heart began to race as a blush colored her cheeks. She quickly looked away, suddenly unable to speak.

"You'll have to be patient with our Faith, she's a little shy" Elizabeth quickly explained.

Liam smiled at her as a wolf smiles at its prey before devouring it. "I'm sure she'll warm to me soon enough."

When one of the servants rang the dinner bell, Faith almost sighed with relief. The sooner this evening was over the better.

ELIZABETH SAT down on the bed in her nightdress and let out a heavy sigh. “John, what are we going to do?”

“Sleep?” John asked as he slipped into bed.

Elizabeth shook her head. “You know I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about Faith. She barely spoke two words all night.”

“She’s just shy, she’ll get over it,” John insisted.

Elizabeth turned to her husband with a doubtful look. “We’ve been saying that since she turned fourteen. She’s twenty, John. Most girls her age are engaged or married already. If she doesn’t find a way to interact with gentlemen, she’ll become a spinster with a piano instead of a cat.”

“At least it’s a nice piano.” John shrugged with a smile.

“I’m serious, John,” Elizabeth insisted.

John sat upright and nodded with a heavy sigh. “I know, dear. I’m concerned about her as well, but I simply don’t know what to do. It seems that as soon as there is a stranger in her presence, she shrivels into the background. The only people she is comfortable around are family and Annie and a few of her friends. If only the doctor had medicine for shyness.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you know there isn’t such a thing. We have to think of something. I can’t stand seeing her so lonely. Since Angel and Grace moved out West, she’s withdrawn into herself even more.” Elizabeth sighed shaking her head.

“Perhaps if we find someone that shares her interests?” John suggested.

Elizabeth’s eyes brightened with hope. “John, that’s perfect. We find a musician, one that comes from a wealthy family, of course, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to care for her, but surely she’ll be able to connect with a musician?”

“We can try,” John agreed. “Can I go to sleep now?”

Elizabeth nodded even as the wheels in her head began to turn. She didn’t know any musicians, but surely it couldn’t be hard to find someone that

enjoyed music as much as Faith. Perhaps if they had music in common, Faith would be comfortable.

A short while later John's soft snores filled the room, but Elizabeth kneeled beside her bed regardless. She closed her eyes and began to pray. She prayed for the Lord to bless her daughters in Texas and then she prayed that the Lord would find a suitable partner for Faith.

One that was patient and kind and one that would make her feel confident.

Because as a mother Elizabeth knew that shyness was only a symptom of a lack of confidence.

And nothing gave a woman confidence like love.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



“*A* cellist?” Annie asked, horrified.

Faith couldn’t help but laugh at Annie’s expression. “I know, it was horrible. All through dinner he kept trying to compare a piano to the cello. He asked me about callouses and shoulder pains as if playing the piano was a physical risk.”

“What was your mother thinking?” Annie laughed loudly. “Careful, next she might just invite a flutist. Then you’ll have to listen to him talk about breath control and lung exertion all night.”

“Don’t even mention it, you might give her an idea.” Faith sighed. “I honestly don’t know what she’s trying to achieve. All she’s achieving by inviting these random men to dinner is she’s making me even more averse to actually meeting someone.”

“I’m sure they’re just concerned,” Annie said with a kind look. “We all are.”

“Why? I’m happy, I just don’t enjoy talking to people I don’t know.”

“If you never talk to new people, you’ll never make new friends,” Annie pointed out.

Faith smiled and playfully tossed a cushion in her friend’s direction. “I have you, I don’t need more friends.”

Annie’s nose wrinkled even as a frown creased her brow. “Maybe not for

long...”

“What? Oh goodness, Annie, you aren’t sick, are you?” Faith asked wide-eyed.

Annie shook her head with a curious smile. “Unless it’s an ailment of the heart, not at all.”

“What do you mean?” Faith couldn’t for the life of her understand what Annie meant.

“You remember how Angel and Travis met?” Annie asked. “I might have done the same.”

“You’re writing to a man you don’t know? Annie, surely you know that Angel simply got lucky. It’s dangerous, never mind irresponsible.” Faith shook her head with disappointment.

“You might be right, but perhaps I might also find love.” Annie smiled dreamily. “His name is Caleb Mason and he lives in Texas. Since that is where your sisters were, I thought it might be a good place to start. You’ve told me how beautiful it is and how nice the weather is there... Honestly, I didn’t expect him to write back.”

“How long have you corresponded with this Caleb Mason?” Faith was very surprised. She had known Annie to be outgoing, but not *this* outgoing.

“I’ve received two letters from him. Oh, Faith, please stop looking at me like I’ve gone mad. I like him, he seems very nice. He works on a ranch and drives cattle. He’s a real cowboy, Faith! He’s looking for love and one day he wants a family, just like I do.” Annie raised her brows in a questioning look. “Can’t you just be happy for me?”

“I will be, I mean I am. I just don’t want you to get hurt,” Faith explained.

“And I won’t, I’ll be very careful.” Annie’s eyes widened with excitement. “Faith, that’s the perfect way for you to meet someone. You don’t have to meet them in person at first and you can take your time thinking of a reply to their letters; it’s brilliant!”

“Wait, what?” Faith asked.

“You should write to one of the men through the Matrimonial Times!” Annie jumped off the bed, a wide smile on her face. “It’s the perfect way for you to get to know someone before you meet. That way when you meet, he won’t be a stranger.”

“Annie, I won’t be able to do that. I won’t even know which one to pick.” Faith shook her head, already shooting down the idea.

“What if you don’t have to choose? What if I told you that Caleb mentioned to me that his boss, Jared Reed, has been thinking about placing an advertisement himself? I could ask Caleb to tell his boss about you and if he’s interested, instead of placing an advertisement, he could just write to you?” Annie suggested excitedly. “That way if it works out, we would live together on the same ranch. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Faith frowned hesitantly. “Annie, I don’t know... I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You never think anything that doesn’t involve a piano is a good idea. I’m going to ask Caleb to talk to Jared and that’s that. At least I’m not inviting him to your dinner table!” Annie crossed her arms firmly.

Faith shook her head. “You can do what you want but if he writes to me, just don’t expect me to reply. There is no way I’m going to correspond with a man thousands of miles away. You heard what happened to Grace, do you want that to happen to us?”

Annie cocked a brow. “You and I both know that Grace wasn’t looking for love, she was looking for wealth. She found someone just as shallow as she used to be and got bitten by it. You can’t compare that horrible man to Caleb or Jared.”

“How do you know? You haven’t met either of them?” Faith insisted.

Annie’s mouth curved slowly. “Because I know how to listen to my heart. My heart has whispered to me over and over again that Caleb is the man of my dreams. That’s how. Come on, Faith, be happy for me. I’ve been praying for the right husband since I can remember. I have complete faith in God. He

made me see Caleb's advertisement and He made Caleb choose to reply to my letter and no one else's."

Faith sighed heavily. "I'm happy for you, I'm just concerned."

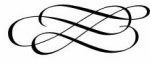
"Funny how I said that just a few moments ago about you?" Annie pointed out.

They shared a smile, but Faith crossed her fingers that Annie would be so excited to hear from Caleb again that she would forget all about her plan to ask him to talk to Jared.

She didn't need another person in her life trying to play matchmaker.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



Faith sat in the drawing room with all her sheet music laid out around her on the floor. Sheet music was hard to find at the best of times, so it was very important to her to take good care of the music that she had.

She had sorted the music by composer but once she was done, it just didn't feel right. When she played the piano, she didn't have Beethoven, Bach, or Mozart days; she played the music that suited her mood.

Faith gathered all the sheet music and set the pile in front of her before she made a mental list of all the different moods of music she enjoyed. Soon she began sorting the sheet music all over again. This time the piles were for nostalgia, joy, sadness, calm, anxiousness, and finally, love.

A smile curved her mouth as she began to arrange the different piles into binders to make sure they were kept safe. Feeling triumphant that she had completed the task she had set out to do, she took the binder with music filled with joyous melodies and sat down at the piano.

She had just settled her fingers on the keys when a maid popped her head into the drawing room. "Mail for you, Miss Jones."

Faith's face split in two, eager to hear from either of her sisters. The last time Grace had written, she had entertained her with stories about Daisy's development and descriptions of the adorable dresses Jessica Scott had made

for her daughter. Although Jessica was Angel's mother-in-law, she had become a self-appointed grandmother to Daisy as well.

A frown creased Faith's brow as she took the letter and read the envelope. She didn't recognize the handwriting. Instead of Angel's precise and perfectly shaped letters, or Grace's curvy letters that flowed into each other's, the handwriting on the envelope was smaller and less neat.

Curiosity piqued, Faith tore open the envelope and pulled out a couple of sheets with more of the same handwriting. She sank onto one of the chairs and began to read.

DEAR FAITH

I AM sure you are as surprised to receive this letter as I am to be writing it. My name is Jared Reed and I heard about you from my friend, Caleb. I'm sure you are aware that Caleb has been corresponding with your friend Annie Brook for quite some time now.

A GASP ESCAPED Faith as she dropped the pages to the floor. She had completely forgotten about Annie's offer more than a month before. In all honesty, she had truly thought Annie had been joking. But now as she looked at the letter in her hands from a stranger, she knew she couldn't just toss it into the dancing flames of the fireplace.

Curiosity and intrigue made her pick up the letter again and continue reading.

I HAVE BEEN VERY hesitant to write this letter, although I've had your address

for a few weeks now. I'm sure you think me insane for reaching out to a woman I have never met.

I assure you I am perfectly sane.

Let me explain why I wanted to write to you. From what Caleb told me, I understand that you are shy and a little withdrawn. I wouldn't call myself shy but I will admit that I am not comfortable talking to women I do not know. The mere fact that we have something in common urged me to reach out to you.

After Caleb began corresponding with Annie, he's been encouraging me to place an advertisement in the Matrimonial Times. I've considered it, to be honest, but I haven't yet dared to do so. Placing an advertisement for a wife and future partner makes me feel like a cow about to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

Perhaps I am insane...

You might wonder why Caleb suggested I place an advertisement. The answer to that is quite simple actually. I am twenty-six years old with a land claim that stretches beyond the horizon. I always believed that once I had my ranch and my house built, and a few head of cattle in the fields, I would be a happy man.

But now I have come to realize that happiness means nothing if you have no one with whom to share it. Making plans for the future feels like a hollow chore if you plan a solitary future.

Instead I find myself wanting a life partner. Someone to share the successes, someone to help carry the burdens and someone with whom to build a life. I dream of having children and a house that is welcoming instead of empty. I dream of meeting someone who will capture my heart, even as she offers hers freely.

Caleb told me that you enjoy playing the piano, so perhaps if I describe it to you like a song, you will understand this yearning better.

In the best melodies, there is always a crescendo. It's as if the whole song

builds to prepare you for the high point that makes you feel as if a song has meaning.

Through everything I've achieved in my life, I feel as if my life has yet to reach the crescendo. That point that gives it meaning.

I can assure you that I am an honest man with Christian values. My home might not include the luxury and comforts found in the city, but it's sturdy and has a lovely view from the porch. My income is of such standard that I will have no problem caring for a family. As for where I live, Reed Ranch is located a few miles from Riverview. Caleb mentioned that you have family in Waterfall, which is only a three hour wagon ride from Riverview. If you doubt my sincerity, you are welcome to send someone to meet me in person.

I won't try to persuade you to write to me, instead, I will simply ask you this; do you find yourself dreaming of your life's crescendo?

If you do, then I look forward to hearing from you. If you don't, then it's been my profound pleasure to know you have at least read my words.

KINDEST REGARDS FROM TEXAS,

Jared Reed.

FAITH FOUND herself reading the letter over a second time. She had no idea who Jared Reed was, what he looked like, or if he was even a good man, but for some reason she already found herself replying to him in her mind.

She couldn't be sure if it was his honesty, his reference to music, or the way he described his own lack of confidence when it came to the fairer sex but before Faith even realized it, she had moved to the writing desk and was replying to a stranger.

CHAPTER 6



“*I*t seems Miss Jones found something in your letter worth corresponding with,” Caleb said as he hopped out of the saddle.

Jared looked up from watering the horses, a frown creasing his brow beneath his wide brim hat. “Say what?”

“I say Annie’s friend wrote you a letter.” Caleb laughed handing Jared the letter. “Here I am goin’ into town to pick up a letter from my sweetheart, lo and behold, there was one for you as well. Seems to me we’re courtin’ two girlfriends from Boston now.”

Jared shook his head as he held the letter in his hand. “Perhaps she just wrote to politely decline to correspond with me.”

“You won’t know if you don’t open it,” Caleb shrugged.

Jared nodded and began walking away from the corral. Without even looking up he moved towards the trail that led towards a creek a couple of hundred yards from his house. He took a seat on the winter grass and shook his head. When he had written to Faith Jones, it had been on a whim. He never actually expected her to write back. Especially not after Caleb had made it very clear that she couldn’t even string two words together in the company of men.

He carefully opened the envelope as if ripping it would hurt Faith in some way. With the sun on his back and the creek bubbling past, Jared began to

read.

DEAR MR. REED,

YOUR LETTER WAS VERY unexpected as you can very well imagine. When Annie mentioned you, I begged her not to reach out. But now that you have, I am pleasantly surprised by your honesty. I won't ask my family in Waterfall to pay you an unexpected visit, at least not yet.

I found myself touched by your words. In a way they very much represent the way I feel. Although there are numerous social occasions for courting in Boston, I find myself overwhelmed whenever I've tried to attend.

Ever since I could remember, the piano had been my best friend. Perhaps it's the piano's fault that I prefer its company to the company of people.

As you can imagine, my social awkwardness has made it quite challenging for me to even consider dreaming of a future such as the one you describe. I've come to accept that no man wants to court a girl who appears mute. But I'm sure you can see through my words, that I am not mute at all. Instead, I find words constantly forming in my head, I just struggle to utter them in strange company.

I understand what you say about your life not having reached its crescendo. I'm not sure if you expect a crescendo to form through our letters, but I will say that receiving your letter was a high note for me.

I can't help but agree with your description of the Matrimonial Times. Although my eldest sister, Faith, found true love through the pages of the publication, my middle sister was dreadfully hurt by it. To me, it seems almost like desperation for a woman to write to a stranger. I've heard about the shortage of women in the West and understand the place in society for such a publication, but like you, I simply do not feel it is the right way for me

to find love.

Reed Ranch truly sounds wonderful. I can only imagine how lovely the sunset must be from your porch. During the times I've visited my sisters in Waterfall, I've always enjoyed the beautiful colors that paint the sky at sunset. Unlike Boston, I find the weather in Texas to be more forgiving as well. I imagine you are having balmy days at the moment, where we are still firmly in the throes of winter.

I will not waste any more of your time, but I will say that I look forward to hearing from you again.

That is, if you found my letter as captivating as I found yours.

KIND REGARDS,

Faith

JARED LET OUT a whoop of joy! Her friend might have described her as shy and withdrawn, but Jared found her enchanting and lovely. Her honesty was sweet and so was the way her letters curved on the page. A smile curved the corners of his mouth, knowing that he wouldn't have to place an advertisement in the Matrimonial Times after all.

He walked back towards the house with a smile splitting his face in two.

"And? Was she politely asking you to stop bothering her?" Caleb asked at the sight of him.

Jared shook his head. "She politely invited me to write to her again. She seems wonderful, Caleb, almost as wonderful as you made her seem."

"Just remember, she's painfully shy. I can't imagine she revealed much in her letter?" Caleb asked.

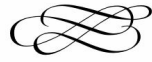
Jared simply shrugged. "What she revealed in the letter is for me to know alone. But I can assure you, she's not as shy on paper as she claims to be in

person.”

Caleb’s chuckle drifted after Jared as he walked into the house. He took a look around and found himself hopeful that one day perhaps Faith would turn his house into a home.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



“*H*e sounds perfectly lovely,” Elizabeth Jones said, smiling at her husband.

Faith turned to her father with a hopeful look. “What do you think, Father?”

“As your mother says, he sounds like a suitable match. If he has a ranch anything like the Scott ranch, I’m sure he’ll have no problem supporting a wife and a family.” John Jones set down the letters and smiled at Faith.

Faith felt excitement course through her veins. In her mind she heard a few high notes dance in a lovely melody. Ever since she had received Jared’s first letter, it seemed her days were filled with only high notes. She couldn’t remember the last time she had reached for her binder with sad music.

Over the last six weeks she and Jared had written to each other numerous times. With every letter Jared sent her, Faith found herself liking him even more. It was an exhilarating feeling to finally have met someone she could talk to. Of course, she had yet to meet him in person but when she finally did, he wouldn’t feel like a stranger at all.

He would feel like the man who had shared his dreams with her. The man who had made her feel confident about her music and her dreams for the future.

Annie nudged Faith in the side and widened her eyes.

Faith nodded, remembering the reason they were there in the first place. Annie had offered to support her when she told her parents about Jared and, in return, Faith would ask her parents' permission to travel to Riverview with Annie, to meet both Jared and Caleb.

"So if you think he is a suitable match, surely you agree that it should be arranged that we meet?" Faith asked her parents.

Her parents shared a silent look before her father turned to her with a pleasant smile. "Yes, I think that would be appropriate given your... social deficiencies."

"You make it sound like she has scurvy," Elizabeth quickly chastened her husband.

Faith and Annie shared a laugh before Faith turned to her mother for her response.

"Your father is right, I think an introduction would be a good idea," her mother agreed.

Faith nodded eagerly. "Wonderful. Annie and I will be leaving for Riverview on Wednesday and we will be returning the following week. It would give us a chance to meet them and to see the ranch for ourselves."

"Under no circumstances will you be traveling to Riverview," her father snapped harshly.

"But you just said..." Faith trailed off.

"Your father and I agree that you should meet, but you are not traveling to Riverview. Remember what happened to Grace? We will not allow another one of our daughters to suffer that humiliation and devastation so far from home," Elizabeth explained firmly. "If these gentlemen are as eager to meet you as you are to meet them, they can travel to Boston. Your father and I would for once like to meet the man courting our daughter before an engagement is announced."

"But we... Annie and I will be traveling together. We've got it all planned out..." Faith couldn't help but feel disappointed. She had thought of

their journey to Riverview as an adventure. The first adventure she'd ever taken.

“Then undo your plans. You can write to these men and explain to them that they are welcome to visit you in Boston. It's much more appropriate for men to travel that distance than for a lady.”

Faith looked at her mother with disappointment in her eyes. Her parents had all but forced her to start courting and now that she had found someone she liked, they refused to let her travel to meet him.

Annie turned to her with an encouraging smile. “Your parents are right, Faith. Perhaps it will be better for them to travel to Boston. I'm sure my parents would also like to meet Caleb.”

“See, at least your friend sees the sense in them coming to Boston,” John pointed out.

“What if they don't come? What if they can't leave the ranch?” Faith asked quietly, feeling as if the crescendo she had been about to reach had just begun its plummet towards a tragedy.

Her mother moved towards her and reached for her hand before meeting her gaze. “If Jared is really as fond of you as he seems to be in his letters, he'll come.”

“They'll come,” Annie said, assuring her as well.

Faith let out a hopeful sigh. “I hope they come.”

“And when they do, I'd like to invite them to dinner. You and your beau as well, Annie. You've all but grown up in this home, and I wouldn't feel satisfied if I didn't meet him as well,” John insisted with a smile.

“Then I guess we'd better go send a telegram, I'm not sure if a letter will reach them in time.” Faith said standing up.

Annie joined her. “We might even look at dresses to wear when we meet them at the train station.”

Faith couldn't help but laugh. In some ways, Annie reminded her so much of her sister Grace. Grace had always been on the look out for an

occasion for a new dress. Often she didn't even need an occasion to buy a new dress, she simply did so for the love of it.

“Good idea, Annie,” Elizabeth smiled at the girls.

Faith and Annie collected their coats and headed outside. As soon as they were out of earshot of her parents, Faith turned to Annie with a baffled look. “I thought they'd wanted to marry me off, now it's as if they've changed their minds.”

“Not at all, Faith. You're their youngest daughter, it's only natural for them to be a little more protective of you. Besides, after what happened with Grace, you can't blame them for being cautious.”

Faith nodded. She had looked forward to their journey westward, but as she and Annie walked through the streets of Boston, she couldn't help but feel excited that Jared might be coming north instead. She could show him all her favorite places and he could get to know her where she felt most at home.

Perhaps her parents had a good idea after all.

CHAPTER 8



Faith felt the familiar tug of nerves in her belly as she stood on the train platform. Just as her mother had predicted, Caleb and Jared were only too happy to travel north to Boston instead of having the girls travel West.

They couldn't stay for an entire week but three days ought to be enough for Faith to find out if Jared was the one who would bring music to her heart.

She wore a new dress; one she and Annie had picked out. It was a pale shade of peach, the fabric flowing and flattering. A waistband revealed her tiny waist, even as billowy sleeves softened her bony shoulders. When she had looked in the mirror before leaving home, she realized Annie had been right. The color suited her complexion, it was almost as if the shade of peach brought warmth to her pale skin.

"Here they come," Annie said excitedly from beside her wearing a navy dress with white trim.

"How do you know it's them?" Faith asked following Annie's gaze. Two men, wearing hats, waistcoats, brown trousers, and flannel shirts were walking towards them.

The one on the left had kind eyes and a generous smile. The one on the right was taller. His eyes were a peculiar shade of blue, even from a distance. His jaw was square and his shoulders broad. Even without asking, Faith

already knew that the man on the right had to be Jared.

“The hats,” Annie laughed. “No one else here is wearing Stetsons.”

“Oh.” Faith nodded as Jared met her gaze. She felt a light blush color her cheeks as her heart began to race.

She had been terrified of this moment ever since Jared had agreed to travel to meet her. Although they had communicated so many times through their letters, she couldn’t help but fear that her usual shyness might intervene, leaving her unable to utter a single word.

“Breathe, Faith!” Annie coaxed beside her in a hushed tone, her smile in place.

Faith nodded and drew in a sharp breath. The nerves coiled even tighter into small balls of torture in her belly.

The two men stopped in front of them. Jared was still holding her gaze. Faith couldn’t seem to look away, it was as if she recognized him even as she was afraid of what he would think of her.

“Which was it this morning? Beethoven or Mozart?” he asked with a charming grin.

Faith felt her mouth curve shyly. “It was Debussy.”

“Then you must be Faith,” the other man said, turning to Annie. “I’m Caleb.”

Annie laughed lightly. “I thought as much.”

While Caleb and Annie got better acquainted, Jared held out his hand to Faith. “I recognized you the moment I stepped off the train. It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you, Faith.”

Faith couldn’t help but feel thoroughly charmed by Jared’s kind words. A smile curved her mouth as she held out her hand. Jared lightly brushed a kiss over it before letting it go. For the first time in her life, she didn’t feel awkward or shy, instead, she felt as if she had known Jared forever.

“I recognized you, too. I’m glad you came,” Faith said quietly.

“When I received your telegram, Caleb had to stop me from getting on

the next train out of Texas.” His laughter was just as attractive as his eyes.

“We would’ve come, it’s just…” Faith trailed off when Jared shook his head.

“I agree with your father. If I had a daughter, I’d want to meet her sweetheart as well.” His smile softened as he lowered his chin and looked at her from beneath his eyelashes. “Am I your sweetheart, Faith?”

Faith’s heart skipped a beat. Not in the usual way that had her running for the exit, but in a way that made her feel bold and confident. “Only if I am yours.”

“If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be here,” Jared said simply, holding out his arm. Faith hesitated for a moment before she slipped her arm through his elbow.

As they walked, Faith realized she had never walked with her head held as high or with a skip in her step, as she was now. She smiled over her shoulder at Annie, happy to see her friend just as happy as she was.

From the train station, Caleb and Jared insisted on taking them to dinner. Annie had made arrangements for them to spend the weekend in a boarding house, but they would hear nothing of having a rest first.

It was as if they were just as eager to spend time with Annie and Faith as the girls were to spend more time with them. When they reached the restaurant, Jared took the lead. He did it in a way that didn’t offend Caleb, but rather encouraged others to follow. He had a quiet authority that Faith found very attractive.

When they took their seats, she turned to him with a smile of adoration. She hadn’t known what to expect when the train pulled into the station, but she hadn’t for a second expected to be smitten within minutes of meeting Jared.

A band played classical music in the background and as the song reached its crescendo, Jared turned to Faith with a knowing smile. When he reached for her hand spontaneously, Faith accepted it without hesitation.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Everyone was seated at the dinner table in the Jones dining room.

For the first time in years, Faith was satisfied with the company at the dinner table. Although she hadn't spoken much to Caleb, she felt very comfortable talking to Jared.

Last night when they had been out for dinner, he hadn't pushed her for conversation. Instead when she became quiet and a little withdrawn, he had engaged her with a topic of interest. Soon Faith was talking to him as she would to a close family friend, completely confident and at ease in his company.

She glanced at her mother at the one side of the table before she glanced at her father. The introductions had gone smoothly over a glass of port, but Faith would have to wait until later that evening to learn what her parents thought of Jared Reed.

Jared smiled at her from across the table. "I can see now that coming to Boston definitely had its benefits. The food is delicious."

Faith nodded. "Consuela is a magician in the kitchen."

"I'm glad you enjoy it, Jared, I made it clear that we were expecting important guests for dinner," Elizabeth added with a smile.

"I wouldn't say important, but I would say grateful." Jared smiled kindly at her mother before he returned his gaze to Faith. "I couldn't help but notice

your piano in the Livingroom; it's quite magnificent. I've never seen anything like it in Texas."

"Perhaps you will treat them with a song after dinner, Faith?" her mother queried.

Faith's eyes widened. "I'm sure no one wants me to bother them with the piano, Mother. You can hardly hear a word when I'm playing."

Jared smiled at her with an encouraging look. "I'd love nothing more than to hear you play. Might I put in a request?"

Faith frowned. "You know classical music?"

"Not much, but there is one song I remember from my childhood. My mother used to play on the piano when I wouldn't take my afternoon nap," Jared explained.

He had not mentioned his parents before and Faith couldn't help but be curious. "Where were you raised?"

"New York," Jared said simply. "My father was a dock worker, my mother a seamstress. After my father had an accident on the docks, they paid a handsome amount for him not to make it public. My mother received a piano and I received a ticket westward."

"Are they still there?" Elizabeth asked before Faith could.

"No, unfortunately they both passed away. My father passed from consumption and my mother not too long after him," Jared answered quietly.

"I'm sorry to hear that. What song is it that you remember?" Faith asked curiously.

"Claire de Lune." Jared chuckled softly. "My mother used to say if you listened to a song about the moon, the stars wouldn't keep you awake."

"That's adorable," Faith said with a smile.

"Tell me more about your ranch, Mr. Reed," John prompted from the other side of the table. "Faith says you have a herd of cattle?"

"That's right, Mr. Jones. I started with only ten head of cattle and over the years managed to build up quite a herd. It's hard work, but the rewards make

it worth it.”

“And this town of yours, I take it it’s quite civilized. I’ve heard of towns in the West that only boast a saloon and a sheriff’s office?” John continued.

Jared laughed. “It’s quite civilized, Mr. Jones. We have a general merchandiser, a barber, a French cologne shop, we even have a post office and a church.”

“Good to know.”

“John, stop frightening the man. Jared, please, call him John,” Elizabeth insisted.

Faith smiled to herself. She could already tell from her mother’s tone of voice and her father’s questions that her parents liked Jared.

After dinner, everyone moved to the drawing room. Faith had hoped that they would forget their request for her play, but she had no such luck. Her mother almost instantly ushered her toward the piano. Faith retrieved her sheet music and took a seat behind the piano.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, something she always did to shut everyone and everything out before she lost herself in the music. As she began to play, her body moved along with the movement of her hands. She swayed lightly to and fro and played to her heart’s content. Only when she reached the crescendo did she realize she was looking at Jared and he was looking at her.

Usually, when Faith played her music, she wouldn’t make eye contact at all. It only made her nervous and shy. But as she looked into Jared’s eyes, she felt something shift inside her. She didn’t feel nervous or shy, instead, she felt more confident seeing the admiration in his gaze.

Her heart swelled in her chest even as a smile curved her mouth. She didn’t once return her gaze to the sheet music, instead playing from her heart. The notes flowed easily, just as the connection between her and Jared felt natural.

When the song came to an end and applause filled the room, Faith stood

up and walked around the piano. For the first time in her life, she bowed and accepted the applause with a smile. Only her parents and Annie would know what a leap that was for Faith.

She saw her mother dab a tear from her eye even as her father pressed a hand to his heart.

Jared stood up and walked towards her. He took her hand and brushed a kiss over the back of it before meeting her gaze. “You’re even more phenomenal than I imagined.”

This time when she blushed it wasn’t because of her innate shyness, it was because her heart swelled with a warmth that seemed to have reached her cheeks.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



It was a lovely summer's afternoon as Faith climbed out of the coach, accepting Jared's waiting hand.

Today was their last day together before he would board the train back to Texas that evening. While Caleb and Annie had chosen to spend the day visiting the old North Church, Faith had suggested she and Jared spend the afternoon in Boston Common.

The park was one of the most beautiful in the country, it was said, but to Faith, it simply offered a lovely walk surrounded by greenery instead of the dirt and dust and buildings on the streets. Regardless of its gruesome history, Faith often came to walk in the Common.

It was hard to believe that she had only met Jared two days ago because as his hand reached for hers, it felt natural. As if holding Jared's hand was the most natural thing.

She didn't find herself struggling for words in his presence, and not once did she find herself doubting his interest in her. Without being overtly forward, Jared made his attraction to her clear with only smiles and looks.

"Is that where they hanged the witches?" Jared asked when they walked past a few trees.

"No, The Great Elm was where the gallows used to be. Gale storm winds destroyed it a little over ten years ago," Faith explained.

“That’s good to know. I can’t imagine it could’ve been easy for descendants of anyone who met their end there to have seen the tree still standing.”

Faith nodded. “I agree. So many of those trials were nothing but hogwash and puritan beliefs.”

“Exactly.” Jared turned to her with a smile. “Another thing we agree on.”

Faith laughed. “And Consuela’s cooking.”

“Definitely. Do you think if you move out West to be my bride, you can convince Consuela to come with?” Jared asked.

For a moment Faith’s heart skipped a beat. They had spent the weekend getting to know each other, and not once had either of them spoken of what would happen once Jared returned to Texas. She finally shrugged with a half-smile. “Her family is here so I hope you can cook because I can’t.”

Jared’s laughter was as bright as the sun in the sky. His gaze caught something in the distance and Faith smiled knowing exactly where they were headed.

He stopped beneath the statue of George Washington and turned to Faith with a look of baffled amazement. “I saw a picture of it in the paper once. I never realized it was this big.”

“It’s big and it’s tall. Simply beautiful, isn’t it?” Faith admired the statue anew through Jared’s eyes, from the horse’s hooves to the bronze sword.

When she realized Jared was no longer beside her, she turned to see him kneeling to her side.

“Jared?” Faith asked, surprised. “What are you doing? You’re ruining your trousers.”

“Then I’ll buy another pair, I can’t imagine I’ll ever find someone as unique as you.” Jared reached for her hand and smiled into her gaze. “Faith, when I planned on coming to Boston it was to meet and to find out if the connection we shared in our letters would exist in real life. But since I first laid my eyes on you two days ago, I’ve had trouble removing them. You’re

everything I've prayed for, everything I've dreamed of, everything I hope to have in my future. Not a day goes by that I don't think of you, or a night I don't dream of you. Do me the honor of accepting my hand in marriage? I promise to love you and care for you until my very last breath."

For the first time since she had met Jared, Faith was at a loss for words. She opened her mouth but words wouldn't come. Her heart was racing even as a smile curved her mouth. She wasn't at a loss for words because she was anxious, instead her words evaporated as hope, joy, and excitement coursed through her veins. Unable to utter even yes, she simply nodded as a tear slipped over her cheek.

Jared flashed her a dashing smile as he reached into his pocket. He slipped a plain gold band onto her ring finger and smiled into her eyes. "For now and forever."

When he stood up and pulled her into his arms, Faith finally knew where she belonged. Home was no longer a place tied to a brownstone in Boston; home was Jared's arms.

He stepped back and looked at her with a questioning gaze. "You ready to say something now?"

Faith laughed as she nodded again. "Yes, yes, and yes."

Their laughter blended into the afternoon air as their life together began. The crescendo had finally started up and Faith knew without a doubt it would continue playing for the rest of her life if she had Jared by her side.

They continued to walk through the Common, talking about nothing but their shared future. Jared spoke of the children he wanted and Faith admitted to him that she would love to have her piano freighted to Texas. As they walked, they fell in love even more.

By the time Faith had to say goodbye, she did it with a light heart, knowing that it would only be a matter of time before she took her place on Reed Ranch as Jared's wife.

Until then, she had a wedding to plan and her life belongings to pack

before she left for the West.

A place she never thought she'd find happiness.

She all but danced home, eager to tell her parents the wonderful news.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



Faith arrived home to find both her parents waiting for her in the drawing room. Ever since leaving the train station, she couldn't seem to stop smiling. Both her parents met her with smiles of their own.

"I must admit, Faith, when you said you met someone through letters, I was doubtful," her father began as he took a seat by the fire. "But Jared Reed seems to be a fine young man. Honest, hardworking, and a great addition to our family one day."

Faith nodded. "I know, Father." She couldn't wait to tell her parents about the engagement but before she could, her mother began to speak.

"He's handsome as well and the best part is, he only has eyes for you. I'm so overjoyed that my baby girl has finally found love," her mother gushed pressing a hand to her heart.

"Can you believe it, Elizabeth? All three our daughters living on ranches out West. Sooner or later we'll need to consider moving West ourselves." John smiled at his wife.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, John, he hasn't even proposed yet. The courtship is still young, a lot could still happen," Elizabeth quickly cautioned her husband.

Faith cleared her throat, hoping to finally get in a word in edgewise. "Actually, Father is right. He isn't getting ahead of himself. Jared proposed

this afternoon.”

Faith couldn't help but smile triumphantly as her mother's expression changed from cautious to one of joy and surprise. “Did you accept?”

Faith nodded with a shy smile. “I did.”

Her father was out of his chair and enfolding her in a tight hug. “My shy little mouse finally found someone patient enough to lure you out of your hole.”

Faith frowned. “I wouldn't exactly call myself a mouse.”

Her father chuckled.

“She's right, John. She isn't a mouse, she's more like the duckling that became the swan. I knew the right man would coax her out of her shyness and let her blossom into the beautiful and confident young lady she is.” Her mother brushed away the tears streaming over her cheeks.

Faith laughed. “Mother, you're being a little dramatic, don't you think?”

“Not at all,” her mother argued. “I've never seen you look so happy or seem as confident. I'm truly overjoyed that you found each other.”

“The wedding! Will it be in Boston?” her father asked, already thinking ahead.

“We haven't really discussed it, but I expect it will be in Riverview on Jared's Ranch.”

“We can make a trip of it, John. We can visit Angel and Grace and then go to the wedding together. We get to see our grandchildren!” Elizabeth clapped her hands excitedly.

Faith couldn't help but laugh. “While you start planning your trip West, I want to write to Angel and Grace.”

“You can write to them later,” her father insisted, pouring her a glass of port. “First, we toast. To our youngest having found love.”

Her father didn't use the usual port glasses, instead, he retrieved the crystal he had inherited from his parents. The only other time Faith had seen the crystal glasses being used was when her father's boss, the owner of the

bank, had come over for dinner.

It baffled Faith to feel so much joy overwhelm her. She had been happy before; she had been delighted when her sisters were married. But never before had she felt as she did now. It was as if a page had been turned and her whole future now lay open before her.

The pages were blank but they nonetheless glowed with promise.

As her father handed her a glass of port, Faith heard the crescendo playing in the back of her mind, feeling as if she had finally arrived where she always wanted to be.

For so long she had dreamed of having a family and a husband that cared for her, but never had she imagined actually realizing that dream. She had come to accept that her shyness would always keep her from it.

“To Faith, may her love be as beautiful as her music. May her future be as blessed as this family. And may her marriage be as loving and kind as ours,” John toasted, holding his glass aloft.

Faith felt tears well in her eyes with emotion. “Thank you, Father.”

She took a sip of the port and felt the warmth spread through her chest. Just like warmth had spread through her chest when Jared had asked for her hand in marriage.

Just thinking of him made her long for his presence. Having downed their toast, Faith headed upstairs to write a letter. But not to her sisters; they could wait.

First, she wanted to write to Jared. She wanted him to have a letter to remind him of what they had shared in Boston when he arrived home in Riverview.

MY DEAREST JARED,

I HOPE your train journey was pleasant.

I WASN'T sure what to expect when you arrived in Boston. At first, I was afraid that you would be disappointed once you met me in person.

I wasn't expecting to fall in love or to find myself dreaming of a future with you.

When you asked for my hand this afternoon, I realized I had never felt more joy in my entire life. I look forward to becoming your wife. I look very much forward to the life we will share and the family we will one day have.

My parents were overjoyed with the news and instantly gave their blessing for our union. They are already planning their trip West and plan to visit my sisters while there.

I wait to hear from you about the arrangements for the wedding. I can't wait to join you on Reed Ranch.

YOURS TRULY,

Faith

FAITH FOLDED the letter and placed it in an envelope. She would mail it in the morning along with the letters to her sisters. But for now, she was emotionally exhausted. And if she was honest, she was eager to get to bed, hoping that her sleep would be filled with dreams of Jared Reed.

CHAPTER 12



“Oh, Annie, I’m so glad you’ve come!” Faith exclaimed as soon as she opened the door.

Just like Jared, Caleb had proposed on their last day in Boston. Faith was overjoyed to know that not only had her best friend also found true love, but that they would move West together and raise their children side by side.

“Me, too. We have so much to discuss. Have you heard from Jared since he left?” Annie asked as they moved towards the drawing room where tea and treats were waiting for them.

“Yes. I received word from him last week. He’s just as excited about the wedding. He mentioned a date late in July. I hope to travel to Riverview before then.” Faith poured them each a cup of tea and offered Annie the macaroons.

“Caleb mentioned a date early in August. But, Annie, Jared is being so kind. Instead of me having to move into the bunk house with Caleb until he purchases his own ground, Jared has offered to build us a house on the ranch and allow Caleb to buy shares in the current herd.” Annie’s eyes lit up with excitement. “So we’re going to be neighbors... forever!”

Faith laughed. “That’s wonderful news, Annie. I’m so happy for you.”

“Have you thought about a dress yet? My mother has offered me her wedding dress; it’s not much but it’s beautiful in its simplicity.” Annie

reached for another macaroon.

“Yes, I have thought about it. Mother offered to take me shopping next week. Goodness, you realize that means we only have a few weeks left in Boston?” Faith asked letting out an anxious sigh. She looked around the drawing room before her eyes rested on the piano. “I never thought I’d ever leave.”

“I know, isn’t it exciting? Your sisters must have been overjoyed to learn about the engagement?”

“Very much. Angel insisted that we visit each other at least once a month. Grace is simply concerned about my wardrobe.”

Annie chuckled. “That’s Grace for you. One would think now that she’s living on a ranch that she’s given up her love for fashion.”

“Not at all. She’s not as concerned with fashion anymore, instead she advised me to purchase a few plain dresses and a few pairs of trousers. Can you believe, Grace wearing trousers?” Faith chuckled. “So much has changed over the last few years.”

“And so much is yet to change. Your parents are going to be awfully lonely here without you and your sisters.”

Faith nodded. “Yes, they are. Father is already speaking about retirement. They’re considering moving West as well. Mother insists that she needs to be closer to her grandchildren.”

Annie reached for Faith’s hands and met her gaze. “You’re going to make a wonderful mother, Faith.”

“You too, Annie.” Faith smiled mysteriously. “I’ve actually thought about what I will name my first daughter.”

“You have, do tell?” Annie encouraged her.

“May,” Faith said with a smile. “Because of the month in which I met Jared.”

“That’s lovely.” Annie nodded. “Just look at you, Faith, you’ve completely blossomed. Aren’t you glad that I went against your wishes and

asked Caleb to tell Jared about you?”

Faith laughed. “I’ve never been more grateful, Annie.” Faith’s laughter sobered as she met her friend’s gaze. “You’ve always known how to coax me out of my shell. In some ways, I think you know me better than most. I value your friendship very highly.”

“Don’t do that; we’ll both be in tears and this is a happy time. A time for celebration and laughter.” Annie teased. “I value your friendship as well, Faith.”

Faith’s heart swelled with love and admiration for her best friend. She felt blessed that the Lord had given her someone as kind and as faithful as Annie as a friend.

Annie’s laughter filled the air with joy. “We should pray that we have our children at the same time, the very same day if possible. Imagine our little girls running through the fields with bonnets on their heads.”

“May will wear a yellow dress and your daughter a pink one. They will be best friends, just like us!” Faith joined in the excitement.

“And if we have sons, they will be best friends too, just like Jared and Caleb,” Annie gushed.

Faith couldn’t remember the last time she had so much fun. While they drank tea, they dreamed about their futures in the West. By the time Annie left, Faith wished it was already late July.

Just this morning it had felt too far away, but now she could only hope for time to fly faster. She was eager for her new life to start.

Her life with Jared.

CHAPTER 13



Faith woke up coughing.

She gasped for breath, but it was as if she simply couldn't fill her lungs with oxygen. Fear began to crawl up her spine as she continued to cough. She reached for the match to light the candle on her bedside table when she realized a strange smell had filled her room.

Groggy, she managed to light the candle only to feel her breath catch in her throat.

The reason she couldn't breathe was the same reason she couldn't see further than her door.

Smoke.

Thick, pungent, and suffocating smoke was billowing into her room. At first Faith wasn't sure what was happening until she heard the sound.

Smoke wasn't supposed to have a sound, was it?

She threw back the covers and picked up the candle, determined to find out what the noise was. As she moved closer to the door, she could see the glow coming from downstairs. The flames licked at the bottom of the stairs as if they were crawling their way toward the first floor.

A cry of fear escaped Faith as she rushed to her parent's room. She flung the door open and almost ran straight into her father. "Fire! There's a fire downstairs!"

Her father nodded, his eyes wide with fear. “We need to get out of the house.”

“But how?” her mother asked sleepily.

“Elizabeth, it doesn’t matter how! It matters that we get out before the entire house goes up in flames,” John barked before he rushed past Faith into the hallway.

Faith ran after her father and managed to grab him before he could descend the stairs. “It’s already coming up, Father, we can’t go down. We’ll be scorched alive.”

Her father dragged a hand through his hair, his eyes wide with fear. “We need to find another way out.”

Faith followed him back to the master bedroom where he opened the window for fresh air. Faith joined him and stuck her head out to gasp for fresh air before she turned to her father. “What shall we do?”

Her father ripped a sheet off the bed and began to wet it with water from the wash basin and jug. “Help me wet this!”

The noise was growing louder with the hissing of the flames, the splitting of wood, and the groaning of the floor as flames consumed it from beneath. Faith could feel the heat beneath her feet, it made her even more terrified that they wouldn’t be able to escape.

Faith did as she was told. She dunked the sheet into the small body of water until there wasn’t a single drop left. The sheet was soaked. She turned to her father with confusion in her eyes. “Here.”

Her father stepped forward and began to wrap the wet sheet around Faith. The cold sheet made her shiver even as she shook her head. “Father, what are you doing?”

“You’re going to listen to me, Faith, you hear me!” her father said firmly. “I need you to be brave. I need you to put on your shoes and then run downstairs as fast as your feet can carry you.”

“But the fire, I’ll burn,” Faith cried out with fear as tears began to fill her

eyes.

“The sheet will protect you, you just have to run fast, Faith. As fast as you can, down the stairs and right out the front door, you hear?” her father demanded firmly with his hands on her shoulders.

“But what about you and Mother?” Faith asked glancing at her mother standing a few feet from her.

“We’ll find more water; we’ll be right behind you. Run, Faith! Run, now!” her father said pushing her towards the door.

Faith glanced at her father, not wanting to leave them behind.

“Go on, we’ll be right down,” her mother encouraged her.

Faith nodded, determined to do as she was told. She rushed to her room and pulled on her shoes, without bothering with stockings, and then she ran towards the landing of the stairs. The flames had already started to lick at the walls with tongues long and yellow as they lit up everything they touched.

She drew in a deep breath and began to run. She closed her eyes, afraid that if she saw the fiery monster she would lose her courage. At the foot of the stairs, she opened her eyes and felt her heart skip a beat with terror.

The noise... she found it.

A raging fire was blazing through their home. Every surface visible through the thick smoke and flames was alight. Even through the wet sheet, Faith could feel the heat of the fire. She held her head down and pulled the sheet tighter around her as she ran for the front door.

Just a few feet from the front door, she stopped in front of a line of fire. She glanced back towards the staircase but couldn’t see her parents. For a moment she considered running back to them, but the heat had already started to dry the sheet.

If she ran back upstairs now, the sheet would catch fire.

Lowering her head, Faith dragged in a deep breath and closed her eyes as she jumped through the line of fire. She reached for the doorknob and let out a cry of pain. It was as hot as a pressing iron.

Without thinking, Faith bundled the skirts of her nightdress into her hand and reached for it again. She turned it and flung the door open and then she ran out into the street.

Gasping for breath, sweat and soot covered her face. She leaned over, resting her hands on her knees to catch her breath. A coughing fit overcame her even as she heard onlookers gather around her.

“Is anyone in there?” a man asked, running towards Faith.

Faith nodded. “My parents!”

Oxygen finally reached her lungs, giving her the strength to look up. The sight before her was like nothing Faith had ever seen before. Flames had broken the windows; it was all but consuming their home. She looked up towards her parents’ bedroom and let out a sigh of relief when she saw them covered with sheets.

Before Faith could pray for her parents to escape safely, the noise became louder and the heat caused an explosion. Faith could see the house collapse into itself, even as the smoke turned a different color.

“Mother! Father!” she cried out rushing towards the front door.

Someone grabbed her by the shoulders, later she would realize it was a neighbor who held her back with the strength of a lion. “It’s too late, it’s too late.”

Faith shook her head as she fell to the sidewalk, tears streaming over her face. “It can’t be, they’re on their way!”

The neighbor held her close and began to rock her back and forth as men rushed toward the house with buckets of water.

CHAPTER 14



Faith wasn't sure how long it took them to control the fire, but by the time they were done the sun was touching the horizon.

She turned to the person sitting beside her with a questioning look. "My parents?"

The neighbor shook his head with empathy. "I'm sorry, Faith, they didn't make it out in time. They only made it to the foot of the stairs."

If Faith had only experienced overwhelming joy for the first time a few weeks ago, she now experienced the opposite. Her heart tore into a million pieces as she began to weep.

Surrounded by firefighters, neighbors, and curious onlookers, Faith felt all alone in her grief.

She had nowhere to go, no one to turn to, and not even a dress to her name.

She looked at the wreckage that remained of the house she knew as home, now reduced to rubble and ashes and felt another wave of grief overcome her.

It was as if she was in a dream, just waiting to wake from the horrors that faced her. She closed her eyes and wished herself awake, but wakefulness wouldn't come. Instead she remained stuck in a nightmare from which she couldn't escape.

Tears kept quietly streaming down her face as the crowd began to

disperse. Some pitied her with words of condolence, others rushed home to prepare for the workday ahead. For them it was just another day, not the day on which they had lost everything that had ever mattered to them.

Someone set down a cup of tea in front of her and someone had wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. But Faith wouldn't recall their faces or their names, all she would remember of this night and the morning that followed was feeling lost and all alone.

"Come on, dearie, you need to get cleaned up. You can't just keep sitting here all on 'yer own." A woman with a cockney accent pulled Faith up by the shoulders. Only once she stood, did Faith realize how small and old the lady was.

"I'm... I'll manage." Her voice sounded gravelly from the smoke inhalation, her throat burning from it.

"Nonsense, you're staying with me," the lady insisted as she tried to hush Faith along the sidewalk.

Faith was about to argue when she heard someone call her name. She turned to see Annie running towards her.

Faith didn't even realize she was running until she slammed her body fullspeed into Annie's waiting arms. She wept without pause, a new wave of grief washing over her.

She wasn't sure when the old cockney lady had joined them, but as she explained to Annie the events of hours before, Faith could do nothing but weep.

When they were finally alone, Annie brushed her hand over Faith's hair. "There, there, it will be alright. I promise."

Faith knew her friend was saying the one thing everyone turned to when they didn't know how to react to disaster or death. The words were heartfelt but did nothing to ease Faith's grief. She wasn't sure how long they stood there, but finally it felt as if Faith was drained of all moisture. Her throat was burning with thirst, her eyes red and swollen from the crying and the smoke.

She pulled back and met Annie's sympathetic gaze.

"I need water."

Annie smiled at her affectionately. "You need a lot more than that, but let's start with the water."

Annie held onto Faith's shoulders as she walked her home. Faith was grateful that she didn't have to see Annie's parents when they arrived. As if she were a child, Annie guided her upstairs and ran her a bath. She bathed her, washed her hair, and kept refilling the glass in Faith's hand.

By the time Faith was clean and her thirst quenched, Annie led her to her bed and pulled back the covers. "You rest for a while and when you wake up, we'll take it from there."

Faith was too exhausted to even argue. She fell into a deep sleep. As if her life had just reversed, her dreams brought her relief from the nightmare she had just lived. She was having dinner with her parents and they were laughing over something Angel had written in her letters.

Suddenly she felt the familiar heat and saw the fiery glow. Her heart stopped as she began to shout for everyone to get out before the fire claimed them.

"Faith! Faith! You're safe! It's me, Annie." Annie's voice dragged her out of the dream.

Faith blinked her eyes a few times and began to weep, the reality was worse than the dream.

"There, there." Annie soothed her as she brushed a hand over her hair. "I sent a telegram to your sisters and I've arranged for the hospital to keep your parents until your sisters arrive."

Faith frowned before hope sparked in her eyes, only then did the word funeral enter her mind. Her parents weren't at the hospital because there was hope of recovery, they were simply there because that's where corpses were kept until funeral arrangements had been made.

Without saying a word, the tears began to roll over her cheeks again.

If there had ever been a loss greater, Faith didn't know it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



Angel stepped off the train and felt the wave of grief overcome her. The last time she had been in Boston, she had spent time with her parents. She had slept in her childhood room, and she had been so eager to escape.

She reached for Grace's hand and smiled at her sister with sympathy. "We'll get through this, at least we had each other."

Grace nodded. "I can't imagine how hard it must have been for Faith. At least we're here now."

Angel nodded. It was the first time both she and Grace had left their children. Angel knew that their children would be cared for by their fathers, but it still didn't ease the separation anxiety.

But this wasn't a journey Angel wanted to expose her child to. There would be a funeral, the arrangements for the house, and then of course... trying to save whatever could be salvaged. It would be emotional, heart-wrenching, and devastating. The last thing Angel needed was to run after her son when she needed to be strong for her sisters.

Once they had retrieved their baggage, Grace arranged for a coach. Angel was grateful that Travis had given them enough money for the journey and the impending expenses, that she didn't have to trudge to Annie's house with her luggage.

As the coach drove through Boston, Angel couldn't help but remember how trapped she had felt there. She remembered how she had been eager to leave, not for love, but the prospect of a career.

The harsh reality of her visit only struck her now. If Faith agreed to return with them to Travis's ranch, this would be her last time in Boston. She gasped quietly, realizing that all her childhood memories and memories of her parents would remain here in Boston.

She bit back the tears that welled in her eyes and quickly turned to Grace. "How are you holding up?"

Grace shrugged. "Horribly." A tear slipped over Grace's cheek as the coach stopped in front of the Brook's home.

"Come on, let's go find Faith." Angel opened the door hoping she looked stronger than she felt.

They were welcomed by Annie and her parents, but Faith was nowhere to be seen.

"She's upstairs..." Annie let out a heavy sigh. "She hasn't left the room since it happened. She's not eating or really sleeping. She just..." Annie sniffed. "She just sits there, staring at the wall."

"We're here now," Angel said almost to herself as if convincing herself that Faith just needed family.

"Come, I'll take you to her," Annie offered.

Angel and Grace followed Annie up the two flights of stairs to the second floor. Annie knocked on a door and gently opened it. Angel smiled gratefully at Annie. "Thank you, for everything."

"I only wish I could've done more," Annie said with a sad smile.

Angel had meant what she had said. As well as taking Faith in and supporting her, Annie and her parents had made the funeral arrangements. Their parents would be buried tomorrow morning at a private service, caskets closed.

"Faith," Angel said quietly as she walked into the room.

Faith's eyes didn't move, she kept staring straight ahead. Fear clutched at Angel's heart. They had just lost their parents, they couldn't lose Faith as well. Angel moved towards the bed and took a seat beside Faith. She gently rested her hand on Faith's shoulder. "I'm so sorry we couldn't be here sooner."

Faith didn't move, she barely reacted.

Grace sat down on her other side. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Faith. I can't imagine how horrifying it must have been for you."

Still, Faith didn't move.

Angel met Grace's gaze and shook her head, fear coloring her eyes.

Angel drew in a deep breath and let it out quietly. "Faith, you have to talk to us. We're worried about you. The funeral is tomorrow and there are things we need to discuss."

It was as if the dam broke. Faith began to weep, heartfelt sobs poured out of her as if she had been keeping them in for too long. Angel held her as she cried, but soon Faith pulled away.

"It's all my fault!" Faith cried out brushing away her tears. "You don't have to forgive me; I know I wouldn't have."

"What?" Angel asked confused. "Faith, what are you talking about?"

"It's my fault. I should've woken up sooner. I should've waited for my mother and father; I shouldn't have left without them. It's my fault that they didn't make it out in time..." Faith broke down in sobs.

Angel's heart clenched in her chest for her younger sister. Annie had given them the facts of what had happened that night and there had been nothing Faith could've done to save their parents.

Being a parent herself, Angel understood why her parents had ushered Faith out first.

She wrapped her arms around Faith and held her tight. "There's nothing to forgive, Faith. It wasn't your fault. You couldn't do anything, save run into the fire after them, and then we would have lost you as well."

Grace nodded. “She’s right, Faith. It wasn’t your fault. We’re just grateful you survived. It must have been horrible. We don’t blame you, we’re just glad that you were saved.”

“Saved for what?” Faith asked gruffly. “To spend the rest of my life reliving the night I couldn’t save my parents? To have nightmares every time I sleep about the flames eating away our childhood as if it hadn’t fed in years? Or was I saved simply to spend every day remembering what I lost that night?”

Angel didn’t respond. It was clear Faith had been caught up in her own misery and grief for too long. She had allowed her mind to spin out of control. She wouldn’t argue with her now, what Faith needed was support and love, not a speech.

She held Faith closer and hugged her. “We’re together now; together we’ll get through this.”

Grace smiled at Angel. “Together we’ll remember them and always cherish the memories we have of them.”

Together the three sisters wept for the loss of their parents. Angel had known coming to Boston to bury her parents would be hard. But not once had she imagined how the disaster had affected Faith.

Her sister who had always been shy and frail now seemed to have molded into an anxious wreck filled with guilt. Angel knew they had a long road ahead of them but first they needed to bury their mother and their father.

CHAPTER 16



Faith felt hollow.

It felt as if someone had scooped out her heart and burned it in the fire along with her parents and everything that had ever mattered to her. Her sisters tried to coax her to eat, but every time food touched her stomach, it would come right back up again.

Angel was kind and supportive but Grace seemed a little irritable at Faith's response to her parents' passing. Faith couldn't even blame her, not even she had known that such a tragedy would rip her soul from her body and leave her wishing she hadn't escaped the fire.

She climbed out of bed and looked out the window. The sun was shining and the flowers in the window box were in full bloom. The beautiful weather and joyful flowers seemed almost to insult the grief that the day would hold.

Faith turned away from the window and began to dress. She wasn't sure how the dress had materialized since Faith owned nothing, but the black satin dress fit her perfectly. The lace veil hid her gaunt expression and hopefully would hide her tears as well.

Drawing in a deep breath, Faith prayed for strength to face the day before she opened the door and headed downstairs. Grace, Angel, and Annie were waiting for her in the dining room along with Annie's parents. Angel moved towards her and hugged her tightly.

“We’ll get through this, I promise.”

Faith nodded, not feeling up to either agreeing or arguing with her oldest sister.

“Annie was kind enough to secure a tomb for Mother and Father,” Grace commented.

“It’s a good thing, at least then you know they wouldn’t be disturbed in future. It’s simply atrocious how graves were moved for the new underground train.” Mrs. Book shook her head with disappointment

“It’s been decided the remains would be moved to a mass grave.” Mr. Brook sighed heavily.

When the construction began for the underground train between Park Street and Boylston Station numerous remains had been disinterred. It had been the source of numerous front-page stories in Boston for more than a year. Faith had sympathized with the plight of the families whose relatives’ remains were moved, but now it seemed inconsequential compared to what she had to face today.

“At first everyone refused to make use of the train, but now... it’s running numerous times a day.” Mrs. Brook sighed heavily.

Angel reached for Faith’s hand. “That won’t happen to Mother and Father.”

“We best get going,” Grace reminded everyone as she pulled on her black satin gloves.

Faith didn’t remember their journey to the King’s Chapel Burial Ground or the conversation that took place on the coach. All she could think about was how she had escaped and her parents hadn’t.

The guilt overwhelmed her, regardless of Faith and Grace’s insistence that it wasn’t her fault.

If only Faith knew what had started the fire...

With the sun shining and the birds chirping in the trees, they met the bishop at the site where her parents would be buried. At the sight of the two

coffins, Faith felt her knees quiver beneath her weight. With her sisters beside her, the bishop began a short sermon for her parents and all those gathered. His words were kind and gentle, referring to her parents as contributing members of society and loving parents. He finished the short sermon with a verse that Faith knew she would never forget.

2 Corinthians 5:8 We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

For the first time since losing her parents, Faith felt some consolation. She yearned to join her parents, regardless. She too would rather be away from her body and at home with her parents and the Lord, than standing over their graves.

Angel scooped up a hand of dirt and gently sprinkled it over the coffins. Grace followed.

Faith simply couldn't bear to do the same. Instead, she reached for the necklace around her neck, one that had been given to her for her sixteenth birthday and laid it on her mother's coffin. "I will always remember."

She moved to her father's coffin and pulled off one of her gloves and laid it on the coffin. "For the helping hand you always so readily offered."

She stood back, not a single tear in her eyes. She was emptied of her tears and now filled with hollow grief instead.

For a while they stood aside as the funeral attendees left, from their neighbors to her father's colleagues at the bank.

When it was only the three of them left, Angel took Faith and Grace's hands. "We will never forget and we will make sure our children remember what wonderful grandparents they had."

Faith nodded, wishing she could be anywhere but here in this nightmare that wouldn't seem to give her any relief.

"The lawyer is waiting for us." Grace checked the time on her pocket watch.

Faith frowned as she turned to her sister. "Lawyer?"

Angel nodded. “Yes, we need to go over Father’s will with the lawyer.”

“But why? There’s nothing left from the fire...” Faith shook her head.

“Faith, Father might have had investments with the bank. We need to meet with him.”

Faith understood that certain things needed to be done when someone passed away, but seeing a lawyer wasn’t one of them. She didn’t care what her father had left them, she only wished he was still alive.

She glanced at her sisters and frowned at their calm grief. She envied them. Why didn’t they seem as devastated as she was? Why couldn’t she accept that all things happened according to the will of God and as his servant it was her duty to accept it?

She let out a heavy sigh before she followed her sisters out of the Burial Grounds.

CHAPTER 17



“*B*efore we leave for Texas tomorrow there is a lot that needs to be done,” Angel said over breakfast.

The Brook family had all departed on their separate chores for the day, leaving the Jones sisters to wrap up their ties in Boston.

“I don’t think I should go with you...” Faith trailed off quietly as she pushed the food around on her plate.

“Of course you’re coming with us. It’s not up for discussion,” Grace said simply.

Faith let out a heavy sigh. Just because she had just suffered a terrible trauma didn’t mean she was obtuse. She understood she had nowhere to go but she didn’t want to become a burden to her sisters now that her parents were gone.

With the money they had inherited from her father’s investments, she could buy her own small apartment in Boston. Although Faith knew that Boston would never be the same again without her family there.

“Grace is right. We should stay together. The best place for you is Scott Ranch. You can spend some time with your niece and nephew and it’s close enough for you to continue courting Caleb.” Angel began making a list. “We need to go shopping today. Although Annie’s been very kind in lending you whatever you have needed, you need your own. Everything from suspenders

and hats, right down to shoes and dresses.”

Practicalities.

Faith nodded. Although she didn't want to deal with the practicalities of their situation, she didn't really have a choice. “Can we go by the house?”

“There's nothing...” Angel said gently. “Grace and I have already been. What the fire didn't reduce to ashes is damaged beyond repair.”

“My piano...?” Faith asked as her eyes darted between Grace and Angel.

“The first thing we hoped to salvage. It's... it won't ever be the same. You can buy a new one.” Grace spoke of the piano as if it were a mere instrument. She didn't understand that to Faith it had been so much more. It had been her best friend, her ally and, in times of need, the best company she could ask for.

“I still want to go by the house,” Faith said stubbornly.

Before she left with her sisters for Texas she needed to find closure. Closure for what had happened that dreadful night. She needed to see for herself that there was nothing she could have done to save her parents.

“Then we'll go by the house when we're done shopping,” Grace agreed. “You should write to Caleb, tell him about the fire and that you're moving to Texas.”

Faith shrugged. “Maybe later.”

Faith hadn't expected a day of shopping to lift her spirits, but it did. For the first time since the fire, she was too distracted to even remember all she had lost. She found herself indulging in beautiful dresses and hats, allowing her sisters to choose bold colors. Faith preferred muted pastels, but Angel insisted the sapphire dress brought out her eyes.

By the time they arrived at the site of their house, Faith felt the grief overwhelm her again. She couldn't help but relive that night. She stood in front of the house and tried to see any other way they could've escaped apart from the stairs.

But the truth of the matter was, there had been no other way for them to

escape. Jumping from the windows into the fire below would've been just as devastating.

Overcome with loss she moved into the decrepit building. She could see the remnants of the stairs and where her parents had been found. She quickly looked away to where the walls had been burned down to the ground.

In the corner, where the drawing room used to be, was what was left of her piano. It made her heart break to see it scorched and burned beyond recognition. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight of the chair. The chair had been burned, but the seat seemed to have remained closed.

With hope blooming in her chest, Faith rushed through the rubble and ashes towards the chair.

“Careful, Faith! The floor could be unstable!” Angel cautioned her.

Faith ripped the seat open of the piano stool and felt relief wash over her to see her folders inside. She pulled them out and held them to her chest as her sisters rushed to her side.

“Your music? Did it survive the fire?”

Faith nodded. “Yes, the corners are a little scorched, but mostly the sheets seem intact.”

“Thank heavens.” Grace sighed gratefully.

They scoured through the ashes for a little longer, but it was just as Grace and Angel had said, there was nothing left to salvage.

All that was left her of childhood home now were the memories she would forever hold dear. They returned to the Brook home for their last dinner with Annie's family. Faith tried to contribute to the dinner conversation, but she found herself retreating once again.

The confidence she had gained through meeting Caleb and falling in love had suddenly vanished. Instead, Faith wished she could disappear between the floorboards and never have to look another person in the eyes ever again.

Surely that would relieve her of the pitying looks. It was bad enough that she recalled the events of that night numerous times a day, she didn't need

others looking at her with sympathy to remind her what had happened.

She retreated to her bedroom where she packed all her new dresses, wondering if her sisters thought they would excite her about her new life in Texas.

The dresses were only a reminder of what she had lost.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18



Jared hadn't heard from Faith in almost a month.

This was the first time since their correspondence began that his letters went unanswered. He couldn't allow himself to even consider that Faith no longer wanted to be his wife. Instead, he patiently waited for her to write to him.

He sent her a letter every day, expressing his concern and telling her how excited he was about their shared future.

When he had gone into town this morning to purchase feed for the chickens, he had been pleasantly surprised to receive a letter. Only on closer inspection did he realize the letter wasn't from Faith.

Curiosity had him opening the letter as soon as he returned to the wagon.

DEAR JARED

THIS IS ANGEL SCOTT, Faith's eldest sister. I hope you don't mind my forwardness in reaching out to you, but I thought it was best you be informed of recent events.

Since you last heard from Faith, a terrible tragedy has befallen our

family. On the evening of the 28th of May, a fire broke out in my parents' home in Boston. My father, who had always been adept at thinking in emergencies, cloaked Faith in a drenched sheet before urging her out of the house.

Unfortunately, the fire became overwhelming and our parents were unable to escape the all-consuming flames.

As you can imagine, this tragedy has truly saddened us all. But Faith most of all.

It seems Faith blames herself for surviving, for not being able to save our parents, and for not waking sooner. She simply hasn't been herself since the tragedy, as I am sure you can well understand. When it came to my attention that she has yet to reply to your letters, I simply knew I had to reach out.

Faith is no longer residing in Boston. She now lives with my husband, Travis Scott, and me until further notice. You can write to her at the address on the back of the envelope, I will make sure she receives it.

It is truly heartbreaking to know that just a few short weeks ago Faith was excited about the wedding and the life that awaited her with you. Whereas now, nothing seems to brighten the shadows of grief in her gaze.

I hope you are the man my father thought you to be and that you will support Faith during this difficult time. A word to the wise, do not let Faith shut you out. She will try, but do not let her. I know what happiness you bring her and truly hope that she can move past this grief with your support to embrace that happiness again.

KINDEST REGARDS,

Angel Scott

TRAVIS READ the letter again and felt a wave of grief rush over him. While he

had been doubting Faith's commitment to him, she had been facing the worst disaster and loss of her life. He wished he could draw her into his arms and assure her that everything would be alright. He wanted to console her and be a shoulder to lean on.

For a moment he hesitated to write to her. What if she did no longer have interest in marrying him? What if this tragedy had made her feel differently about him?

Travis pushed all doubts aside and reached for the reins. He wouldn't let her shut him out, he would abide by her sister's advice and make sure that Faith knew that he cared. As he began to drive the wagon loaded with feed home, Travis began to word his letter to Faith in his mind.

MY DEAREST BELOVED,

OVER THE COURSE of the last few weeks I found myself doubting if you still remained faithful to our commitment when I didn't hear from you. How wrong I was...

I've just learned of the tragedy that claimed the lives of your parents and your family home. I can't imagine how hard it must be to suffer such a devastating loss. There are no words that will ease the grief you must be feeling, but hopefully I can attempt to give you consolation.

During the brief time I spent with your parents, it was clear they adored you. They were kind, generous and caring and, most of all, welcoming to both me and Caleb. I will also remember them for that. I am certain that to know that your parents are now looking down on you from heaven does nothing to ease your grief, but I assure you they wouldn't want you to spend the rest of your days drowning in guilt in grief.

Instead, embrace the life you still have to live. A life they can no longer

join in.

They would've wanted you to be happy, to have a family and to look to the future with hope, not the past with grief.

The fire might have stolen your parents, your beloved childhood home and your valued items, but it didn't take your memories, Faith. Turn to your memories in times of grief and be reminded of how blessed you were to have such wonderful parents.

I will remember them always.

I wish I could comfort you during this difficult time, I wish I could've been there to support you. I would've traveled north to stand by your side in a heartbeat, had I known.

Please write to me, Faith; tell me what I can do to support you. It is a man's duty to care for, protect and honor his wife, let me have that privilege now.

MY DEEPEST CONDOLENCES and fondest affections,

Travis

TRAVIS NEVER TRAVELED into town more than was necessary but as soon as he arrived home, he penned the letter and saddled his horse. He wouldn't delay sending this letter to his beloved Faith for another minute.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



Six weeks after the tragedy of the fire, Faith sat in a field surrounded by wildflowers. She held her face up to the sun and wondered if she would ever be able to feel the joy again that she had felt when she had walked through Boston Common with Jared.

Her feelings for Jared hadn't changed in the least, but she had.

The fire had changed her irrevocably. It had left her with so much guilt that she couldn't seem to move on with her life. The only time she felt relief from the heavy clouds hanging over her was when she was with her niece and nephew.

But even then, she would feel the guilt rush over her immediately afterward, knowing that her parents would never have that privilege. Angel tried her best to understand, but Faith couldn't simply *move on* from her guilt as Angel suggested.

Every day was a struggle. It was a struggle for Faith to convince herself to get out of bed and dress in one of the new dresses they had bought in Boston. Dresses bought with the money her father had left them.

As if money could ever replace his presence.

She would struggle through the day as she watched what a wonderful mother Angel had become and how much love there was in her family. She would struggle through the chores, every single chore a reminder that this

wasn't her home. She felt obliged to do as much as possible so that Jared and his mother Jessica wouldn't think of her as taking advantage of their hospitality.

A heavy sigh escaped her as she looked up at the cloudless sky. The brightness of the sun made her eyelids flutter closed before she began to pray. Praying was the only thing that helped her these days. It helped her to get a little perspective, but mostly it gave her someone to talk to. She couldn't admit to her sisters what she could admit to the Lord. She couldn't tell Jared that she didn't feel as if she deserved happiness.

'Dear Lord, I hope You are up there today because I need You to give me strength. Everyone says I should move on, Lord, but moving on means forgetting my parents, forgetting that night. How will I ever forget that night?

Lord, I need Your wisdom to guide me on the way forward. I can afford to get a place of my own but I know my sisters will be offended. I receive the letters that Jared writes to me, but how can respond when I know I'm no longer the same girl he walked through Boston Common with?

Please, Lord, help me. Give me guidance and strength and help me find a way to move on and accept the tragedy that took my parents. I beg of You..."

Faith stopped mid-prayer at the sound of her name.

"Faith?"

When she heard say her name called again, she turned around and was surprised to see Jared standing only a few feet from her. "Jared?"

"Yes, it's me." Jared smiled kindly as he moved toward her.

Faith's heart began to race, her usual shyness fighting to the surface as he took a seat beside her. She dropped her gaze into her lap, wondering why he was on Scott Ranch.

"When you didn't reply to my letters, I knew I had to come," Jared explained. "Did you read them?"

Faith nodded, still not meeting his gaze.

Jared turned to her and lifted her chin with his finger before turning her to

face him. "I've missed you, Faith."

Faith didn't know what to say. She wasn't sure what he was expecting of her.

"I was so sorry to learn about your parents, I wish I could've been there to support you."

Faith found him searching her gaze and felt the familiar butterflies in her tummy. Her feelings for Jared hadn't changed in the least. But how could she just continue their courtship as if nothing had happened?

Everything had happened.

"Tell you what, you don't have to say a word. Just let me sit here by you, I promise I'll do all the talking." Jared raised a brow in question.

Faith nodded, basking in his presence. How could she have known that just having Jared close would make her feel stronger?

Jared leaned back on his elbows and crossed his legs at the ankles. Faith did the same, wondering what Jared was going to talk about. He surprised her by pulling a sheet of paper out of his pocket before he began to speak.

"I had a feeling you might not feel like talking, so I thought I'd read you a few bible verses instead." Jared smiled at her and began to read. "*Continue encouraging each other and building each other up, just like you are doing already. 1 Thessalonians 5:11.* That verse is the reason I decided to come and see you. I can't build you up or support you all the way from Riverview."

Faith didn't speak, instead she waited for him to continue.

"*Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Romans 12:10.* My devotion to you is steadfast, Faith. You must know that I will continue visiting until you feel strong enough to face the world again. I honor your feelings and I want to help you carry your grief."

Faith felt the wave of grief rush over her, but she pushed it aside. Jared sat up and reached for her left hand. He brushed his finger over the ring that remained on her finger.

"*Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Mark 10:9.*

We might not yet have said our vows, but to me, we were joined the day you agreed to marry me. I won't let tragedy, distance, or grief separate us from what we have."

Faith met his gaze and a tear slipped over her cheek. Before she knew it she had succumbed to sobs. Jared pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried. He didn't try to tell her everything would be alright, that she should let it out, or even that she should look to the future. He just held her while she poured out all her emotions. When she was finally done, she leaned back and he offered her his handkerchief. Faith used it to dry her cheeks.

Jared smiled at her warmly. "*We have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven – not built by human hands.* That is where your parents are, Faith, remember that in the darkest times. They didn't remain in that blaze; their souls were simply called home. God has a plan for all of us, and although you might want to believe it was your fault that they weren't saved, just remember calling them home was part of God's plan as well."

Faith blinked twice at his words and a frown creased her brow. "You really think the fire was part of God's plan?"

Jared felt hope spark in his chest and nodded. "Just like finding you was part of God's plan. We don't always understand his acts, Faith, but we must trust in His will. *For He has plans to prosper us, not to harm us.*"

Faith smiled weakly. "Thank you for coming, Jared. I'll understand if you don't want to make the journey again."

Jared chuckled and shook his head. "Clearly you have been a little out of touch. Annie has arrived in Riverview. Between her and Caleb setting up house and planning their wedding, I'm grateful for the escape. Can I visit you again next week perhaps? Perhaps we can even go on a picnic?"

Faith hesitated for a moment before she nodded. She wasn't sure if she still wanted to marry Jared and if she wanted to move away from the only family she had left, but she did know that spending time with Jared had been more consoling than any other activity in the last six weeks. "I'd like that

very much.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20



“*I* see Jared came to visit again today,” Angel commented over dinner.

Faith shrugged. “Yes, he did.”

“I’m glad, he seems like a really nice man. I can see why Mother and Father approved of him.” Angel cut into her meat without even noticing how mentioning her parents had upset Faith.

“Wasn’t the wedding supposed to be today?” Travis asked turning to Faith.

Faith let out a sigh and dropped her fork. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry, Faith, I’m sure it must have been a difficult day for you. How is Jared taking postponing the wedding?”

Faith frowned as she turned to her sister. “Who said the wedding was being postponed? How can you even think of weddings at a time like this? You and Grace both carry on as if they didn’t exist. They did!”

Faith stood up from the table and rushed to her room. She had been so happy to see Jared today, but once he left, she felt guilty for her joy. She found herself thinking of the past when families would be in mourning for years or more, but in her family, it seemed everyone just wanted to move on with their own lives.

Faith wasn’t going to do that.

There was a soft knock at the door before Angel's head peered around the door. "Can I come in?"

"It's your house," Faith reminded her.

"It's your home for as long as you like," Angel countered as she took a seat beside Faith on the bed.

For a moment they sat in silence until Angel finally spoke. "It might seem to you that Grace and I are not mourning, but we can't just think of ourselves, Faith. We need to think of our children, our families, and our responsibilities. What will become of little Jacob if I gave myself over to my grief? Death is a natural part of life and we have no choice but to accept it. It might sound harsh, but you know as well as I do that it's the truth."

"I can't. I keep remembering that night and sitting on the sidewalk... I should've run back, I should've..." Faith began but Angel shook her head firmly.

"This world is filled with sin: anger, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, and pride," Angel began.

"You forgot sloth," Faith said with a weak smile. Her mother had made certain all her daughters knew the seven deadly sins before they even turned five.

"Right, and sloth. Would you rather our parents spend their old age in this world simply because we're selfish and want them to bring joy to our lives, or would we rather they rest peacefully in heaven?"

"That's not fair, if you put it like that you make my grief sound unfounded," Faith argued.

"No, I'm simply saying they are in a better place. Not once have you asked me how I deal with my grief," Angel said gently.

Faith turned to her sister and frowned an apology. "I'm sorry, Angel, I just thought... you seemed fine."

"Of course I'm not fine," Angel said impatiently. "I lost my parents, and I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. My baby sister was there to

witness the tragedy and I feel helpless to help her process her grief.”

“I’m sorry...” Faith trailed off. For a moment silence hung in the room before Faith turned to Angel. “How do you deal with your grief?”

Angel smiled dreamily. “I read Revelations. I memorize my favorite passages. Whenever I feel overcome with grief, I simply remind myself of the wonderful eternal world that mother and father now reside in.”

“Streets paved of gold?” Faith asked suspiciously.

“Exactly. Rivers of water, clear as crystal that hold life. Twelve gates with twelve pearls. Streets made of gold, pure as transparent glass. And the best thing about heaven is the presence of our Lord and Savior. It’s only temporary, Faith, we’ll see them again when our time comes. Then of course there is Isaiah 57...” Angel smiled and let out a quiet sigh.

“I can’t recall it from memory,” Faith admitted.

“Good people pass away; the godly often die before their time. But no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come. For those that follow godly paths will rest in peace when they die.” Angel drew in a deep breath. “I can’t believe I’ve memorized it.”

“Very impressive.” Faith chuckled. “So according to Isaiah, the godly die before their time because God is protecting them from evil to come?”

“Exactly.” Angel nodded. “So instead of grieving their passing, celebrate that they were called home before they had to face more sin and evil to come.”

Angel pressed a kiss to Faith’s head and stood up. “Just remember, Faith, Mother and Father would’ve wanted us to be happy and to rejoice in the memories we have of them. They wouldn’t have wanted us to drown in our grief.”

Faith sighed when Angel left the room. She knew her sister was right; she just wasn’t sure she would ever be strong enough to accept God’s will.

CHAPTER 21



Between building the new cabin for Annie and Caleb and being a full-time rancher, it had been three weeks since Jared had been able to visit Scott Ranch. He missed Faith and wished that she was there with him where he could take care of her. But ever since the tragedy, neither of them had broached the subject of their wedding.

Faith was still quiet on his last visit, hardly saying anything at all. But every now and then she would smile at him with shadows in her eyes, but at least her smile gave him hope. Enough hope that he kept on praying and dreaming about their future together.

When he had sent the invitation for Faith's whole family to attend Annie and Caleb's wedding, he had once again not expected a response. But to his surprise, he had received a telegram informing him that the whole family would be in attendance.

It was only dawn, but Jared was already out and about, trying to get everything done before the ceremony later that morning. Along with the help of a few ranch hands, they had moved the furniture into Caleb's new cabin the day before and tested the woodstove.

Tonight Caleb would be a married man, Jared thought with a heavy sigh. How he wished it could've been him instead.

As he began to carry chairs to the field where the ceremony would take

place, Jared thought about Faith. He thought about her as he picked wildflowers for the bride's bouquet and even when the first guests began to arrive.

Since her arrival in Riverview, Annie had been staying at a boarding house in town. Tonight would be her first night on the ranch and Caleb and Jared wanted to make sure that she felt at home.

He was truly happy that Caleb had found love but couldn't help but envy his friend for finally saying his vows.

As the rest of the farmhands began to help him prepare the field for the ceremony and clear the aisle for the bride and her dress, an idea began to form in Jared's mind. He checked the time on his pocket watch and knew that he had very little time if he wanted his idea to work.

He found Caleb shaving in his cabin and hoped his friend would understand. "I need to go into town."

"What? Now?" Caleb asked wiping the blade on a towel.

"Yes, now. I'm going to try my best to back in time for the ceremony but if I ain't, you'll have to forgive me."

Caleb turned to him with a curious look. "What could be more important than my wedding day? I'm your best friend!"

Jared nodded. "That you are, but there is someone more important in my life than you."

Jared didn't explain further; he was running out of time. Instead, he hitched the horse to the wagon and set off for town. He would apologize to the horse later for running him so hard, but Jared had a feeling his whole future depended on the plan he was about to execute.

Faith had never visited his ranch and when she did he wanted to make sure it felt like home to her. That way, when he asked for her hand again, she would be reminded of how happy they had been in Boston.

The ceremony was only an hour away when Jared arrived in town. He had very little time and a big task ahead of him, but he wasn't frightened in

the least. Jared knew that hard work brought its rewards and what he was about to do might just earn him the greatest reward of all.

A life with Faith Jones.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 22



“*L*ook how green it is, isn’t it pretty?” Grace asked as she looked around the landscape.

Faith couldn’t help but agree. It was as if Riverview was greener with more pastures on the horizon than there were in Waterfall. “It is.”

“I’m so glad we came. We hardly see any part of the country at all except for the ranch.” Grace was clearly excited about traveling further than town for a change.

The morning had been chaotic. Between dressing for Annie’s wedding and getting all the people, children, and luggage loaded, they had barely gotten on the road on time. According to Travis, they would arrive just in time for the ceremony.

It had been debated whether to return to Waterfall after the ceremony but both her sisters’ husbands’ had decided it would be best to spend the night in town at a boarding house rather than make the long journey back to Waterfall after dark.

Angel, Travis, and Jacob travel in the wagon in the front, and Faith traveled with Grace and her family.

“We’ll arrive right on time,” Grace’s husband said as they drove the thoroughfare in the town of Riverview.

“Shouldn’t we stop to secure lodgings?” Grace asked as they passed a

hotel and a boarding house.

“That would be wise,” he agreed.

A short while later they were back on the road and headed out of town. Faith wasn't sure what to expect but when the ranch came into view it simply took her breath away. It was easy to see that Jared's cattle operation was just as big as Travis'. Only once they approached the main house, did Faith realize what Jared had meant by a large house.

The cabin was almost twice the size of the cabin on Scott Ranch. The porch railing, the barn, and every fixed object was decorated with wildflowers. A smile curved Faith's mouth as she realized how enchanted Annie would be by all the trouble gone to for her wedding.

“Here we are,” Grace announced.

Once everyone was on solid ground, the men tended to the horses. Faith glanced down at the sapphire dress Angel had insisted she wear for the occasion and wondered if it wasn't a little too dressy for a wedding on a ranch in the middle of summer.

As if sensing her doubt, Grace smiled at her with confidence. “You'll take his breath away.”

Faith quickly looked away to hide her blush.

They moved to the field where the ceremony was being held, but even as her eyes scanned the guests for Jared, she couldn't seem to find him anywhere. Even when they took their seats and the pastor began the service, she couldn't find Jared.

Fear began to crawl up her spine, the feeling unfamiliar and daunting as doubts began to rush through her mind. Had Jared finally tired of trying to win her over from her grief? Had he left his own ranch just to avoid facing her? With every second that passed, the doubts seemed to multiply. By the time Annie and Caleb said their vows, Faith was ready to run back to Waterfall.

The guests clapped and tossed flower buds into the air as the newly

married couple walked back down the aisle as Mr. and Mrs. Mason. Faith smiled at Annie and truly felt happy for her friend, although she was beginning to doubt the wisdom in her attending.

Why invite them if he wanted to avoid her?

As the guests began to indulge in all the refreshments and food that had been set out for the celebrations, Faith found herself wandering away. She stood in front of the porch of the cabin and couldn't help but be curious as to what Jared's house would look like inside.

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching before she ascended the steps. There were two rocking chairs on the porch, almost inviting her to take a seat and watch the sunset. She remembered her letters to Jared and wished she could go back to that time again. When her heart was light and her future was filled with nothing but dreams and excitement.

When she stepped through the door she couldn't help but feel guilty. She was trespassing without invitation. Her eyes scanned the vast living room before they landed on the John Broadwood Grand Piano. Faith's breath caught as she was captivated by the exquisite instrument standing beneath the window.

Her feet began to move even as the music began to thrum through her veins. Without even bothering to ask or to see if she had an audience, Faith sat down and revealed the keys. She breathed in the scent unique to a piano of its quality, and ran her fingers over the ivories. As if someone had blown life into her veins again, she felt a smile curve the corners of her mouth.

Faith closed her eyes and began to play from memory, her fingers moving over the keys as if they were long-lost friends becoming reacquainted. It was the first time she had touched a piano since losing her parents.

It was the first time she felt alive since losing her parents.

When the song reached its crescendo, she felt a pair of hands rest on her shoulders. Faith knew she probably had to stop, but she simply couldn't. Her head, her body, and her soul moved with the music as she continued to play

until the very end. When she played the final note a tear slipped over her cheek.

Music was what she needed to come back from her grief.

“There you are,” Jared’s voice whispered beside her ear.

Faith turned and looked up at him, feeling her heart swell with love. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t just have wandered into your home. I’m sure you don’t want me here.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you here?” Jared asked, confused.

“Because you weren’t at the service. I understand if you want to avoid me.” Faith began to stand up, but Jared took a seat beside her.

He turned her chin so that she could face him and smiled into her eyes. “I wasn’t at the service because I was busy trying to carry this monstrosity into my house... for you...”

“For me?” Faith asked, confused.

“For you. I realized this morning that you didn’t only lose your parents, you lost your music too. I can never bring your parents back, Faith, but I hoped that if I gave you back your music, perhaps... perhaps you’ll come back from your grief and remember how much I care for you.”

Faith gasped quietly. “You did all this for me? But I’ve been so... distracted...”

“You’ve been grieving. If you allow me to call you my wife, I want to do so much more for you F. I want to make this your home, I want to love you and protect you and I want for you never to wonder where you belong ever again, I want you to belong with me...” Jared held her gaze and Faith felt his love warm her from the inside out.

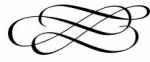
Her heart leaped with joy as she met his gaze and smiled. “You’ve been patient and kind, and understanding, and now you’ve given me back the one thing I didn’t even realize I’d lost... I’d be honored to be your wife.”

Jared brushed a kiss over her lips and smiled into her eyes. “Play it for me again, Clare de Lune.”

Faith's laughter blended with the beautiful notes of the expensive piano as she played for the man she loved.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE



“Goodness, at the rate these young’uns are eatin’, you’ll have to start runnin’ more cattle,” Angel complained as she continued to plate second helpings of food.

Travis laughed and brushed a kiss over her forehead. “That can be arranged.”

Faith and Grace began to laugh as Travis left the kitchen to join the men outside. It was the middle of summer and the heat was stifling. Instead of the expensive dresses the Jones sisters had once worn on the streets of Boston, they wore lightweight cotton dresses that could withstand the heat.

With calving season over, the hardest work of the year lay ahead for cattle ranchers. Branding calves was an exhausting task. One that few ranchers tried to do on their own. Last week Faith and Jared traveled to Waterfall along with Annie and Caleb for a few days to help with the cattle.

Today, they were all gathered on Reed Ranch to help Travis with his season’s calves.

Faith stood in her kitchen for a moment and just mused at the chaos around her. She and Jared had already been blessed with two children of their own. Then there were Angel’s four young’uns, along with Grace’s three. Altogether they had a total of nine children running around. You could hear their squeals of joy as the cousins played. It was a sound Faith knew her

parents would've loved.

Five years after the tragedy that had claimed the lives of her parents, Faith still grieved for them now and then. But mostly she rejoiced in the joy she and her sisters had found in Texas. She knew that her parents would be looking down on them with pride and joy.

A glance out the window rewarded her with a glimpse of Jared and her heart skipped a beat. Although they had been married for almost five years, Faith still thanked the Lord for her wonderful husband every single day.

She had never met a man more patient, kind, or understanding, or one that could be a better father. But then, her sisters would say the same of their husbands.

But Faith knew her journey with Jared had been a harder one. A shallower man would've bid her farewell when she had been caught up in her grief, but Jared knew how to bring her back to life. Only later had she learned that the piano she had played on Annie's wedding day had been bought from the hotel in town that very morning. Jared had offered the hotelier double its value to have him agree for him to take it right away.

She turned and smiled at the piano that still graced their living room. Just like Annie and Caleb were part of their family, the piano had just as important a role. It was played to bring joy, to bring peace, and mostly it was played to remember the many nights she had played for her parents.

"Jacob says he's still hungry," Jared said coming through the front door.

"What did I just say?" Angel said shaking her head. "That boy is going to grow up to be the size of a giant with the amount of food he eats."

Jacob took after his father in more ways than one. He had inherited his father's appearance and it was clear he was going to be as tall or taller even than Travis.

"We'll grill some more beef, let the kid eat. He's working pretty hard," Jared said pointing out the window.

Angel, Grace, and Faith sighed proudly as Jacob, now eight years old,

wrestled a calf to the ground. Faith had lived on a cattle ranch long enough to know that although they were called calves, they were as strong as oxen in her opinion.

Faith poured a glass of milk for her husband which he drank down immediately. "I best get back out there," Jared said before chastely pressing a kiss to Faith's cheek.

Faith blushed lightly and smiled at her husband. "Anything I can do to help? Angel and Grace are in charge of the food."

Jared glanced at the piano and smiled at her with hope in his eyes. "Make it a happy one and open the windows."

Faith's laughter followed her husband out the front door. Not only was she blessed to have a wonderful husband, but she was also blessed to have one that loved music almost as much as she did.

"You heard him," Angel encouraged as she plated food for Jacob.

Faith moved to the piano and opened it. She slid her fingers over the keys as she did every time before she played. As if she was greeting the piano with an affectionate handshake.

When her fingers began to dance, music filled the air. She played with everything she had, allowing herself to be lost in the music.

The children danced on the porch and the men smiled at each other, grateful for the music to lighten their workload even as Angel and Grace began to dance in the kitchen.

Faith smiled to herself as she glanced up at the roof. "*I wish you were here, but you are in our hearts.*"

THE SCOUNDREL'S BRIDE



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



Jane Mellor did not see the magic of Christmas as so many children did. Not even the first flakes of snow fluttering over New York City, lending Central Park an almost otherworldly shimmer, inspired any excitement in Jane.

The first Christmas she had spent with George had been magical. Just the two of them in their small apartment was all Jane could ever have wished for. She and George had spent hours talking about raising a family and the names they would give their future children. Jane had always had a particular affinity for the name Annie if they had a daughter or Jack for a son. In a perfect world, they would have at least two children. She had always thought that as a mother, she would make sure not to make the same mistakes as her parents. She would certainly avoid her father's idea of parenting.

Jane had no siblings of her own and had therefore always dreamt of raising a large family. A family in which there would be no shortage of love. It was a vow she had made herself long ago. For a while, it seemed as though she would be able to fulfill the vow with George, but then the trajectory changed abruptly.

Not a single day went by without Jane thinking about George and the horrible fate that had befallen him.

It had been an ordinary Wednesday afternoon much like every

Wednesday over the recent months, with Jane holding with a delicately ornate China cup, and seated in Sarah Manning's living room. Jane inhaled the sweet aroma of cinnamon rose in the steam before she took a careful sip of the tea. These afternoon tea meetings with Sarah and their friends were a recent addition to Jane's routine, but one she had come to grow particularly fond of.

Sarah was the first person to welcome Jane and George into their new neighborhood. She had a kind and sincere face which filled Jane with a strange sense of familiarity. Not to mention she was stunningly beautiful with perfect doll-like golden locks and an immaculate sense of fashion. It wasn't long before Jane and Sarah became friends. If she was honest, though, Jane had a feeling that it was easy to be friends with Sarah, whether you wanted to or not.

The other women in their group were also friendly and Jane liked them well enough, but Sarah was her closest friend.

It was a newspaper boy on the street who first told them what had happened. An explosion at a warehouse had killed several employees and destroyed almost the entire building. Somehow, even though the name of the warehouse had not been mentioned, Jane knew in her heart that it was George's place of work.

When her suspicions were confirmed, Jane felt as though the very ground beneath her feet had opened and swallowed her. It seemed entirely unfair and cruel that something so awful should happen to her George. He had always been an extremely kind man who was loved by everyone who knew him.

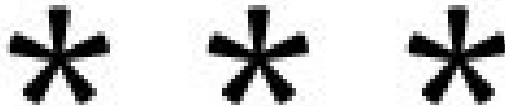
For days following the incident, Jane had been overcome by grief and disbelief. A part of her refused to believe that George was gone, and she sat on his chair in their living room, listening for his familiar footsteps upstairs.

They never came.

Everyone told her it would get easier with time, but Jane didn't believe them. Sure, she still went to afternoon tea with Sarah and the women, but this

was more to alleviate Sarah's worries than for Jane's benefit.

Thankfully, George left her the means to live comfortably for a while. Unfortunately, that money would run out eventually, and then what would she do? Jane possessed some sewing skills, so perhaps she might be able to find employment as a seamstress? The truth was, even if she got a job, the thought of having to live alone in the apartment that was home to her and George made her stomach churn.



That morning, the sun's golden rays pierced through the clouds which had been hovering ominously over New York for days on end. Usually, Jane kept to her normal routine on Wednesdays. She rose early, had oatmeal for breakfast, and wrote in her journal. This morning, however, Jane decided that since the sun had blessed them with a rare appearance, she would venture outdoors for a walk. Central Park wasn't too far, and quite frankly she could do with a change of scenery.

Jane adored the hustle and bustle of life in a city. New York had so much to offer and there was so much to do. No two days were the same and there was always a chance of meeting new people with exciting stories to share. Sometimes, Jane wished that she was a little more outgoing because she would then perhaps have more chance to meet those people others so often talked about.

As a child, she was often very quiet and preferred to play by herself rather than with other girls her age. At first, this worried her parents, but they quickly realized the truth, that Jane simply enjoyed her own company.

After strolling along one of the park's many paths, Jane finally arrived at a small pond. It had frozen over weeks before when winter began to lay its mark of cold on the land. It wasn't yet frozen enough to skate on from one side to the other, but Jane guessed that within weeks, once the temperature dropped, families would be enjoying an afternoon of leisure here with their children.

A cold breeze ruffled Jane's hair and she tucked a strand of her golden locks behind her ear. A little snow fell from a tree above her head and created a layer of white dust on her mourning clothes. In two weeks, she would be free to hang her mourning clothes in the wardrobe after the year period had passed. These days these rules weren't really necessary, but she had learnt these traditions from her own grandmother. She had been a formidable English woman who had left London at twenty in the hope for a better life.

Wearing mourning clothes was sometimes as heavy as the grief she still felt in her chest, but the day she took off the black dress that had almost become part of her identity, Jane made a promise to herself.

Once she changed clothes, she would do everything in her power to make sure that George had not died in vain and that she would try to be happy again.

After all, Jane knew in her heart that George would want her to move on with her life and not forever dwell on memories of him and hopes of what could have been.

He would have wanted her to be strong.

Jane could not help but feel a little frightened. Would she forget George if she removed her mourning clothes? Would he fade from her memory like a dream remembered only in the moments after waking?

Jane did want her life back. She wanted to be happy again and she wanted to accomplish all she knew George would have wanted for her. Sarah Manning had told her just the other day that she was still young and that there was still hope for her.

“Why are you sad?”

The voice caught Jane off-guard. Not because her thoughts had been interrupted, but because of the person behind the voice.

A little girl, no older than perhaps eight or nine, stood in front of her wearing a pink dress embroidered with flowers. Her auburn hair had been turned into a long plait that hung over her right shoulder. Under her arm was a doll dressed very similarly but boasting red hair rather than auburn. Her brown eyes seemed to almost glimmer in the sunlight and Jane thought that the little girl’s mother must surely be just as beautiful as she.

Jane had never been afraid to talk with children and often found them to be more thoughtful and truthful than some adults. She had simply been caught unawares, lost as she had been in her own world, as was so often the case lately. Jane had always been a daydreamer, which often got her into trouble at school as a child, but she had never changed her ways and for that she was glad.

After all, one of the reasons George had fallen in love with her in the first place, was because he thought Jane was very sure of herself and who she wanted to be, no matter what others thought.

“What do you mean?” Jane asked in a friendly tone, feeling a little embarrassed that someone had noticed her mood.

“I saw that you were crying,” said the little girl, “Why would you cry when the day is so beautiful?”

Jane pondered her answer for a few seconds. She was struck by the clear conviction of the little girl’s question. It wasn’t entirely suitable to divulge the truth behind her sadness to a small child, but what should she say? She didn’t have the heart to lie to the girl because it was clear that she was astute and could read Jane’s mood. However, Jane would not want the girl to tell her parents that she had met a sad and strange lady in the park. She could very well do without such a reputation.

“My husband died a year ago,” Jane explained. “It has been a year, but I

still miss him every day. We often walked around Central Park and I was just reminded of him.”

For a while, the little girl didn't reply, studying her instead, as if she was trying to process Jane's words. Jane hoped she hadn't upset her young companion with her honesty, but there was no reason to lie.

“My daddy died when I was very little,” the little girl admitted as she perched herself on the bench next to Jane. “It made my mommy very sad, and she felt lonely, but now she's not sad anymore.”

“What helped?” Jane asked

“She married again and now I have a new daddy. Look! There he is now!”

A tall man wearing a black frock coat, hat, and gray trousers strolled towards them while whistling a merry tune. The little girl waved excitedly and in response, the man waved back with a mahogany cane in his hands. The man had kind, blue eyes, and short blond hair. Jane guessed him to be perhaps a few years older than her and, judging by his clothes and the way he carried himself, Jane thought that he was wealthy.

Jane also thought for a second that the man looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't for the life of her place him. She had always been good at remembering faces, but less so when it came to names which had caused quite some embarrassment over the years. In fact, Jane remembered the first time Sarah had introduced her to a friend she had not yet met but absolutely could not remember her name. Jane guessed her name, but it turned out to be the name of somebody with whom the woman had quarreled.

Jane Mellor was a woman to whom money mattered little. She valued the simple pleasures of life that were often overlooked by others. Such pleasures as a perfectly brewed cup of tea or a fall afternoon with the orange hues of the sun turning all the leaves into apparitions bathed in gold. Jane believed with all her heart that ordinary and everyday moments should be treasured as having immeasurable value.

However, Jane also understood the importance and security that money brought. That had been one of the concerns after George's death. Jane had no family to turn to or anyone who would take her in. Had it not been for the money George had left her, Jane feared the possibility of having to face entering the doors of a poorhouse.

The poorhouse was everyone's worst nightmare. Jane had heard several stories about widowed women who were sent to the poorhouse with their children. More often than not they'd been separated from their children, forced to work long hours and sleep very little. Even though she was a widow, Jane could not imagine a fate worse than living out her remaining days in such a condition. She would not allow herself to stoop to such a level of life, knowing too that no one wanted that for her. Not even her father, with whom she did not have a good relationship.

"Clara, stop pestering this young lady," said the man as he stopped by the bench. "I do beg your pardon, miss."

The little girl, Clara, pouted and Jane couldn't help but chuckle.

"Oh, it's no bother at all," Jane assured him. "In fact, I am glad for the company."

"I was just telling her how mommy was sad before she met you and that now she is happy again. Oh, I know! Perhaps it will work for you as well. If you marry again, maybe you will not be sad anymore."

"Clara, you are being rude," the man warned, but Jane didn't mind. In fact, something about Clara's suggestion struck a chord with Jane. She knew that it was common for widows to remarry after their husbands' deaths. Jane had just never considered that it might be an option for her.

Maybe you won't be sad anymore.

The little girl's words echoed in Jane's mind and a feeling stirred which she had not felt in a very long time.

Hope.

For such a small word, it still held much power. Jane avoided using it for

fear of jinxing herself with bad luck. She had too much respect for the powers that be and did not see a reason to challenge that which she did not quite understand.

Yet, a tiny fragment of hope lingered in the back of her mind, like a vague beacon of light at the end of a dark cave from which one feared never being free from.

Jane wanted to know more.

“Clara, may I ask,” Jane began. “How did your mother meet your new daddy?”

“Oh, I can answer that,” offered the man as he locked eyes with Jane. “The New York Times has a matrimonial times section for advertisements. I had advertised for a suitable woman to wed. Clara’s mother replied and within a few weeks of exchanging letters, we were engaged. I know it is not my business to pry, Miss....”

“Jane. Jane Mellor.”

“Miss Mellor. As I said, it is not my wish to pry, but my daughter is right. Perhaps searching the matrimonial times might help you find joy again. Now, it has been a pleasure to meet you, but I am afraid we must carry on our way. Come, Clara.”

“Bye. I hope we meet again,” Clara waved excitedly as she jumped off the bench and hurried to catch up with her father.

Jane waved back and it was not long before Clara and her father disappeared around a corner.

Somehow, Clara’s words about her mommy finding happiness again resonated with Jane. She wanted more than anything to be happy again. She wanted with all her heart to love again. Jane had once thought that she would never love anyone as much as she had loved George, and for some time after his death, Jane also became convinced that she would never be happy again.

That’s not what George would have wanted. Deep inside, Jane knew that George would want her to find a way to be happy again. He would also want

her to be cared for and looked after, instead of being frightened and lonely.

At that moment, as the afternoon sun slowly began to make its descent below the horizon to give way for the moon, Jane Mellor made a decision.

She was going to love again.

Perhaps the next time she saw Sarah, she could speak with her and ask her advice. Yes, that was a good idea.

Unlike Jane, Sarah was definitely the very epitome of a social butterfly. Every time they were out on walks or dining together, there were always people who knew Sarah. They would come up to her and ask after her family. At times, those people who knew Sarah's husband happily praised his good work and commented on how proud she must be to have married such a man as him.

Jane knew that Sarah was proud of her husband. They had been married for several years and were very happy together.

Jane trusted nobody more to give her honest advice and to share thoughts on what Jane ought to do than Sarah. She knew she could rely on her friend no matter what happened.

For the first time in a year, the smile that tugged at Jane's lips was genuine and she felt excitement.

She was going to be alright, after all, just as George would have wanted for her.

If she ever met Clara again, Jane would make sure to thank her for her suggestion.

CHAPTER 1



For the first time in a year, Jane felt a lightning bolt of excitement rush through her body when she opened the door to her apartment. It was as though she suddenly saw everything in a new light and the heavy weight of grief that had been a constant part of her life for so long now, seemed to at last lift.

Jane would always love George, but she knew in her heart that George would want her to be happy and looked after.

So it was then that on the way from the park, Jane purchased a copy of the Matrimonial Times. She had walked to the newspaper vendor and was about to purchase a copy of the New York Times when something struck her eye. The Matrimonial Times. It was tucked on a high shelf behind other titles. Instead, she purchased that.

She put the newspaper on the kitchen table to set the copper kettle on the stove. It was usual for Jane to enjoy a cup of tea in the afternoon, but today called for a celebration. She unearthed a special blend that she had been gifted by a dear friend on her birthday the previous year. After the kettle had whistled and Jane had poured the tea into the blue China cup, she finally sat down to carefully read through the placements in the matrimonial times.

This was not the first time Jane had flicked through the content of the matrimonial times, but not for herself. Her friend Phoebe had been set on

finding a husband and had often shown Jane the advertisements for potential matches. At the time, Jane had found them rather amusing and wondered how one could possibly tell anything about someone from a few sentences on a page. However, she recalled that Phoebe began exchanging letters with a gentleman out west and it wasn't long before she relocated to marry as a mail-order bride. If memory served her right, Jane recalled that Phoebe and her husband had been married for a few years now. She didn't know much about their life, but Jane knew that they had two children and perhaps one more on the way.

As she carefully scanned the advertisements on each page, often rereading them once or twice, Jane began to feel a little overwhelmed. So many men needing wives? She couldn't help but to wonder why so many need to place advertisements.

Calm yourself, Jane, she thought as she sipped the perfectly brewed tea. Jane closed her eyes and exhaled calmly. She was making things much too complicated and she knew that they needn't be.

Jane opened her eyes again, thinking she ought perhaps to take a little break and come back to it later. As she pushed her chair back and got up, Jane upset her cup of tea which immediately began to soak the pages of the newspaper.

“No!” As quickly as she could, Jane put a towel on the table and managed to save at least a little section of the newspaper. Once the paper had dried she might be able to make out some of the writing, but she might just as well buy a new copy tomorrow. Perhaps it was just as well that she took a break for the evening.

Even though her apartment was small, it gathered dust incredibly efficiently. Jane had been meaning to give it a thorough dusting and cleaning, but she had simply had other things on her mind, but now seemed as good a time as any. While most people dreaded having to clean, Jane really enjoyed it and found it relaxing. She always turned on the gramophone and dusted the

apartment while humming to herself, imagining attending a ball in a fancy palace somewhere in the world. Perhaps her neighbors found it annoying, but sometimes it was truly the simple pleasures in life that made all the difference.

As she was about to fold the newspaper, an advertisement just in the corner caught her attention which had been spared the spilled tea. She could easily have ignored it, but Jane's attention was sparked.

This is what it read:

***MATRIMONY** - a Texan gentleman, 30 years of age and of a respectable rank in life, with ownership of a large ranch including estates and cattle. Now a widower, eager to start a family, seeks to correspond with a young lady of Christian belief who is prepared to move out west. Respond to this address:*

Mr. Daniel Harper

Jane read that advertisement a few times over. There was nothing special about it. It wasn't particularly long or even particularly informative. Yet, something about it aroused Jane's curiosity and somehow, she just knew that this was the advertisement to which she would reply. After all, what was the worst that could happen?

It was a very short advertisement and virtually told Jane nothing much about this man other than that his name -Daniel Harper - and that he was a widower who wished to find a wife and start a family. There was nothing more about his interests other than his occupation in Texas. Then again, that is what letter writing was for and surely once somebody began to reveal details about themselves, the rest would be easy.

Jane had always adored writing letters. Expressing oneself through writing was a gift she had been blessed with already as a young child. She and her cousin who lived elsewhere in the country were not able to see each

other too often and they had kept in touch through letter writing all the way into adulthood. Jane wondered what her cousin would say about her plans to find a new match through the advertisements in the matrimonial times. Perhaps, after she was done cleaning, she would write to her cousin as it was her turn to reply.

Texas was about as out west as one could travel. Jane had never so much as left New York City. She had heard stories of Texas which to her seemed almost like another world entirely to the one she was used to. In the city, Jane knew exactly what to expect. She knew the buildings and the streets she walked. It had been her home her entire life and it was where she felt safe.

That's why Jane knew she had to take a leap of faith. She knew that the world was so much larger than could ever be put into words. She had heard stories of other people's travels during teas at Sarah Manning's house. However, hearing it from someone else was not at all the same as experiencing it firsthand. Jane wanted to explore and to be the one to tell other people her stories, but if she was to do that, she had to be brave and take the first step.

That's how, on another cold winter's evening, Jane Mellor began writing letters to Mr. Daniel Harper in Savior Springs, Texas.

Jane knew next to nothing about Texas other than what she'd read in newspapers or heard from other people. She knew that a year earlier several large fires had all but destroyed most of downtown Dallas. At first, it was assumed that the fires had been a result of a particularly hot summer. It later turned out that the fires were intentionally fueled by less benevolent motives. Jane also knew that the weather in Texas was quite different from the weather in New York. Apparently, snow was extremely rare, whereas New York was covered in snow during the winter months.

She had fortunately kept the fine writing paper George had bought her in the cabinet. Jane and George had never exchanged letters because they met through mutual acquaintances and once they were married had hardly spent

any time apart. Theirs had truly been love at first sight.

Jane rested the tip of the quill on the parchment and began to scribe. At first, she struggled to come up with the words to write, but after a few moments of pondering the right words and phrases, she let her hand rest gently on the table and then wrote.

Dear Mr. Harper,

I write this letter to you in response to your advertisement in the Matrimonial Times. I read the advertisement with great curiosity and decided to enter into correspondence. I am a widow whose husband died in a factory accident a year ago. I feel now is the time to move on, which I believe you can relate to.

I must admit that this is my first attempt at a response to an advertisement and so you must forgive me if my etiquette is in any way improper.

I live in New York and have done so all my life. In fact, I have never left the state and am hoping to expand my horizons, as it were.

Sometimes I dream of traveling abroad and visiting other countries. I would love to one day maybe stroll the streets of Paris or visit Venice. I am not certain I will ever have the opportunity to visit those places, but one can indeed dream.

I have never been to Texas, so please indulge me. Please tell me about Texas. What do you look for in a potential bride? I apologize for perhaps appearing somewhat forward, I simply wish to get to know you.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Jane Mellor

Jane put the quill away and fetched an envelope while she waited for the ink to dry. The last thing she wanted was for Daniel Harper to open a letter, only for it to be smudged and illegible. Strolling to the post office just around the corner from the tenement to mail the letter would make for a nice outing.

It only took a few minutes for Jane to pop the envelope into the post office and return to her apartment. That night she fell asleep with a

considerably lightened heart and a smile on her face.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



*P*atience had never been among Jane's virtues. Even as a little girl, she had never been good at waiting. It was especially difficult when she was looking forward to a happening. However, Jane knew that it was always best to keep herself busy instead of just anxiously waiting. So Jane did just that just for the next few weeks; kept herself busy. She took long walks, either alone or accompanied by Sarah Manning, she wrote in her journal or sewed, depending on what took her fancy.

Whenever she walked through Central Park alone, which was often, she played a game with herself. If she met people walking past her in the park, she would guess how they knew each other based on their interactions. Were they perhaps a husband and wife taking a rare break from child-raising. Perhaps they were siblings scheming a celebration party of some sort for their parents. Jane knew that she would never get an answer to those questions, but that was the whole point.

JANE WASN'T certain exactly how long it would take for the letter to arrive in Texas, but she assumed it would take at least a number of weeks for Daniel Harper to receive the letter, read it and then send a reply.

Then again, what if he didn't reply with a letter of his own? What if he

read Jane's letter and found her boring and not someone he might wish to correspond with?

No.

JANE COULDN'T ALLOW herself to be so negative and worried. So, when the mail finally arrived on a Thursday morning almost three weeks after posting her letter, Jane could hardly contain her excitement. In fact, she had to remind herself that the old lady, Ms. Johnson, across the hall would get very cross indeed if Jane caused any kind of ruckus.

JANE SAT down at the kitchen table and held the envelope in her hand for a while, examining it carefully. It felt strange knowing that the letter within the envelope was not from her cousin or anyone she knew. Jane's mind was immediately filled with many questions. Was he a person who enjoyed writing long letters or did he prefer to keep them short and simple? What if he had only replied to tell her that he was not interested? She wanted to know the kind of man Daniel Harper was and Jane was so excited she could hardly contain it. The first thing she noticed was that Daniel's handwriting was incredibly neat and elegant. He shaped the tail of his A's like a hook and kept his sentences quite short and to the point.

OF COURSE, one could not possibly know much about someone's personality simply by judging their way of writing, but Jane liked to hope.

MADAM,

I was pleasantly surprised to receive your letter. Truthfully, I had started to wonder if perhaps my advertisement had the opposite effect to all I had wished. I am most grateful to you for having proved me wrong.

I very much enjoyed reading your first letter and you do not need to apologize for being forward. I much prefer a woman who speaks her mind and is sure of her opinions.

Paris is indeed a magnificent city. There are not enough paintings in the world that could bring justice to its beauty. When I lived there, I always enjoyed walking along the river Seine after my morning coffee.

I am glad to hear that you dream of traveling because even though I have visited a couple of cities around the world, there are still a few I wish to see.

I have only been to New York once, as a small child, and I confess that I do not recall much of my visit. However, I must admit that I am far fonder of the sanctity and freedom of the countryside. There is nothing quite so beautiful as sightseeing from one's position on horseback, I assure you.

Do you also enjoy the outdoors?

Your Obedient Servant,

Mr. Daniel Harper

JANE READ the letter again and again and her heart fluttered excitedly every time. Daniel Harper had responded to her letter. That must mean that he at least found her interesting and wished to know more.

KNOWING that Daniel clearly enjoyed traveling and had seen more of the world was exciting. She wondered if he had any exciting stories of adventures he had experienced.

JANE KNEW that she had to brace herself. There was no point in filling pages with all she wanted to ask about him.

JANE'S LIFE wasn't extraordinary by any means, but she liked to think that she had plenty of experience and knew who she was as a person. Surely, that would be enough for a potential husband who wanted to get to know her.

FORGETTING her cup of tea altogether, Jane immediately fetched the writing paper and sat down with the pen to scribe her response.

DEAR MR. HARPER,

I am delightfully pleased that you received my letter, being my first correspondence so far away, I must confess to being a little nervous. I thought that perhaps my letter might somehow get lost along the way.

I do indeed enjoy the outdoors, although I must confess that I have only left New York City once or twice as a small child. Although, I am not certain that the Hamptons qualify as the countryside. I daresay most people who live there or choose to visit would not even know how to start a fire. I imagine that living in the countryside requires skills that one might not necessarily learn while living in a larger town.

YOU MUST FORGIVE MY IGNORANCE, but most stories I have heard about the West are those of outlaws and cowboys. It sounds a great deal more exciting than New York City. As a little girl, I took a pony ride in Central Park, but I have never actually been horseback riding.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Jane Mellow

THE LETTER HAD to be perfect and so Jane reread every word with care. She did not want to come across as too forward as she did not want to give Daniel the wrong impression of her. His response had been short, but Jane thought that she had a glimpse of the sort of person he was. Daniel Harper seemed like a man who was sure of himself, as well as a man who clearly loved his home.

JANE HOPED that she hadn't offended him by mentioning the stories of the west she'd read. The last thing Jane wanted was for Daniel to think she was a small-minded person who believed everything that she heard from others without having a mind of her own. That wasn't true, of course, and Jane knew that all too well.

ONCE SHE HAD DECIDED that the letter was good enough, she folded the paper and placed it in the envelope. Jane almost ran to the post office around the corner as if that would somehow speed up the letter's arrival which was of course ridiculous.

THIS WAS a feeling Jane hadn't experienced in a while. When she got back to her own apartment and sat in front of her mirror to brush her hair, Jane realized that she was excited and perhaps even happy. She had something new to look forward to and she knew that if she truly did her best, she would soon have a new life and could leave the old one behind.

IT WASN'T that she didn't love New York City, after all, it had always been her home. Deep inside, Jane knew that in order to be truly happy again and live a fulfilled life, she would have to move and make new memories elsewhere.

AND THAT'S what she decided to do.

THAT NIGHT, Jane slept more soundly than she had in a good long while. Ever since George's death, her sleep had been anything but peaceful and she would wake at least once. Now she had dreams that were more peaceful and she woke feeling rested and energized, ready to take on the world.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



For the next week or so, Jane made sure to make the most of her days and got out of bed early so that she would not miss the mail delivery. She still couldn't believe that Daniel had actually responded with a letter into which he had clearly put a lot of thought. Surely that must mean he was a good man and not somebody vain or shallow.

She felt excited and anxious to hear from Daniel again and hoped that he would divulge more information and stories of his life in Texas. Owning a ranch with acres of land as well as cattle was a different reality to the one which Jane was used to. She'd never imagined herself as a rancher's wife, but as she sat in her favorite armchair and leaned back to close her eyes, she could easily do just that.

Out on the ever-stretching plains of the West, with the heat of the afternoon sun shining down on them. Perhaps she would be waiting for Daniel to return home after a long and arduous day of work with freshly homemade lemonade.

Perhaps he would ask her about her day and listen intently to her stories. Even if Jane didn't have stories of her own, she could always read out loud. George had always loved Jane to read aloud from her favorite books, like the *Brothers' Grimm Fairy Tales*. If she wasn't reading fairy tales or fables, Jane very much enjoyed reading poetry aloud and the works of Shakespeare.

Then again, Daniel might very well turn out to be a man who did not much care for literature or reading.

Jane wasn't awfully particular about the interests a potential match should show, but sharing some common ground certainly made for more enjoyment.

Daniel's advertisement had mentioned that he was keen to start a family, but Jane had not previously given this much thought.

She and George had spoken about having children and if Jane was honest, she had certainly been looking forward to becoming a mother. The idea lingered in Jane's mind for some time one morning as she was finishing her breakfast. George had desperately wanted children, but he had also wished to wait until he had saved a little money from his wages at the factory.

That money had now been passed onto Jane, although she had been rather frugal with her spending since George's passing. Jane Mellor was a woman of simple pleasures who did not require much to be quite content with life.

Finally, the mail arrived bringing the much-anticipated letter from Daniel, which she eagerly opened at the kitchen table as had become tradition.

Madam,

I read your response with great pleasure, and I admit that your comment about the Hamptons made me laugh and that is no small feat, I assure you.

To answer your question, yes, the West can be dangerous if you are not careful and do not have your wits about you, but that can certainly also be true of most places. I, for one, have heard many stories of troublesome types in New York who go out of their way to cause harm.

Rest assured, Madam, you will find no unsavory types of the sort here in Savior Springs. It is a quaint town with people who enjoy the simple pleasures of life and the fresh air of the countryside. The people here are very hospitable and curious about those who choose to visit. In all my years of living here, I have yet to meet somebody I did not care for.

Besides, there is nothing better to soothe the mind and the soul. I am, of course, somewhat biased in my beliefs, as I'm sure you can understand.

We have ponies and horses, among the most beautiful creatures on God's green earth.

Indulge me, madam, if you will. How do you spend your free time?

I look forward to your response.

Your Obedient Servant,

Mr. Daniel Harper

Jane was ecstatic and wanted to jump up and down but had to compose herself. Not only was this letter much longer than the previous one, but it also showed more of Daniel's personality. Jane thought that he seemed to be a man with a great sense of humor, which was important, but also a man who loved his home and his people. Not to mention the fact that he wanted to know about her and what she did in her spare time.

Jane made herself a cup of tea, fetched the writing paper and a pen, and sat down to write. This letter needed to be more detailed than her introduction and Jane thought carefully about what to write and how much to share. That week had not been a particularly exciting one, but there were other matters to mention.

Dear Mr. Harper,

Firstly, there is no need to call me Madam, even though it is very polite of you. I would prefer you called me Jane.

I was terribly excited to see your letter in the post today. I am also a woman of simple pleasures but I do have my hobbies, as one must. On Wednesdays, I visit my friend Sarah for afternoon tea along with the ladies in our neighborhood. We catch up and talk about the various goings-on in town. Sarah is a very dear friend and we have known each other for a good many years.

She hosts weekly afternoon teas with the local ladies in our community, which is always a lovely affair. She assures me that there is nothing quite like watching the sun go down over a Texan horizon. Sarah has family in Dallas who she sometimes visits when she is able.

I enjoy keeping a journal. I find it very relaxing to write my thoughts and reflect upon them at a later time. Of course, I enjoy reading and sewing as well. I am quite capable of mending clothes as well as sewing for myself and others.

Savior Springs sounds like a lovely town and I truly hope that you were not offended by my mention of those stories. If so, I apologize, it was not my intention to hurt your feelings.

I would be interested to learn more about the cattle you keep. Do you see wild animals on your ranch?

I look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Jane Mellor

Jane was a little worried that Daniel might have been offended due to her ignorance, but after reading the letter a couple of times over she decided it was not the case. She felt happy with her own response and carefully folded the letter and placed it in the envelope.

Before Jane fell asleep that night, she closed her eyes and imagined a new life filled with things she could never have imagined. It was only a feeling but even so, deep inside Jane Mellor knew that her life was about to change. Instead of being frightened of those changes, she decided to embrace them. And so, with thoughts of acres of farmland and the sound of horses galloping, it did not take long before Jane fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4



For some time the routine continued unchanged. Jane would receive a letter from Daniel, each one longer than the next. Although Daniel finally referred to her by her Christian name only after two more letters, asking her to call him Daniel in return which seemed only fair.

JANE DEFINITELY SHOULDN'T HAVE WORRIED about struggling with conversation. In fact, her letters to Daniel became so lengthy that Jane soon realized she had run out of writing paper on which to pen her replies.

HAVING something to look forward to and getting to know someone new, made such a difference to Jane's mood. She was much happier than she had been in a while, and she felt as if she was starting to be herself again. The person she had been before losing George.

CORRESPONDENCE WAS GOING WELL and Jane felt hopeful, but there was still no mention from Daniel's side about a potential marriage match. Were they to simply keep exchanging letters with no intention of meeting? Had he

grown tired of her already and just did not have the courage to tell her so? How long did it usually take for correspondence to turn into an actual engagement?

IT BECAME clear to Jane that these were all matters of which she knew little, but which she also had not considered until then. Should she perhaps bring it to Daniel's attention in case he had forgotten? No, that would seem awfully forward and would certainly not work in Jane's favor. The very last thing she wanted was to scare him off and so she decided to bite her tongue.

TO JANE'S RELIEF, when the next letter arrived from Daniel, its content was exactly what Jane had hoped for. Daniel stated his intent to marry and asked Jane to be his bride. If she chose to accept his proposal, he would send the money for her train fare and would be delighted to meet her in Savior Springs.

MY DEAR DANIEL,

Of course I accept your proposal. It would be my great honor to become your wife. Butterflies seem to have taken up permanent residence inside my stomach and I cannot wait to meet you in Savior Springs. I have some matters to attend to in New York, but it should be no trouble at all to arrive after Christmas.

I cannot wait to begin our lives anew.

Yours truly,

Jane

PERHAPS HER REPLY was a little short considering its importance, but Jane had so many thoughts in her mind that she just thought it best to be to the point. She couldn't wait to tell Sarah about this new development.

BEFORE SHE HAD TAKEN to writing to Daniel, Jane dreaded spending another Christmas alone. This time, however, would be different. Sarah had invited Jane to spend Christmas with her and her family and it would be the perfect time to announce her news. Sarah knew that Jane had been corresponding with Daniel, but she did not yet know about his proposal. She wanted to keep it secret for a while, worrying that if she told anyone, it would break the magic spell which had been cast over her.

JANE WAS A LITTLE NERVOUS, however. She had never made such a long journey and she had never been on a train. She knew Sarah had traveled outside of New York and so she would make sure to ask her about it.

THERE WAS SO MUCH that Jane did not know and while it all felt a little frightening, she knew it was all a part of her journey towards finding happiness. George used to say that if something was scary, then it meant it was worth doing and Jane couldn't help but think that he was right.

CHAPTER 5



Jane could not wait to share her news about Daniel’s proposal. There was much to prepare for and many practicalities Jane had to take care of. Sarah and Jane had agreed to meet up for a walk around Central Park the following day. A part of Jane wondered if she might see the little girl again. It was highly unlikely, but stranger things had occurred, and Jane wanted a chance to say thank you.

MAYBE IT WAS SILLY, but Jane wondered if the powers that be had sent Clara as a way of letting Jane know that her life would be fine and that she would find happiness again. Maybe there was something magical to it all that she hadn’t considered.

EVEN IF IT WAS just pure coincidence, Jane still chose to believe that fate had intervened as it so often did in stories.

“HOW EXCITING FOR YOU, JANE,” Sarah exclaimed as they turned right to follow a small path past a garden of which Jane was particularly fond. “Truly,

I am delighted for you. I know this past year has been difficult. You deserve happiness.”

Hearing Sarah’s reaction to Jane’s proposal was a relief. It was not as though Jane needed her approval, but it would certainly make it less difficult to leave New York. Jane and Sarah had been friends for the better part of ten years and were indeed almost sisters to one another. In fact, it was Sarah who had introduced her and George. Jane would go so far as to say that Sarah was the only real family she had left in the world. Jane had never had a good relationship with her father, and he had always behaved abominably towards her. After her mother died, Jane did not see a point in keeping a close relationship with her father. Especially not after meeting and marrying George.

JANE REMEMBERED the day she met George down to the very last detail.

SARAH HAD BEEN HOSTING a social event, a picnic in the summer. Jane had not been feeling particularly motivated to attend, but as was always the case, Sarah convinced her. It would be good for her, she had said. Who knows, she might meet somebody who took her by surprise. It should have been obvious to Jane that Sarah had of course already had George in mind when she mentioned the event. It was rather annoying that she had been right. Once George and Jane were introduced, they spent almost all evening conversing with each other.

JANE LOVED Sarah with all her heart, but she did have a tendency to be immensely proud of her achievements and so when George proposed to Jane, it was Sarah who could not stop talking about it.

“I SHALL EXPECT A WEDDING INVITATION, of course,” said Sarah with certainty. “John has family out west and it would be a lovely holiday, indeed.”

“I AM certain that Daniel will not mind me having guests,” Jane replied. “Certainly not my dearest friend.”

JANE COULD TELL that her compliment turned Sarah’s cheek a little red. Even though they were close friends, Jane and Sarah were very different. Sarah was more outspoken than perhaps was common for a woman of her standing. She had never been afraid of speaking her mind and sometimes did so without considering the consequences beforehand. Jane, however, was quieter and more reserved. It wasn’t that she was shy or unable to speak her mind about things that mattered to her, it was just that Jane had never been one to enjoy being the center of attention. In fact, Jane had always preferred having a few close friends that she knew really well, instead of several friends of a more shallow nature.

“HAVE you decided when you are leaving New York, yet?” Sarah asked curiously as they passed the bench that marked the spot where Jane had met Clara. Directly across from the little pond. Jane looked around her, hoping she might see Clara and her stepfather, but sadly there was nobody else there except for a lady walking a dog.

“NOT A PRECISE DATE,” Jane confessed. “But we have decided that I shall

leave New York after Christmas. I told Daniel that you had very kindly invited me to spend Christmas with your family and I would not miss that for the world. Especially if it is to be the last Christmas we see each other for some time.”

“INDEED, and it might well be your last snowy Christmas. I am quite certain that there will not be much chance of snow in Texas.”

A CHUCKLE ESCAPED Jane’s lips. She would miss these walks and conversations with Sarah. She always had a way of making her laugh. Having friends with whom you could be entirely honest and your true authentic self was a blessing that Jane would always keep close to her heart, no matter what happened in life.

“DANIEL TELLS me that there is nothing quite like a picnic at the waterside on a Texan summer’s day,” Jane continued. “He seems to be quite the romantic, which is not what I expected after reading his advertisement.”

“WELL, I do hope that he lives up to his words,” said Sarah. “He sounds like a perfectly lovely man, and I do wish you the very best, even though I shall miss you dearly. You must remember to write often.”

JANE NODDED and promised Sarah that she would write as soon as she arrived in Savior Springs.

THEY STROLLED FOR A WHILE LONGER, talking about all manner of topics that might have made no sense to any passer-by. Finally, after almost an hour had passed, Sarah and Jane said their goodbyes.

“I MEAN IT, YOU KNOW,” confirmed Sarah. “I truly do hope that he makes you happy. You deserve nothing less, especially after all that has happened. It is what Daniel would want for you.”

JANE KNEW that Sara was right.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6



To Jane, time always seemed slow to pass, particularly when looking forward to an anticipated event. Now, however, was the exact opposite: time flew by far too quickly and before Jane knew it, she found herself standing on a platform at New York Station with a bag on either side of her.

For the occasion, Jane had chosen to wear her very finest clothes: a long dark green dress with a domed skirt. Over the dress, she wore a coat of a similar color as well as a white bonnet. The bonnet was her favorite item because she had inherited it from her mother a very long time ago. Wearing it reminded Jane of her mother and she hoped that wherever she was, she would be proud and smiling down at her from above.

“Now, are you sure you’ve got everything you need?” Sarah asked

Ever since leaving Sarah’s home, where Jane had been staying, her friend had not stopped fussing to make sure Jane had whatever she needed. She was very kind and thoughtful and so Jane did not mind. She simply smiled and assured Sarah that she would be perfectly alright.

“Okay, now then,” Sarah continued. “Make sure the conductor knows your stop because he will remind you when you are approaching. It is a long journey and if you sit down all through it, your legs will suffer when you finally arrive.”

“Even if I tell you that I know these things, you will not stop fussing, will you?” Jane teased

Sarah shook her head and tears began to form in her eyes. This surprised Jane because for as long as they had known each other, she had only once seen her friend cry and that was during Jane and George’s wedding.

“I will miss you greatly,” said Sarah. “Truly. I wish you a very safe journey and I shall await news of your safe arrival. Goodbye, Jane.”

“Goodbye, Sarah. Thank you for being a true friend all these years.”

The two friends hugged each other before Jane climbed aboard the train. Watching Sarah grow ever smaller as the train rolled out of the station, she knew that from now on things would be very different.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



*H*ad Jane been told that when she was twenty-four years of age, she'd be traveling across the country to another state to be married, she would have laughed. In fact, in Jane's mind, she had always thought that she'd never leave New York. It was the city in which she had been born and, she thought, the city in which she would surely have died at an old age. Instead, she was a passenger in the train car, looking out of the window at the landscape passing by.

There had been many people at the station and Jane wondered where they were traveling to. Just like she did in the park, Jane tried to guess the relationships between the people walking past her compartment. Some were old and others were young. There were families with young children who were excited to be on such an incredible adventure.

It was a long journey and Jane had books to read, sewing to do, and, of course, her journal in which to write. She did not know whether someone would be sharing her compartment, but for now, she had it all to herself.

Watching New York grow smaller was a strange experience. After a few hours, Jane thought that she could just watch the landscape pass by without ever getting bored. As a way to pass time, she reached into one of her bags for her journal and a pencil. She flipped to an empty page, but instead of keeping the journal vertically, she turned it so that the page was horizontal,

and then she began to sketch the landscape on view outside the window.

Jane was by no means an artist. However, she did enjoy focusing on a sketch without having to keep an eye on how much time had passed. Usually, she would sit on a bench in the park and capture the scene around her. Everything from the pond where she had met young Clara, to the gardens through which she strolled with Sarah, and the flock of pigeons seeking out treats to feed on.

The first time Jane had ever put a pencil to paper was when she was a little girl. One of the few memories she had of her Mama was watching her sitting in an armchair, quietly sketching while looking out the window and waiting for Jane's father to come home after a late night. Jane liked to think that she might have inherited her talent to draw from her Mama, but there was of course no way to know for sure.

"Pardon me, miss," came an unfamiliar voice. "Is this seat taken?"

Jane looked up from her sketch to see a young woman around her age standing in the doorway. She was dressed modestly in a long sky-blue dress and carried two bags with her, just like Jane.

"Not at all," Jane replied. "Please sit. Shall I help you with those bags?"

"Oh, that would be awfully kind of you."

A few moments later, Jane had put the woman's bags on the overhead rack above the seats opposite her. The young woman sat down and exhaled wearily with a sigh as she leaned back into the seat.

"Have you been on board for long?" the young woman asked curiously

"I departed from New York," Jane told her. "I am traveling to Texas."

"Oh, how exciting. Are you visiting family?"

"Actually, I am to be married to a Texan rancher."

"How exciting! How did you meet? Oh, how terribly rude of me. I have not even introduced myself and here I am asking intrusive questions. My name is Amelia. Amelia Hardwick."

"I am Jane Mellor and you were not rude at all. Very pleased to meet you.

Daniel and I have been corresponding for a good few months now and he has more recently proposed marriage.”

Amelia’s eyes grew wide, both with curiosity and a glint of awe. Surely Amelia must be aware of the matrimonial times because it was not an unusual way of finding a potential spouse. However, the look in her eyes was one of a woman with many questions. To be fair, though, a few weeks ago Jane was that woman.

“I have heard of women who move out west to marry and seek new fortunes, but I have never met one myself, until now,” said Amelia.

“If I am truly honest,” Jane admitted. “I would not have thought myself to be one of those women. However, my late husband passed away a year ago and I believe he would have wanted me to move on with my life. How about you? Where are you traveling to?”

“I am traveling to St Louis to stay with my sister for a while. She has recently had a baby and she needs some help around the house. Truthfully, I am looking forward to a change of scenery. Even cities such as Washington can feel like a small village where everybody knows everybody else’s business, even if you wished they did not.”

Jane nodded and could certainly relate to that feeling about New York. Even though they had only spoken for a few minutes, Jane already liked Amelia. She was talkative and curious, but also very friendly. For every question that she asked Jane, she seemed to have no problem at all answering them about herself as well. Jane had never been one to enjoy small talk, but instead of chatting about the weather, she and Jane discussed all manner of topics. It was clear to Jane that Amelia was a very quick-witted and intelligent woman, who was also very opinionated. She also found herself agreeing with Amelia on many of the topics they discussed, whether current affairs or relating to their hobbies.

“It has been a genuine pleasure to meet you, Jane Mellor,” Amelia said when they rolled in at the platform in St Louis. “You will write to me when

you reach Texas, won't you? I would love to hear about your adventures.”

“Of course!” said Jane excitedly. “I would love to.”

With that, Amelia disembarked from the train and a few moments later the train rolled out of the station, continuing onto its next destination.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



It was a good thing, Jane thought, that she had been blessed with patience as one of her virtues. Otherwise, the journey from New York to Texas would have felt never-ending. After Amelia had disembarked in St Louis, Jane was left alone in the compartment, for which she was quite happy. Although she did miss having someone to talk to, she was quite comfortable with her own company.

Besides, there was nothing dull about being onboard a train. Jane was alone in her compartment but she could still hear the hustle and bustle of the train. Now and again someone walked past to stretch their legs and Jane would sometimes catch a snippet of their conversation. Whenever the train stopped for passengers to disembark and board, Jane always found herself amazed by the difference in the landscape. She realized just how vast and majestic the country was and how little of it she had seen.

Jane had never envisioned herself traveling to other countries, she was far too fond of home for that. Occasionally, though, she did daydream about a life in grand cities such as Paris or London.

Even though Jane enjoyed the train journey, she had to admit that she was looking forward to sleeping in an actual bed again.

If she found that her legs were sore from sitting down too long, Jane walked up and down her section of the train and sometimes stopped by a

window to look out at the view around them. A few things surprised her about the train which probably seemed silly to those who were used to train travel.

One of the things that surprised Jane was the sheer speed of the train. She knew they were much faster than horseback, but having experienced it herself was different to hearing descriptions from others.

The second thing that surprised Jane was the extent of the noise made by the train. Even though her cabin was far from the engine of the train, she could still hear it very well. She'd barely slept that first night because of the noise and the new impressions, but it was better now that she was used to it. It was almost hard to imagine that only a few years ago, the train didn't exist and now it made travel to visit relatives easier who lived further away.

It was a surprisingly sunny winter's day when the train rolled into the station at Savior Springs, Texas. Jane knew it wouldn't be snowy like New York, but the fact that it was almost like the heat of summer had caught her rather off guard.

"This is it, Jane," she told herself. "Your new life."

Jane exhaled heavily to collect her reserve, after which she grabbed her bags and stepped off the train onto the platform.

Other than her, only two people disembarked from the train. Two men who seemed to be friends as they left the station together. Jane put her bags down beside her to take a look at her surroundings and familiarize herself with her new home.

The station was tiny. In fact, it consisted of just a platform with one wooden bench and a small hut that seemed to serve as the ticket office.

It wasn't even manned.

Jane knew that Savior Springs would be nothing like New York or the other large cities, but she hadn't expected it to be quite so isolated. However, even if something was new to begin with, it wouldn't take long before it became familiar. Jane simply had to give herself time to get used to it all.

The other strange thing that Jane quickly noticed was that she was now completely alone at the station. It was strange because, in their correspondence, Daniel had promised to meet her at the station. Yet, Daniel was nowhere to be seen, and, as far as Jane could tell, she was all alone on the platform.

At first, a million different thoughts of possible what-if scenarios ran through Jane's mind. What if she had arrived in the wrong town? What if Daniel had changed his mind and she simply had not received a letter saying just that?

For a while, Jane just stood on the platform and took it all in. There was no need to expect the worst, so she grabbed her carpetbag and started walking out of the station.

Now, Jane Mellor was not a woman who struggled to manage by herself, such as carrying heavy bags. However, she was unaccustomed to the warmth of the Texan sun as well as the terrain of the dirt road leading into town.

After about twenty minutes, Jane placed her bag beside her and looked up at the town in which she had just arrived.

Savior Springs looked exactly the way Daniel had described it in his letters. There were two rows of buildings on either side of her. Most, if not all of them, were storefronts and from what Jane could see, Savior Springs had all the amenities a small town could possibly need. There was a saloon a little further down the high street, as well as a tailor, a cobbler, and a general store.

Quite a few people were out and about. A woman and her child walked past Jane and gave her a wary glance. Jane had never liked being the center of attention and she was aware of how strange it must seem for a woman to just march into town with her bag of belongings.

"Excuse me, Miss." The voice belonged to a middle-aged gentleman with curly dark hair that fell just below his ears. He was smartly dressed in tailored pants and wore a vest and a frock coat. His eyes had a look of confusion mixed with curiosity.

“Are you lost?” he asked carefully.

“Oh, I should hope not,” Jane replied in a friendly voice. “Although, perhaps you could help me? I am looking for Mr. Daniel Harper.”

At the mention of Daniel’s name, the man winced in a way that didn’t quite sit right with Jane. The stranger definitely knew Daniel, but something told Jane that perhaps they did not get along well.

“If it is Mr. Harper you are looking for, Miss.....?” the man began.

“Jane,” Jane corrected. “Jane Mellor. Please just call me Jane.”

“Miss Jane. Well, if you see the Marshal, Harry Unsworth, he will tell you the whereabouts of your Mr. Harper.”

“And where might I find the Marshal?” Even saying the word made her head spin. The Marshal. That could not be good.

The gentleman spat out his tobacco and then turned around while gesturing for Jane to do the same.

“See that building towards the end, just next to the post office? That’s where you’ll find the Marshal. Oh and do tell him that Judd Knoxville would like to repay that favor with a drink at the saloon.”

“I will,” Jane said. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Knoxville.”

“Oh, please call me Judd. You look after yourself now, Miss Jane.”

Jane promised she would and once again picked up her carpetbag and made her way to the Marshal's office.

By the time she reached the Marshal’s office, Jane was absolutely exhausted. She hadn’t slept well or comfortably throughout the train journey and would kill for a rest on a soft mattress. Unfortunately, Jane had a feeling that she would not be getting a rest for at least a little while until she figured out what had happened to Daniel.

“Hello?” Jane called out as she walked through the doors of the Marshal’s office. “I am looking for Mr. Unsworth?”

“Here,” called a jolly voice and Jane sighed with relief. “And who are you, young miss?”

Harry Unsworth sat behind a desk reading a newspaper and smoking a pipe when Jane entered the room. He folded the newspaper and put it to one side as he looked up and met Jane's eyes. Just like Judd Knoxville, the Marshal had the look of perplexion as if he couldn't quite figure out what Jane was doing in town. Truthfully, Jane was starting to ask herself the same question and felt a bit like a fish out of water.

"Good morning, Miss," greeted the Marshal cheerfully. "I don't believe I've seen you around town before. What brings you to Savior Springs?"

"Is that obvious?" Jane chuckled.

"Well, we don't get many visitors hereabouts. Especially not young ladies such as yourself, miss. How may I be of service?"

"I am looking for a man by the name of Daniel Harper. I was told that you would be able to point me in his direction."

At this, the Marshal's eyebrows furrowed and the look in his eyes suddenly turned noticeably more serious.

"And who was it that told you to find me?" he asked matter-of-factly as he crossed his arms.

"Oh!" Jane exclaimed. "A very kind gentleman. I believe his name was Judd Knoxville. That reminds me, he asked me to tell you that he wants to repay your favor with a drink."

The Marshal chuckled and seemed to relax a little more, adjusting his posture so that he was sitting more upright.

"I'll be sure to take him up on that," the Marshal said. "Now then, if I may be so bold, what business do you have with Daniel Harper?"

"I have traveled from New York," Jane explained. "Daniel Harper and I have been corresponding by letter for quite some time now and I am here because I am to be his wife."

Jane wasn't sure exactly of the reaction she had expected from Harry Unsworth, but the look of disappointment mixed with concern in his eyes made Jane's heart drop.

“I am sorry to be the one to tell you, Miss...?” the Marshal began.

“Mellor. Jane Mellor,” Jane filled in. “Please tell me what has happened? I got the impression from Mr. Knoxville that perhaps something is not quite right? Is Daniel okay?”

“You have traveled a long way and you seem like a sweet girl, Miss Mellor. Unfortunately, as the town’s Marshal, it is my duty to tell you a truth that might not be what you wish to hear.”

“I am quite certain I can handle whatever truth you wish to speak, sir.” Inside she wasn’t quite so sure, but she had to know.

The Marshal walked around his desk and leaned just on the edge so that he was right in front of Jane.

“You are not the first woman to arrive in Savior Springs with the intention of marrying Daniel Harper,” he explained. “In fact, your arrival is the very reason he is in jail.”

“Jail?!” Jane gasped. “Whatever for? Surely there must be a mistake of some kind?”

“There is no mistake, Miss. Just like yourself, other women have traveled to Savior Springs with the hope of marrying Mr. Harper only to find that he has rejected them.”

Even though Jane heard the words coming out of the Marshal’s mouth, it was as if her brain did not want to understand them. This did not match the personality of the same Daniel with whom Jane had been corresponding for weeks. Jane had the impression of a kind and hardworking man who had suffered losses in his life but had decided to start life anew by marrying again. In the letters, Daniel had written to Jane, he explained that he wished to become a father one day and how he wanted to marry a woman who truly understood him.

For weeks, Jane was certain that she was that woman and that they had connected during those weeks of correspondence. Could the words spoken by the Marshal really be the truth? Had she allowed herself to be fooled? Jane

could just about hear her father's angry voice in her mind, mocking her for making such foolish decisions. George who had passed away and now Daniel, who may or may not be a fraudster.

"What happened to those other women?" Jane asked, keeping herself as calm and collected as always.

The Marshal was quiet for a few moments as if he was silently pondering what to tell her.

"Most of the girls took up work in the saloons," the Marshal explained. "There's quite a few of them in the area."

"Surely a man is allowed to change his mind about marriage if he does not deem the bride suitable?" Jane put to the lawman.

"Well indeed, Miss. It is, however, not right to lure a woman across the country with false intentions."

"Is Mr. Harper here right now?"

"Yes, he is."

"May I speak with him?"

"I do not believe that would be appropriate."

Jane exhaled a frustrated sigh. She could feel the emotions bubbling inside her and she wasn't sure what to do. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't upset. The man she thought she'd been getting to know was a liar and a charlatan. Most of all, Jane was angry with herself for being so gullible and trusting. She could easily imagine the look on her father's face if he ever found out and he would surely mock her for it. Sarah might be more sympathetic towards her, but Jane did not want her friend to pity her.

It's okay, Jane, she thought. Everything will be fine.

"Miss, why don't you sit down?" Harry suggested. "I'll get you a glass of water."

Harry left the room to get her a drink of water and her tears immediately began to well up and stream down Jane's face. She hated crying in front of people, especially ones she didn't know because it made her feel vulnerable

and exposed.

At that moment, though, Jane was frightened.

“I’m so sorry,” Jane apologized as she dried her tears. “How terribly rude of me to barge into your office and then burst into tears.”

“Oh, you needn’t apologize, Miss,” Harry assured her as he put the glass of water on the desk. “You’ve had a long journey and must be tired. There’s an inn just up the road that has some rooms available. I know the landlady’s family and if you mention my name, she’ll give you a discount.”

“Thank you.”

Jane dried the last of her tears and took a sip of water. Maybe it was just her mind playing tricks on her, but she thought the water tasted differently from New York’s water. It was almost fresher.

“I’ll walk you over to the inn,” Harry offered.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly take up more of your time, Mr. Unsworth,” Jane protested.

“Harry, please. Mr. Unsworth was my father’s name.”

“Harry. Thank you for telling me the truth about Mr. Harper and for being so kind. I assure you that I am not usually like this. You are right, though, a good rest will definitely do me some good.”

At first, it looked as though Harry was about to protest again, but he closed his mouth instead and sighed in defeat.

“Alright then, Miss,” he said. “Good luck.”

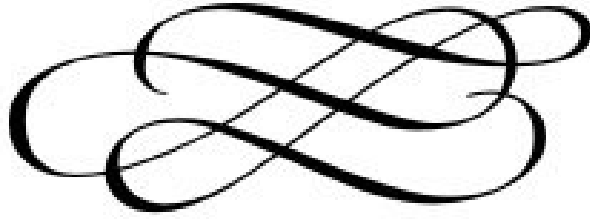
“Thank you.”

Harry nodded and tipped his hat and just like that, Jane was out the door again with her carpetbag in one hand. Hopefully, the inn would be quiet and she could rest for a couple of hours. However, she also needed to make plans to figure out what to do next. While Jane didn’t know exactly *what* to do, she did know that it would not be easy.

Whatever happened, though, she knew one thing for certain: she was in need of a good meal after the bread she had taken on the train.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Just as the Marshal said, the landlady of the Inn, Mrs. Keeling, was a kind woman. From the moment Jane walked in through the doors, Mrs. Keeling saw that she was exhausted and immediately helped her to check into a room. In fact, she even drew a hot bath that was ready for Jane to soak in as soon as she had settled.

THE ROOM JANE was assigned was small, to say the least. It had a single bed, a small bedside table, a desk, and a chest of drawers. Its only small window faced the high street, which was starting to show increased signs of life.

BEING in a new town was a strange feeling and Jane didn't like the situation she'd found herself in. She couldn't possibly blame anyone but herself because her decisions had led her to this very moment. She could just about hear her father's laughter echoing like thunder in her head.

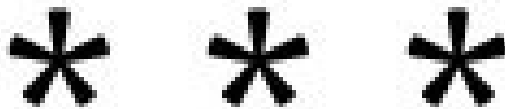
THE BATH WAS EXACTLY what Jane needed. Just lying in the tub and allowing her body to absorb the water while she inhaled the lovely flowery scents,

Jane was ready to all but fall asleep while soaking. After the bath, she thanked Mrs. Keeling for her kindness. Mrs. Keeling, who wore her graying hair in a knot and was dressed in a lovely dark blue dress, simply smiled at her.

“YOU REMIND ME OF MY DAUGHTER,” Mrs. Keeling had said. “She has recently married and now lives in Chicago.”

THE LANDLADY TOLD Jane a little more about her daughter and even though she was tired, Jane hadn't the heart to interrupt the older lady. When Jane asked where she could eat., Mrs. Keeling kindly offered to Jane a serving of her homemade stew. Had Mrs. Keeling offered her nothing more than gruel, Jane would have devoured it with relish to satisfy her growling stomach, being that she was entirely fed up with a diet of bread.

ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, with her stomach filled by the tastiest stew she had ever eaten, Jane crawled between the sheets on the bed and fell asleep before her head so much as settled on the pillow. She was still upset about Daniel and overwhelmed by everything that had happened since her arrival in Savior Springs, but knowing that there were kind people like Mrs. Keeling had Jane feeling more relaxed.



IT WAS dark outside when Jane woke up. She had only intended to sleep for a couple of hours, but she must have needed the rest. Jane often dreamt very vividly, but she had slept to wake with no memory of any dreams when she opened her eyes. She must have needed the sleep more than she thought and her muscles had definitely taken somewhat of a beating after having slept so uncomfortably on the train journey.

JANE STIFLED a yawn before sitting up.

AFTER ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED, she had more than a great deal to think over.

DANIEL, the man with whom she had been corresponding and shared her life story, was a confidence trickster. That was the simple truth of it and even though Jane wished there had been a mistake or a misunderstanding of some kind, she knew in her heart that all the Marshal had told her was true.

THE QUESTION REMAINING WAS an important one: what was she to do?

THE SIMPLE ANSWER and perhaps the safest would be for Jane to simply buy a ticket in the morning for the next train back to New York. She would, of course, have to face the embarrassment of admitting her folly.

JANE KNEW that Sarah would be kind and understanding about it. She could hear her friend telling her that these things happen more often than one might

think and that Jane need not blame herself. It was the other women in their social circle who worried Jane. Some of them were less kindhearted and loved tasty morsels of gossip.

IN NEW YORK, and certainly other places as well, gossip was worth its weight in gold. A fact that Jane knew all too well.

JANE KNEW that if she went back to New York, she would have to deal with the repercussions of her mistakes. Going back to New York also meant going home to a familiar and safe place, but one also filled with sad memories.

WHAT IF, Jane thought, she didn't go back to New York? What if, despite everything, she stayed in Savior Falls?

Sure, it was a small town and life here was very different from life in New York, but at least here she didn't know anyone. She could start life over and make her own way in the world, even without a husband. Mrs. Keeling owned an inn and was a very successful businesswoman by the looks of things, so why should Jane not try to do the same?

IN THE MORNING, Jane would make sure to ask Mrs. Keeling if there was any work to be had in town or perhaps even at the inn. She had some money saved that would last her a few months, but beyond that Jane would need a plan.

YES, she thought, that would be a good start.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



“Good morning, Jane. Did you sleep well?”

Jane had, to her surprise, slept very well indeed. At first she thought it would be difficult to sleep through the night after having slept in the day, but that wasn't the case. Jane had fallen asleep again, to even have some dreams that she vaguely recalled in the morning as the first rays of sunshine peered through the window.

“I slept like a log,” Jane replied. “A bath and the stew truly did wonders. Thank you so much.”

“Oh, it's no bother at all, dear,” said Mrs. Keeling with a smile. “What will you be doing today, if you don't mind me asking?”

“I don't mind at all. Actually, I wanted to ask whether you know of any work opportunities available right now? I think I'll be staying in town for a while.”

Mrs. Keeling said nothing at first. Her eyebrows furrowed as if she was pondering the answer to Jane's question.

“There's a mercantile just across the road,” Mrs. Keeling said. “It's run by Mr. Browning, who is a lovely man. However, between you and I, he is getting older and can't quite run the business on his own anymore. Tell him that I sent you and I'm sure he'll be happy to offer you some work.”

“Thank you so much,” Jane said. “Everyone here is so kind.”

“It’s no bother at all, dear. Savior Springs is the kind of town where everyone is welcome. Now then, would you like some breakfast before you go out?”

“Yes, please, that would be lovely.”



AFTER BREAKFAST, which consisted of oatmeal and a cup of tea since Jane had never liked coffee, Jane decided to explore what there was to see in Savior Springs. She felt more relaxed now that she had made the decision to remain in the town. The locals were friendly and Jane was certain that if she did her best and was kind to others, Savior Springs would be a good place for her to settle, even without a husband.

In New York, everything was big and sometimes you had to walk for quite a while before reaching your destination. In Savior Springs, it was the exact opposite. The mercantile Mrs. Keeling had mentioned was literally a stone’s throw from the inn. No wonder everyone felt so safe in a community where everything was so nearby.

The OPEN sign hung on the mercantile door, but when Jane carefully opened it, she was met by silence.

“Hello? Is there anyone here?” she called out, wondering if perhaps she should come back later.

The interior of the store was bigger than it seemed from the outside and stocked everything a mercantile could possibly need. There were shelves of pots and pans, as well as a wall display of canned goods. Cooking utensils and farm equipment were stacked and packed and displayed, constituting all

that a rural area might need by way of supplies.

Just as Jane was about to leave the store with the intention of returning later, she heard footsteps upstairs. A few moments later, a man she assumed to be Mr. Browning walked into the store.

Mr. Browning appeared to be in his late 50s or early 60s. He was a somewhat stout man who wore black trousers and a white shirt under a brown waistcoat. A pair of round glasses rested on his nose and Jane also noticed the silver chain of a fob watch in his pocket.

“Good morning, dear,” Mr. Browning greeted warmly. “I haven’t seen your face in these parts before. Are you passing by Savior Springs?”

“As it turns out, I moved here only yesterday,” Jane explained. “From New York.”

Mr. Browning lifted his glasses and dusted them off with a handkerchief while he studied Jane.

“New York?” he questioned. “You’re a long way from New York. What brings you to our little corner of the world?”

Jane told Mr. Browning about her journey from New York and all that had happened since she arrived in town. Mr. Browning listened intently to her story without interrupting and when Jane had finished telling her story, there was a brief moment of silence between them.

“You’ve had quite an adventure, dear,” Mr Browning chuckled, although there was no malice in his voice. “Are you sure you wish to remain in Savior Springs?”

“Yes.” Jane nodded. “I want to make a life for myself here. I think I could be very happy living here.”

“In that case, we had best think of getting you some work. I could certainly use a hand around the store if you don’t mind that sort of thing?”

Jane was so relieved to hear those words from Mr. Browning.

“I wouldn’t mind at all!” she beamed excitedly. “I’d be more than glad to help out. When can I start?”

Mr. Browning laughed warmly and heartily at Jane's enthusiasm and was about to reply when the bell over the door rang, signaling someone entering the store.

"Ah! Mr. Unsworth!" Mr. Browning exclaimed. "Your order hasn't arrived yet, I'm afraid. Perhaps tomorrow, if we are lucky."

"Actually, I came to check in on Miss Mellor. I went to the Inn, but Mrs. Keeling said that you were over here. I thought perhaps you had decided to go back to New York?"

This surprised Jane. Sure, the Marshal had been kind to her yesterday and helped her way more than he'd needed to, but Jane got the impression that she'd been rather a nuisance. Besides, she'd have thought that it must get terribly frustrating to always have to tell these women that the promise of marriage was nothing but fake.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Unsworth," said Jane. "But, I have decided to stay in Savior Springs. In fact, Mr. Browning has just offered me a job at this very moment."

Jane could tell by the look on the Marshal's face that he was embarrassed by his choice of words and Jane felt bad. Maybe she had been a little too harsh, but it had been a long couple of days and Jane was tired. She didn't want her journey to Texas to have been in vain and felt like she needed to defend her intentions to stay.

"I am glad you came by," Jane continued. "I wanted to thank you for your help yesterday and for telling me the truth about Da...Mr. Harper."

"It's no trouble at all, Miss Mellor," said the Marshal. "I was only doing my job."

"Well, you saved me a great deal of trouble and embarrassment, nonetheless."

Had Jane not known better, she could have sworn she saw the slightest hint of a blush on the Marshal's cheeks.

"In that case, I guess I should welcome you to your new home," he

managed after a while. “If you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

With that, the Marshal lifted his hat slightly and left the mercantile.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



Just like that, Savior Springs became Jane's new home. It was amazing how quickly something that used to be unfamiliar and frightening became safe and ordinary.

Jane decided to stay at the Inn until she had enough money saved to afford her own place to rent. Every morning, she woke up and had breakfast with Mrs. Keeling, who had become almost like a mother to her. Following breakfast, she walked across the road to the mercantile where she spent the day. Jane had been a little nervous at first about what the good people of Savior Springs might think of this newcomer, but she soon found that they were all friendly and more than anything just curious about her.

Jane happily told them about her old life in New York and that she had come to Savior Springs to make a new life for herself and to build happy memories rather than sad ones.

Working in the shop was fairly easy and Jane found joy in helping Mr. Browning to run the mercantile. For the most part, business was good, and Jane made a little money that she was able to save towards renting a place of her own. Truthfully, even if she was not paid, she'd happily help out anyway because Mr. Browning was such a sweet man. He treated her with kindness and fairness.

Jane had not forgotten to write to both Sarah and Amelia, whom she had

met on the train. At first, Sarah had tried to persuade her to come back to New York after finding out that Daniel was a fraud, but Jane assured her that she was happy and content staying in Savior Springs.

So it was that winter turned into spring and before Jane knew it, she had become very fond of her new life.

One Monday morning as she stood behind the counter at the mercantile, sorting out receipts and making sure the list of orders was as it should be, she noticed Mr. Browning looking a bit pensive.

“Is everything alright, Mr. Browning?” Jane asked and stopped what she was doing. Despite his age, the older man was in relatively good health, but over the past couple of months, Jane had noticed that he needed to take it a little easier. She didn’t mind doing more of the heavy work because she enjoyed it. There was something about the look on Mr. Browning’s face, however, that felt strange and Jane couldn’t quite put her finger on exactly what that was.

“Hmm? Oh yes, I was just a bit lost in my own thoughts,” Mr. Browning explained.

While that was certainly true, Jane could tell there was something else on his mind as well and she wondered what it was.

“It’s just that it seems like something is bothering you, if you don’t mind me saying so?” Jane said as she leaned forward with her arms on the counter.

“Nothing escapes you, does it?” Mr. Browning chuckled. “You are right, though. I have been thinking, but it is not really my place to comment on it.”

Normally, Mr. Browning was a man with a good sense of humor and whenever Jane was at work, there was a lot of laughter between them. That’s not to say that he wasn’t very serious about his business and it had become clear to Jane since she started work that the people of Savior Springs held him in the highest regard.

“You have been very good to me since I moved here, Mr. Browning,” said Jane. “You are always welcome to speak freely about your opinions, no

matter what they might be.”

He placed a couple of items on a shelf and then turned so that he was facing Jane.

“It’s just that I can’t help but notice that Harry has been coming by the store more frequently since you started working here,” Mr. Browning began. “I know that the trouble with Mr. Harper was a bit of a setback for you, but you seem to be happy here in town and well, Harry has never been wed. You two have a lot in common and seem to like each other’s company. Perhaps, he might be a good match for you?”

Jane fell silent as she considered the man’s words. Mostly, because she simply did not know what to say. Mr. Browning wasn’t wrong in that the Marshal had been coming by the shop very frequently, but there was nothing strange about that. After all, it was his job to make sure that the town and its businesses were safe. Harry had never behaved in such a manner that might suggest he would be interested in marrying Jane.

Instead of responding with words, Jane burst out laughing, which surprised both her and the shopkeeper.

Harry was kind and Jane always enjoyed talking with him when he visited the store, but he was only doing his job as a marshal. Jane was certain that Harry had similar conversations with the other shopkeepers and townsfolk. The idea that he would stop by the mercantile simply to speak with her was ridiculous.

“I apologize for my reaction, Mr. Browning.” Jane apologized as she caught her breath. “It’s just that I do not believe that the marshal sees me in that way at all.”

“Perhaps not and it is, of course, your choice whether to pursue it or not, but I was simply making observations. Now then, would you mind quickly running across the road to the tailor’s and picking up the order from the other day? There’s not much business today, so I think we can close up the store early and maybe have ourselves a cup of tea, don’t you think?”

“Certainly.”

Even though Jane carried about her day as normal, the words spoken by Mr. Browning still whirled around in the back of her mind and she could not help but think that the old man might have a point.



“I THINK Mr. Browning is right. We can all see it, Jane.”

It was later that afternoon, and the sun was about to begin its journey below the horizon, turning the color of the sky shift to various shades of pink and orange. Jane was having tea with three women with whom she had formed a close friendship over the past couple of months. They all sat on the porch of Jane’s house, which she was renting with the money earned from her work at the mercantile.

It wasn’t a big house by any means. It had a small cooking area, a bed in the corner, a desk, and, most importantly, a porch. Jane always spent her evenings rocking in a chair on the porch, just watching the world go by under the evening sun. She enjoyed listening to the sound of crickets chirping in the grass around her and taking in all the scents and smells that were new to her.

During her first few weeks in Savior Springs, Jane worried that perhaps the women in town would find her strange and therefore not want to make her acquaintance or be her friend. Those concerns were soon proven wrong, and Jane found that she had much more of a social life than she had in New York. Sure, she missed those Wednesday afternoon teas at Sarah’s house, but the only person she’d really been friends with was Sarah. Jane knew for a fact that the other women thought her rather an oddball. Not that she necessarily

cared about other people's opinions of her, but she was grateful that Savior Springs was different.

"Everyone?" Jane asked. "You mean people are talking about it?"

"Of course people are talking about it," said Annie, a young woman originally all the way from Illinois. "It's the only exciting thing currently happening in town."

Jane didn't like being the center of attention and she felt a bit foolish for not even noticing the things people were saying. Ever since Mr. Browning mentioned that she and Harry would be a good match, Jane had found it difficult to behave normally around the Marshal whenever he came into the store.

Truthfully, Jane would be lying if she said she had not thought about Harry. He was a kind, strong and handsome man with a gentle heart. She enjoyed their conversations and sometimes it felt as though time stopped when they were in each other's presence.

"You do like him a little, don't you?" teased Charlotte, a woman with long, blonde hair that she always wore in a braid, who spoke with a heavy Texan accent.

"I...I don't know," Jane felt her cheeks flush red with embarrassment. "He is rather handsome and kind, but I do not believe he even thinks of me in such a way."

"Well, in that case, you surely need a pair of spectacles," Annie pointed out. "It is clear to us that he has taken an interest in you. Being the Marshal's wife would not be so bad."

No, Jane thought, *it would not*. Even if Jane felt something for the Marshal, she did not know what to do about it. The whole purpose of her moving out west had been to find a suitable man to marry, but over the past few months Jane had been busy making herself at home in Savior Springs and quite frankly had forgotten about that.

Jane was certain that she still wanted to marry and perhaps even have

children in the near future. She just hadn't considered that the Marshal might be that man and now she couldn't stop thinking about it.

"You are blushing like a cherry blossom tree, Jane," Charlotte chuckled. "There is no denying it."

Jane buried her face in her hands as the three friends laughed.

"What should I do?" Jane asked. "I cannot very well approach him about it. It would be rude."

"Perhaps one might suggest," Charlotte replied. "That you simply strike up a conversation with him that is not just about the store."

Jane exhaled a heavy sigh, realizing that her friends were right. She was a little scared, though, and certainly did not want to be too forward in case it turned out that she had gotten it all wrong.

CHAPTER 12



A couple of days later, Jane went to work and found that Mr. Browning was feeling unwell. At first, he tried to tell Jane that he would be perfectly capable of running the store, but she could see that he was feeling ill and so she insisted that he spend the day at rest. By now, Jane was comfortable running the store and knew most of the customers by name, so she felt confident she would be able to do a good job even without Mr. Browning.

EVEN THOUGH MR. BROWNING was fit and healthy, it was still clear that age was catching up with him. There were times when Jane could tell he was in pain after having reached for items from a shelf or when sitting down too quickly. However, Jane also understood that Mr. Browning was a man with a lot of pride and so she knew much better than to question his choices.

THE OLD MAN respected her and was kind to her and, therefore, Jane was kind to him and respected him.

MOSTLY, running the store meant making sure the shelves were stocked with the right items, handling the register, and taking payments from customers. Over the past few months, Jane had learned that the mercantile was also where people stopped for a chat, and quite often that involved the local gossip.

FOR A TOWN as small as Savior Springs, there was rather a lot of gossip going around the town. Within less than two days of living there, almost everyone Jane had spoken to knew her name and that she had moved from New York with the hopes of marrying Daniel Harper.

JANE HAD BEEN TERRIFIED that the townsfolk would think her just another foolish woman who had fallen for Harper's plot. Admittedly, Jane knew that she hadn't been the first woman to fall for Daniel's scheme, but she had been so enchanted by the idea of finding her happily ever after in the matrimonial times. Every so often, Jane also thought about the little girl she had met in Central Park, Clara, and wondered how she was getting along. A part of her wished that she knew Clara's surname so that she might be able to write her a letter thanking her, but perhaps that was a silly notion.

The gossip in Savior Springs was quite different from the gossip in New York and even though Jane did not partake in it herself, she did listen. It was a good way to get to know the townsfolk and as a result of lending them an ear, Jane was often invited over for tea or for lunch, which she of course gratefully accepted.

THAT DAY, the shop was particularly quiet and so Jane was free to serve Mr. Browning her soup in between serving customers. Thankfully, the

shopkeeper seemed to simply have a case of the common cold and Jane guessed that he would be feeling much better in the next day or so.

JANE RECALLED a time when she'd had to look after George when he was unwell and feverish. She remembered being frightened when the fever spiked, knowing how dangerous it could be. Thankfully, George recovered quickly, and Jane hoped that Mr. Browning would do so as well.

“YOU ARE TOO KIND to me, Jane,” said Mr. Browning as he sat up in bed. “Harry would be lucky to have you as his wife, you know.”

“I AM ONLY DOING what any good soul would do,” Jane told him. “It’s really no trouble at all. Rest up now, I will be up a little later.”

AFTER MAKING sure Mr. Browning was comfortably tucked beneath warm blankets with a soup bowl in his hands, Jane went back downstairs to keep an eye on the shop.

Mr. Browning lived in the living quarters upstairs and so it wasn't a long way for Jane to go to check on him. It was usually fine to leave the store unattended for a few moments.

JANE SET her foot on the last step into the store and heard a noise that caught her off guard. At first, she thought that a customer was browsing around the store while waiting for someone to serve them. However, when Jane listened to the conversation, she realized that the intention was far more sinister.

CAREFULLY, she walked towards the back door of the store and saw two men standing by the counter. One of them was tall and blond while the other was shorter and stouter with brownish hair. To Jane's horror, she saw that the shorter of the two had his hands in the tin box where all the money was kept.

"WHAT DO you think you are doing?"

THE TWO MEN stopped what they were doing and caused quite the ruckus with items falling off the counter. Instead of staying in the store where it was safe, Jane hurriedly followed them outside. She didn't have a plan and in fact, did not know what to do, she just did not want them to get away with stealing Mr. Browning's money.

JANE WALKED along the side of the wooden building and as she was about to round the corner, the tall blond man appeared. Before Jane had a chance to say or do anything, the outlaw grabbed her by the waist, and she could feel his awful sharp nails dig into the fabric of her clothes.

"LET ME GO!" Jane screamed. "Please!"

"I DON'T THINK SO, GIRL," the man said with a sneer. "You're coming with us."

JANE'S HEART was beating so fast that she thought it might very well leap out of her chest. She wanted to fight the man, but his grip on her was too tight as he flung her onto the horse. Jane continued to scream and struggle and just as she thought they were going to get away with their crime and with *her*, a gunshot rang out loudly.

“WELL, WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE?” came Harry's voice. “I haven't seen you boys around these parts before.”

“WHY DON'T you mind your own business and you won't have to see us around these parts ever again,” said the short man.

JANE CAUGHT Harry's eye and even though she was glad that he was there, she was still very frightened by the whole situation. It was not how she had imagined this day to go.

“I'M afraid I can't do that, fellas,” Harry said. “You see, I am the marshal of this town and as such, it is my job to protect its establishment and its people. Now, I'm going to give you a choice.”

“OH YEAH?” said the taller of the two outlaws. “What kind of choice would that be?”

“OH, it's very simple. Put this young lady down and leave town forever or

there will be trouble. You mark my words.”

AT FIRST, Jane thought that the outlaws would laugh off Harry’s threat and ride away with her anyway. Instead, they did just the opposite and released Jane before galloping out of Savior Springs.

JANE FELT HERSELF SHAKING, still filled with fear after the awful event. She ran into Harry’s arms, much to his surprise.

“THANK GOODNESS YOU WERE HERE,” Jane gushed. “I was so scared. Thank you for saving me from those awful men.”

BEFORE JANE COULD SPEAK her mind further, a horrible thought came to her. Harry might have saved her life, but those men had made off with Mr. Browning’s money. When Jane realized that, she burst out crying. She would never be able to forgive herself for being so reckless simply because she had forgotten to make sure a door was locked.

“What is it, Jane?” Harry asked worriedly. “Did they hurt you?”

“No.” Jane sniffed. “It’s just...they got away with Mr. Browning’s money. There’s not much left at all.”

“HOW MUCH IS LEFT?”

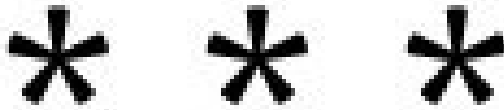
Jane reached down and picked up the tin box from the ground. Inside, a

few coins covered the bottom of the tin, making Jane feel even worse.

“NOT MORE THAN THREE DOLLARS,” Jane said. “There was at least ten in there.”

SHE SHOWED Harry the tin and when she looked up at him, she saw his eyes darken and a serious expression came into his eyes.

“YOU GO BACK to the store, and I’ll pursue those men to get the money back,” Harry assured her as he mounted his horse and rode away.



JANE KNEW that there was no way Harry would be able to catch up with the men. They were too far gone and probably knew of many secret places in which to hide. In her mind, Jane had already gone through many scenarios of what to tell Mr. Browning. She could use some of her saved wages to make sure the lost money was accounted for, as it was her fault it had been stolen in the first place.

THEREFORE, it surprised Jane when Harry walked into the store no more than a half-hour later, just as he had said, bearing the sum of seven dollars and

twenty four cents in change. Jane knew that he hadn't caught up with the outlaws, but truthfully, she did not care. The money was accounted for, and she would not have to tell the shopkeeper that it had been stolen at all.

“THANK YOU, HARRY,” Jane thanked him as she placed the money tin back on the counter. A heavy weight was lifted off her chest as she breathed out all the previous anxiety and fear. “I know you didn't follow the men and I am so grateful for your generosity and your help.”

“THERE'S no need to thank me, Jane,” Harry assured her. “I am only doing my job, after all.”

“WELL, Savior Springs is lucky to have a marshal such as yourself.”

HARRY CHUCKLED and Jane could swear she saw the slightest hint of a blush on his cheeks. She began tidying the counter and clearing up the mess left by the outlaws. She then became aware that Harry was still there.

“JANE, there is something I would like to ask you,” the marshal approached her with his hands in his pockets like a schoolboy talking to a girl he took a liking to. “Might you be free on Sunday after church? I know a place by the creek and thought that perhaps we could have a picnic.”

JANE ALMOST DROPPED the broom she'd been holding and felt herself blush,

undoubtedly more noticeably than Harry. She knew very well that the other women in town thought she and Harry were a good match. And of course, Mr. Browning would not stop talking about it. Sure, Jane very much enjoyed Harry's company whenever he visited the store. He was handsome, funny, and smart. He always listened to what she had to say, and he never thought her opinions or ways of thinking were silly.

TRUTHFULLY, Jane was a little scared. When she thought she would marry Daniel, she thought it would be easy. After learning about the real Daniel, Jane was worried she might be misled again. She didn't truly think Harry was dishonest about his intention, especially after his show of character after the theft, but the thoughts were still in Jane's head.

"I WOULD LOVE to have a picnic with you, Harry," Jane answered finally, and Harry seemed almost relieved that her response was positive.

"WONDERFUL. I look forward to seeing you then. Goodbye for now, Jane."

SHE NODDED her head and smiled as he left the store.

CHAPTER 13



*A*fter Harry left the mercantile, Jane told Mr. Browning what had transpired earlier. At first, the old man was worried about Jane and wondered if she had been hurt. She explained that thanks to Harry's bravery, all the money was accounted for. Mr. Browning expressed his guilt over leaving Jane alone to deal with such a terrible ordeal, but Jane assured him that everything was fine. Truthfully, she was much happier that Mr. Browning had been upstairs and safe and sound instead of facing the two outlaws.

The truth was, Jane was more than aware of how badly things could have turned out had the outlaws managed to ride off with her. She truly owed Harry an incredible debt that she would never be able to repay. Then again, Jane also had a feeling that Harry Unsworth was a man who wouldn't see it as any kind of favor owed by her because he was merely doing his job as a Marshal.

Jane counted the days until Sunday. She could hardly sleep for excitement at the idea of picnicking with Harry. She always dressed properly and smartly for church on Sunday, but this Sunday she wanted to look her very best. So Jane decided to wear her favorite sky-blue dress that she hadn't worn since leaving New York.

Other than the store, the church was a gathering place for the townsfolk

on Sundays. Jane usually sat in one of the center pews next to either Mr. Browning or her lady friends.

It was a struggle to pay attention to the service, even though she was usually keen to hear the pastor preach. Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, the service was over and Jane almost leaped out of her seat to meet Harry outside the church. Some of her friends giggled when they walked past Jane and she knew she would have to tell them all about the picnic afterwards.

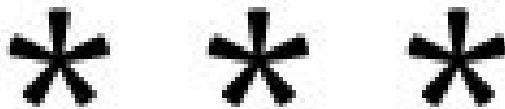
It seemed as though Harry had also decided to wear his finest clothes, a red waistcoat over a white shirt, paired with black pants. When he saw Jane, he walked up to her, carrying a woven picnic basket in one hand and his hat in the other.

“Good morning,” Jane said formally.

“Hello, you are looking lovely today. ” Harry replied in an effort to ease the obvious tension “Are you ready to go?”

She reddened slightly at his kind words. “Yes, very much so.”

Harry offered his arm which Jane hooked into hers and they made their way on foot in the direction of the creek.



EVEN THOUGH JANE had been living in Savior Springs for a few months now, she had never been to the creek. She had simply been too busy getting used to her new life and working at the mercantile. Sitting at the creek with the grass caressing her hands, she felt at peace. Above them, a few clouds floated by, and Jane heard birdsong all around them.

It was a fairly simple picnic. Harry had brought lemonade, bread with cheese, and chocolate. Despite the lack of diversity in the picnic basket, Jane was happy.

“That one looks like a sheep, don’t you think?” Jane said as she pointed up at a particular cloud above them.

“You’re right!” Harry agreed. “What about that one? Looks a bit like a rabbit, I think.”

“I love rabbits. When I was a little girl, there was a place in Central Park where you could sometimes see them just peacefully going about their day without so much as a care in the world.”

“Do you miss it? New York, I mean.”

Jane thought for a while. She didn’t necessarily miss New York as a city, but she missed some of the people she had shared her life within the city. For instance, she missed Sarah and their long walks around the park. She also missed her daily routine and enjoying a cup of tea at the small café around the corner from her tenement.

She had so many memories of New York that were tied to specific people, like George and Sarah and even her parents. Jane had never lived anywhere she could be who she wanted to be and make entirely new memories. That was a gift that Savior Springs had given her, even though making her way had at times been rather difficult.

Had it not been for the kindness of the townsfolk, Jane would still be struggling and might even have made the decision to give up entirely.

“There are some things I miss, like my best friend Sarah,” Jane admitted. “However, Savior Springs has all I could possibly want, and I am happy here. It’s peaceful, safe, and close to nature in a way that New York wasn’t.”

“Do you think you might go back someday?” Harry asked with a slight hint of concern in his voice.

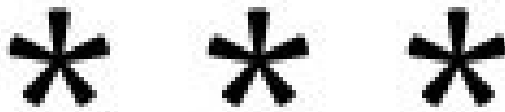
“No. This is my home now.”

“I am very happy to hear that.”

“So am I.”

Jane blushed, which she always seemed to do in Harry’s presence, but she agreed with him. In fact, she was more than happy that she had made the decision to stay in Savior Springs, despite the awful business with Daniel.

Harry was unlike any man she had ever met before. He was different from George both in appearance and behavior, but not at all in a bad way.



JANE AND HARRY spent the better part of the afternoon at the small creek. They talked about everything and nothing. She learned that Harry was the oldest of three children. Both of his sisters were married and lived in other areas of Texas. Despite living in the same general part of the country, there was not much time for them to visit each other. Harry had explained that the last time he’d seen them both was at the christening of his youngest niece some months before. They did keep in touch through letters, which excited Jane because she adored writing letters.

Even during the moments of silence, Jane was still comfortable in Harry’s company. At first, she’d been a little worried that their conversations might prove somewhat dull since they hadn’t spent time together outside of his brief visits to the mercantile.

“So, when will you see him again?” Charlotte asked a couple of days later when the ladies were having tea on Jane’s porch.

“This Sunday, after church,” Jane replied as she reached for the cup of tea in front of her. “He said he has a special place he wants to show me and when I asked where it was, he said I would simply have to wait to see.”

Both Annie and Charlotte *oohed and aahed* and then giggled. Jane felt as though she was a schoolgirl again, but she had forgotten how much she had missed the feeling of anticipation before seeing someone. She had no idea where Harry was going to take her on Sunday and a part of her wanted to know so that she could prepare, but that would take away the mystery of it all.

“You know, Jane,” Annie began. “For as long as I have known Harry Unsworth, I have never known him to be quite so taken with a woman as he is with you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jane blurted while shaking her head. “I am sure there have been countless other women who have taken to him.”

“Oh certainly, *they* have taken to him,” Annie confirmed. “But he has had no interest in anyone. In all honesty, Jane, some of us were starting to lose hope of him ever finding the woman of his dreams... until you came along.”

“I am not the woman of his dreams.”

“Then why has he asked to see you again?” Charlotte teased. “Do not tell us that even now, after he has clearly shown an interest in you by asking you to a picnic, you do not believe his intentions.”

Jane did not have an answer to Charlotte’s question. In fact, she had been pondering the notion herself. Was it so strange for someone like Harry to take a shine to someone like Jane? During the picnic, it was clear that they shared many interests and Harry made her feel at ease. Perhaps, Jane thought, she was just being needlessly cautious about what could in all possibility turn out to be wonderful.

“Are you at least looking forward to seeing him again?” Annie asked, changing the subject ever so slightly.

“I am!” Jane confessed. “I just wish he would tell me where he is taking me. What if I dress entirely inappropriately for the occasion and then make a fool of myself?”

The three friends laughed again for a good while and then moved the

conversation on before Charlotte and Annie left for their homes.

Jane retired inside and sat down at the small desk in the corner of her bedroom. She opened the drawer to remove her writing paper and dipped the tip of the quill in the ink she had purchased just a couple of days before. She had been writing to Sarah regularly, and it was her time to reply to the latest letter which had taken Jane a little longer to get around to because life had been rather busy and eventful lately.

My Dear Sarah,

Spring in Texas is nothing like spring in New York. For one thing, the weather is quite warm here all year round, whereas in New York snow might still linger at times until the warmth of the sun decides it's time for a change in season.

Tell me, is that sweet old woman still selling roasted almonds at the entrance to Central Park? There are some things I miss about living in a larger city and those almonds are one such thing. However, Texas has plenty to offer that you would not be able to do or find in New York.

Everything here is so close to nature. Horses and cattle roam the wide-open plains and you can hear crickets chirping loudly in the tall grass at night. It's my favorite pastime in the evening when I get home from work. I love sitting in my rocking chair with a cup of tea, just closing my eyes while I listen to the music of nature around me.

I am at peace here.

Oh! You asked me about Harry and there have indeed been some developments. Two thieves stole the takings from the store just last week and almost absconded with me on horseback. Harry saved me and scared those awful men out of town. I know you will be worrying, but I am fine. It will make for an exciting tale one day, but something good also came of it!

Harry asked me to join him for a picnic after church on Sunday and I said yes. He brought a picnic basket filled with bread, cheese, lemonade, and even chocolate! We sat in a lovely spot next to the small creek that supplies the

town with water and it was lovely. The weather was perfect; sunny, but not too warm with a slight breeze.

I must admit, I was a little worried at first because I thought we might not have much to talk about outside of his visits to the store, but how wrong I was. We talked for hours about everything and nothing at all. He is so kind, thoughtful, and funny. He asked me about New York and if I missed living there. I told him that I do not really miss the city, but I miss the people I left behind, such as you. Oh, I do hope you might be able to visit one day, I truly believe you would love it out here.

Where was I? Oh yes, the picnic. He walked me home and we agreed that we would see each other again, so this coming Sunday after church he is taking me to a secret venue. I haven't the faintest idea where, but I am excited, nonetheless.

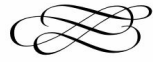
Oh, Sarah, I am so glad to have met Harry. After the embarrassing ordeal with Daniel, I thought that I was not meant to meet someone new, yet I have.

How is life in New York? Have I missed anything exciting?

Your very dear friend,

Jane

CHAPTER 14



Time was, Jane thought, quite peculiar. Sometimes it seemed to pass so slowly, but sometimes time literally just flew by. Just as she had before the picnic, Jane counted the days until Sunday when she could see Harry again.

EVEN THOUGH SHE kept herself busy at the store and with the upkeep that came with living in a house, her mind still drifted to Harry.

MR. BROWNING HAD NOTICED Jane's good mood during work and did not miss a moment to tease her about it, which Jane of course did not mind. Jane was very glad that Mr. Browning was back on his feet after his recent illness.

CHICKEN SOUP, Jane knew, truly worked wonders.

FINALLY, Sunday came around, and Jane was out of bed before the rooster because she was so excited. She enjoyed her breakfast while browsing

through her wardrobe, deciding what to wear. She could not wear the blue dress again, even though it was one of her favorites. She could not be sure of a suitable dress since Harry had not told her where they were going.

AFTER MUCH DELIBERATION, Jane finally settled on a light green dress that she had bought in New York a few years before, but seldom found an opportunity to wear. It was proper enough to wear for church and hopefully suitable for whatever Harry had planned for them that afternoon.

Jane sat down in her chair and brushed the tangles out of her hair before braiding it neatly.

BESIDE THE MIRROR was a photograph of her mother. Even though Jane had been quite young when her mother passed away, she still thought about her every day. She often wondered what her mother would think about her new life. Would she endorse her move to Texas, leaving all she knew in her wake, or would she be upset?

IN HER HEART, Jane knew that her mother would be proud of her. She might have few memories of her, but the memories Jane did have revolved around learning to be a strong woman who could make the right choices for herself to ensure her own happiness.

JANE LIVED by those words even to this day. Sure, she might have made mistakes along the way, but she had always learned from them, and they had indeed made her a stronger person.

“THIS WILL DO, JANE,” she said out loud and put the brush down beside her mother’s photograph.



CHURCH WAS as busy as always, but this particular week, Jane felt that the sermon spoke directly to her. The pastor preached about the importance of blind faith and the part it played in people's lives. Jane couldn't help but wonder if a divine force from above wanted her to know that everything would be alright and that there was no need for her to worry.

As the pastor continued with his sermon, Jane glanced around the church. The usual familiar faces were there, and she even noticed the barkeep of the saloon trying his best not to fall asleep. His wife helped by nudging him in the side and Jane tried not to laugh.

THERE WAS no sign of Harry, though. He usually sat across the aisle at the front with his deputy, but he was missing.

“JANE,” Charlotte whispered as she'd noticed Jane's concerned look. “What's wrong?”

“HARRY'S NOT HERE,” JANE REPLIED

REASON TOLD her that there was no need to immediately start worrying. There could be many reasons for Harry not being at church that morning. Perhaps he had been held up at work or he might have overslept, even though the latter was unlikely. There was still a worrying thought lingering in the back of Jane's mind. A voice that told her he decided to not show up because he did not wish to see her. Maybe he had realized that he could do much better than Jane and had simply decided not to tell her.

No, Jane thought. Those anxious concerns did not fit with the Harry she had come to know over these past few months. She was still very worried about him and couldn't help but wonder if something had happened to be concerned about.

IT WAS difficult to focus on the last half hour of the sermon. Jane's thoughts continuously drifted to awful scenarios in her head about what might have happened to Harry. As soon as the service was over, Jane hurried out of the church before she could be deterred by either Charlotte or anyone else. By now, everyone knew that she had plans with Harry after church and she did not want to deal with the embarrassment of him not showing up.

WHILE MOST OF the townsfolk stayed behind to talk and catch up on local gossip, Jane quickly made her way into town. Apart from a couple of people, the streets of Savior Springs were pretty much empty, which wasn't difficult to achieve, given it was a small town.

AS JANE WALKED towards the marshal's office, she stopped when she saw

three men on horseback outside. She did not recognize them as townspeople and strangers did not often visit Savior Springs unless they knew someone in town. Something about their appearance scared Jane and she immediately recalled the tumultuous affair with the outlaws at the mercantile.

FOR A MOMENT, it seemed as though time was frozen. Jane stood looking at the three men, not knowing what to do. It was clear that they had bad intentions and there was no way she would be able to protect herself against three of them. She thought they might address her, but they set off on their horses instead, very nearly knocking Jane over in the process. Her heart immediately began to beat faster, and she had a horrible feeling that Harry was in trouble.

IGNORING the dust on her dress and the speed of her heartbeat, Jane rushed into the marshal's office.

At first, she thought nobody was there, but as she walked further into the room, she saw a pair of shoes sticking out from behind the table. Fearing the worst, she ran over to find Harry unconscious on the floor. Jane fell to her knees with tears in her eyes, unsure of what to do.

“HARRY!” she cried. “Harry, please wake up.”

THERE WAS no response from Harry and Jane began to sob as she bent over him on the floor. She gently shook him. When that didn't work, the sobs became a flood of tears and she started bashing him on the chest with her fist. “Don't you leave me like this.”

SLOWLY HARRY BEGAN to open his eyes, and he moaned softly.

JANE STOPPED HITTING him and instead held him close.

“JANE?” he managed to say.

“YES, it’s me. I’m here stay still.”

HE LAY STILL as she ordered for a few seconds and then the world regained focus. He spoke a little more clearly, “What happened?” The last thing I remember was being hit on the head.”

“THERE WERE THREE MEN OUTSIDE,” Jane explained, “They were on horseback and almost knocked me over when they left. Who were they?”

Carefully, Harry sat up and leaned against the wall. Jane noticed that he had a small laceration on his forehead that she would have to treat later.

“THEY WERE a gang of outlaws who have been causing trouble around these parts for quite some time now,” Harry explained. “A while back, I locked one of their members up and so they paid me a visit today to exact their revenge. Turns out they are not very good at their jobs.”

JANE CHUCKLED TENTATIVELY, feeling such a wave of relief that Harry was not seriously hurt. He would undoubtedly be a little sore for a while, but nothing that Jane couldn't take care of.

"I AM SO glad that you are not hurt," Jane said. "I was worried when you weren't at church."

"I DID NOT MEAN to make you worry," Harry apologized. "I am sorry for causing you to worry and for putting you in harm's way. I am not a very good marshal."

"No, no, do not apologize. I am fine and you are alive. That is all that matters to me."

THEY SAT in silence for a while and Jane blushed a little when she realized that Harry had put his hand on hers.

"JANE, there is something I would like to ask you," Harry said after a while.

"YES? WHAT IS IT?"

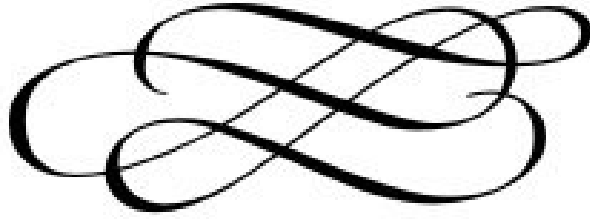
"I THINK I might want to kiss you, if you might be agreeable to that?"

“YES, I think I would like that very much.”

BUTTERFLIES FLITTED in Jane’s stomach as Harry very carefully and gently put his lips to hers. Jane knew at that moment that she never wanted to kiss anyone else in her life.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE



Jane Mellor used to believe that she was cursed with bad luck. First, her mother died when she was young, and her father treated her horribly. Then, the man she thought was the love of her life died in a tragic accident. Surely, Jane believed, that meant that she was simply not meant to find her happily ever after. For a while, she had come to peace with that thought.

Life, it seemed, had other plans for Jane.

Had someone told her when she was a little girl that she would find a home in a small town in Texas named Savior Springs, she would never have believed it. Throughout her life, Jane thought that New York was where she would live, but she knew now that it simply wasn't true.

Six weeks had passed since Jane found Harry unconscious in the marshal's office. Only a couple of days later, he asked Jane if she would marry him, and Jane, of course, said yes.

"Oh, Jane, you look absolutely beautiful," Sarah gushed.

She had travelled to Texas as soon as Jane had written to her. As soon as she met Harry Sarah knew that he was the right choice for her friend.

"Do you think Harry will think so?" Jane asked, as concerned as any bride on her wedding day.

"I have no doubt in my mind that he will."

Jane was nervous but filled also with joy and excitement. She stood and turned to face Sarah who had made it from New York to be her maid of honor. Jane felt incredibly blessed and lucky to have such a true friend.

As she looked at herself in the mirror, Jane couldn't believe that the woman in the reflection was the same woman who once thought she would live out her days alone after George's death. She had also once believed that she would never love anyone the way she loved George, but now she had Harry Unsworth.

Harry was everything Jane could ever want and more. After the wedding, they had agreed to move into Jane's house as it was big enough for two and perhaps children in the near future.

There was a knock on the door and Mr. Browning walked into the room. The mercantile owner had kindly offered to be the one to give Jane away at the altar and she couldn't be any happier.

"Are you ready, dear?" Mr. Browning asked with a smile on his face, dressed in his finest clothes.

"Yes," Jane said. "Yes, I am."



THE WHOLE TOWN attended the wedding, even those townsfolk to whom Jane had barely spoken. It seemed as though everyone was glad that Harry had finally found a perfect match in Jane and they were more than excited about the wedding which was held at the local church.

After the wedding, the townsfolk held a party that lasted long into the night. When Jane and Harry shared their first dance as husband and wife to

one of Jane's favorite waltzes, she finally knew happiness.

It was late into the evening and, while some guests had left for home, a few guests still remained at the party, happily talking and laughing about the events of the day.

"What are you thinking about, Mrs. Unsworth?" Harry asked softly as they swayed to the sound of the music.

"Well, Mr. Unsworth," Jane replied. "I was just thinking how life always finds a way to make things right."

Harry replied with a kiss and, as Jane rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes, she knew that she was finally exactly where she belonged.

FINDING A BROTHER FOR JESSICA



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



1870, Boston, Massachusetts

*I*t was a dreary day in Boston, the sky devoid of color with only hues of grey and white creating a stark backdrop to what was the best day of Hazel's life. She stood in front of the small stone chapel, her heart racing with excitement even as the first drops of rain began to fall.

The tombstones in the small cemetery beside the chapel glistened from the rain, turning a dark shade of grey, pronouncing the names all the more. The wind whipped and whistled as it raced through the trees, bringing a slight chill to her arms, but not even that could dim her happy mood.

Hazel glanced down at the white dress she had borrowed from a friend, her only concern for it to remain white as she rushed towards the chapel. Her hair was braided onto her head like a lady of the ton and for the first time in her life Hazel felt beautiful. She pushed open the heavy wooden doors and stepped inside, out of the rain. Her kitten heels clattered on the stone floor, but Hazel didn't care. Some might say a bride should walk down the aisle with a pause between each step, but Hazel had waited three years for this moment, and she wasn't waiting for another second. When she had met

Michael Irvin three years ago she had been blown away by his charm and his vision of the man he wanted to become.

He had worked on the trains and Hazel had worked at the train station as a cleaner. What had started with a few smiles soon led to walking home together. She had fallen in love in the coldest months of the year and hadn't even been bothered by the snow because her heart had been warmed by love.

For three years they had dreamed of a future together. They had dreamed of building a life together in Boston. Two children and a small home filled with laughter and love. They had held off on that dream until Michael could find a better job. One that would afford them the life they dreamed of.

When he had been appointed to work at the docks a few months ago, Hazel had known life was about to change. He had asked for her hand in marriage underneath a full moon. He had promised her the world and Hazel had leapt at saying yes.

The last few months had been a whirl of excitement. Michael had secured them a tenement home near the docks and had started his new position, insisting Hazel no longer needed to work at the railway station. Although their home was nothing fancy, it was theirs. Two bedrooms, a rickety kitchen table and a hole in the roof were going to be start of the life they had always dreamed of.

Hazel stopped halfway towards the altar and her eyes met Michael's and she knew all her dreams were about to come true. She was certain there were handsomer men in Boston, richer as well; but a kinder man, with a good soul she knew she would never find.

"Are you ready?" Michael asked her, wearing his borrowed suit and a broad smile.

Hazel nodded and moved towards him. "I'm ready."

The pastor let out a heavy sigh of agitation. Clearly the last place he wanted to be on a dreary day in Boston was officiating a wedding between what he presumed were barely more than children. "Great, now that

everyone's ready, can we get this over with?"

Not even the pastor's bad mood could sour Michael and Hazel's excitement.

He didn't even bother with a sermon or a verse of encouragement for the young couple; he said the vows as they were written in the King James Bible before turning to Hazel and Michael with a questioning look.

"I do," Michael said first.

"Me too," Hazel laughed. "I mean, I do."

"I now pronounce you man and wife," the pastor said snapping the bible shut. "Go on, I want to close the chapel before the storm gets even worse."

Hand in hand the newlyweds rushed out of the church, eager to get to their new home. They pounced over puddles of mud, only to step in others, causing dirt to splatter over their neat clothes, but they didn't care. They ran all the way home, arriving completely soaked and chilled down to the bone. But as soon as they stepped into their small home with water seeping in through the crack in the roof, none of that mattered.

Because, after three years of dreaming about their future together, today it was finally going to start as Mr. and Mrs. Irvin.

Michael framed Hazel's face with his cold hands and smiled warmly into her brown eyes. "I don't think I've ever been as happy as I am right now. We've got the whole world at our feet, Hazel."

Hazel smiled, seeing her future in his vivid blue gaze. "I know, Michael, and we're going to conquer it together. I love you."

"I love you." Michael sighed before he noticed the time on the clock. "I have to get to the docks for my shift, but I promise when I get home we'll celebrate."

Hazel pecked him on the cheek. "Hurry, you'll be late."

A few minutes later Michael was out the door and rushing towards the docks. Hazel let out a contented sigh before she glanced down at the dress and laughed. It looked as if she had jumped into a puddle of mud, with only

the bodice free of dirt.

At least she had something to do while Michael was at work. They might be dirt poor, living in a rickety tenement home, but Hazel knew that it was only a matter of time before God made all their dreams come true. A smile curved her mouth, especially the dreams of having a baby or two.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



1877 Boston, Massachusetts

It was almost time for Michael to come home, Hazel thought as she stirred the grits on the stove. The biscuits were already baked and being kept warm in the oven to be ready when Michael arrived.

A smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she glanced out the window to the children playing outside in the street. She still couldn't believe that the beautiful girl with long black hair spilling down her back and eyes the color of the sea on a sunny day was her daughter. Hazel grabbed onto the side of the table when she suddenly felt a little unsteady. She hadn't been feeling well for a few weeks now but hadn't bothered mentioning it to Michael. The dizzy spells came and went, and she was certain it was nothing to be concerned about.

Barely a year after their wedding God had blessed her and Michael with a beautiful little girl. Jessica brought so much joy to their lives that, after only a few years, Hazel accepted that although she and Michael might never have the life they dreamed of on their rainy wedding day, they had so many blessings to be grateful for.

After a few years Michael had been promoted from unloading incoming vessels at the docks to construction of the new addition to the docks. It was hard and physical work, but it paid enough for Hazel to be able to stay home and take care of Jessica.

Although they had prayed for God to bless them with a son after Jessica's birth, after eight years they were still waiting to be blessed with another child. Hazel tried not to think about it that much but sometimes she would notice a distant look in Michael's eyes when he saw a little boy, and Hazel would know he had never stopped thinking about it.

Hazel turned away from the window and began setting the table with a shake of her head. Because, although God had blessed them with a little girl, Jessica was not exactly what you would call girly. Hazel forced her to wear dresses when Jessica really preferred the pantaloons her friends wore, since all of them were boys. While all the other girls in the community began learning to cook and sew, Jessica spent her days playing ball and accepting every challenge her friends could think up for her.

She was the epitome of a Tom-boy and Hazel had long since given up trying to change her. She was the light of her father's eye, although Hazel knew that Michael still yearned to have a little boy. A noise outside drew Hazel's attention and as soon as she saw what was going on, she dropped the knives and forks she was holding and rushed outside.

If anyone else had walked past they would have thought a couple of boys were embroiled in a skirmish. But the shortest one on top of the bigger boy, pounding fists into his chest, was in fact Jessica, her little girl.

"Jessica Irvin. You get off Thomas right now!" Hazel called out even as she rushed towards the group of children that had gathered to see who was going to win the fight.

Jessica's hair fell out from underneath her cap even as her hands lifted to pound into Thomas's chest once more. Hazel shook her head on a heavy sigh before she moved towards her daughter and plucked her off the poor boy by

the scruff of her neck.

“It isn’t ladylike of you to go around beating up boys!” Hazel said, the anger clear in her voice.

Jessica, who was about a foot shorter than Thomas, straightened her shoulders and shook her head. “It isn’t gentlemanly of Thomas to beat up on little Winston to steal his pocket money.”

Hazel frowned as she turned to see Winston, 2 years younger than Jessica, sobbing quietly as he held onto a coin.

“You were protecting Winston?” Hazel asked, a little flabbergasted.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jessica said indignantly. “You said there were enough scoundrels in this world for two lifetimes. Since Thomas did a scoundrel thing, I taught him a lesson.”

Hazel sighed heavily as she turned to Thomas. She couldn’t fault her daughter’s reasoning, although she would give her an earful about propriety and proper behavior when they were alone. Thomas was clutching his nose but fortunately nothing more than his ego seemed at all at risk of injury. “Thomas, you alright?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Thomas replied in a small voice before he turned and started towards the tenement apartment he called home.

“Come, young lady. Your father will have something to say about this,” Hazel said firmly as she tugged Jessica home.

As soon as they were inside Hazel opened her mouth to give her daughter a proper speech but instead a smile curved her mouth. “Although I don’t approve of how you went about defending Winston, I’m proud of you.”

Jessica’s eyes lit up with pride. “I told you I’ll be a good big sister, didn’t I?”

Hazel laughed, ruffling her daughter’s hair. “You go clean up; your pa will be home any minute now.”

When Michael arrived home, Hazel didn’t mention Jessica’s skirmish with the boys. Instead they spoke about Michael’s day and Jessica entertained

them with tales of the neighborhood children.

As soon as Hazel took a mouthful of her meal, she felt her tummy twist and pushed her plate away.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Michael asked after a while, noticing she hadn’t even touched her food.

Hazel shook her head. “I’ll be fine, just not feeling well.”

Michael nodded before he continued with the rundown of his day. “Peter brought his son to the docks today.” He shook his head on a smile. “Hazel, you should’ve seen how excited that little boy was to see the big ships that came into the harbor. One day I’ll show my son those ships as well.”

Hazel felt the familiar stab of disappointment at not providing him a son, but when she glanced the table and saw Jessica’s face light up with joy her heart sank.

“I’ll teach him how to play ball and how to fight,” Jessica added with gumption.

Feeling a little lightheaded and more than a little overwhelmed by her family’s conversation Hazel excused herself. She quickly rinsed the dishes before she went to bed. She wasn’t feeling well but she couldn’t seem to put her finger on what was wrong. She was tired and a little nauseous. In the kitchen she could hear Michael and Jessica talk about all the things they’d teach a baby brother. Hazel rolled onto her side and cried herself to sleep because she couldn’t stand listening to how she had let both of them down by not falling pregnant again.

Jessica had proved today that she would make for a wonderful big sister and Michael had proved himself a good father over and over since Jessica’s arrival. It was just a shame that God wasn’t listening to their prayers.

The following morning when Hazel woke, she felt even worse. The mere whiff of food had her running for the outhouse. She was tired and her body ached, and she knew she was coming down with something.

Michael gave her one look before he took down their tin of savings. “You

go see a doctor today, you look right awful.”

Hazel smiled, ruefully. “Thank you. I knew you were a man of compliments.”

Michael shook his head. “It’s not even winter yet, we can’t afford you making me and Jessica sick as well. Rather let the doctor take a look and give you something for it.”

So once Michael was on his way to the docks, Hazel and Jessica headed to the doctor’s surgery. She had a feeling it was only a cold but agreed that it would be best if she had it taken care of before it got worse.

As soon as they arrived at the doctor’s rooms, Hazel felt silly for coming in. She was wasting their savings when she wasn’t even sure of anything being amiss. A few dizzy spells and a loss of appetite did not an illness make, she kept reminding herself. She was surrounded by sick children, concerned mothers and a few elderly people with miserable coughs. Quickly she glanced at Jessica and wished she could tell her daughter to wait outside before she caught whatever the other patients had.

By the time the doctor finally called Hazel into his examination room, they had been waiting for almost two hours. Jessica was becoming difficult; hunger and boredom usually did that to an eight year old.

The doctor wore spectacles that rode low on his nose, and he looked at her over the half-moon lenses. “What seems to be the problem, ma’am?”

Hazel sighed. “I’m not sure, really. I’ve been having a few dizzy spells lately, loss of appetite... nothing specific. To be honest, I think I’m just wasting your time, but my husband insisted I make sure it isn’t something to worry about.”

The doctor nodded before glancing at Jessica. “Your girl?”

“Yes.” Hazel smiled with pride as she always did when someone asked her about Jessica.

“And only the one child?” the doctor asked in a strange way.

Hazel nodded. “Yes. We never... we haven’t been blessed with more

children since Jessica.”

Jessica chose that moment to pipe up. “But we want more children. A brother, to be exact.”

The doctor chuckled softly. “I can imagine. Mrs. Irvin are you currently experiencing your monthlies?”

Hazel felt a bright red flush cover her cheeks and her chest. Such things weren’t spoken of, especially not between strangers. She shook her head, too shy to answer.

“Interesting,” The doctor said as he scribbled with his quill before meeting Hazel’s gaze again. “Do you remember the last time you experienced your monthlies?”

Hazel frowned, trying to remember. She had been so caught up with life in general that she didn’t even realize that she had missed a couple of months. She mentioned the last time she remembered, and all color drained from her face. For such a long time she had dreamed of having another child that she had completely pushed the thought aside.

She slowly began shaking her head when she noticed the doctor nodding at her with a big smile.

“Come Spring, I’d imagine,” the doctor said with a broad smile as he stood up, clearly deciding further investigation wasn’t necessary. Hazel got up, completely flummoxed, unable to form two words when Jessica suddenly began crying.

“Jessica, honey, what’s wrong?” Hazel asked, concerned.

“Are you going to die come spring?” Jessica asked sobbing.

The doctor’s booming laughter brought a smile to Hazel’s face. Before Hazel could explain the doctor’s reasoning, he bent over and met Jessica’s gaze. “Come spring, you’re going to get a little brother, little girl.”

Jessica’s face lit up with surprise even as Hazel felt laughter bubble from her throat. She had long ago let go of the dream of having another child and now after all these years God was finally blessing them with another child.

She nodded at her daughter before smiling at the doctor.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“My pleasure,” the doctor said warmly before calling in his next patient.

As soon as Hazel and Jessica were outside on the sidewalk Jessica turned to her mother with a wide-eyed look. “Can we stop by the docks and surprise Pa with the news?”

Hazel shook her head. “The docks are no place for women. We’ll go home and surprise him when he gets home.”

Together mother and daughter walked home, planning how they were going to give Michael the news he had been hoping to hear for almost eight years.

CHAPTER 2



January 1878 Boston, Massachusetts

No one was more excited about the baby than Jessica. The first few days she announced to anyone that would listen that she was going to have a baby brother. Regardless of Hazel and Michael's insistence that it might be either a girl or a boy, Jessica was convinced God was sending her the baby brother she had always wanted.

As the months passed, the Irvin family prepared for the arrival of their baby. Blankets were bought, clothes sewed, and money saved for everything they would need once the baby arrived.

By the time winter took Boston in its icy grasp, the Irvin family didn't even notice as they were counting down the days till spring when the newest addition to their family would arrive. On a Saturday afternoon Hazel and Michael were sitting by the wood stove trying to ward off the cold while Jessica stood by the window watching as snow drifted to the ground, covering Boston with a beautiful white blanket.

"I hate winter," Jessica announced from the window in a sullen voice.

Hazel smiled at Michael knowing her daughter was only eager for Spring

to arrive. She turned to the window. “You used to love winter. Building snowmen and playing in the snow.”

“That was before I realized it turned into a muddy sludge that only made us slip and get cold,” Jessica said with maturity beyond her years.

Michael chuckled beside Hazel. “She’s right, you know.”

Hazel shook her head with a smile. “Patience is a virtue and right now that snow isn’t a muddy mess, it’s a beautiful blanket just asking for company.” Hazel turned to her husband with a mischievous look. “We might be about to have our second child but we’re still young.”

Michael laughed as he stood up and scooped Jessica up from her position at the window. “Time to build a snow man.”

With laughter in the air, Hazel followed them outside. They worked together and in no time at all they had built a beautiful snowman complete with a carrot for a nose and sticks for arms. Michael let out a heavy sigh. “Just a shame he’ll be a muddy sludge in the morning.”

When Michael threw the first snowball, Jessica shrieked with laughter. One by one they all made snowballs and soon the snow expedition turned into a snow fight. Jessica was just about to heave the second ball at Michael when Hazel’s loud cry made them turn to her in concern.

Hazel felt warm liquid running down her legs and even before uttering a single word she knew what was wrong. The baby was coming.

Michael rushed to her side, concern laced his voice. “It’s too soon.”

“I know,” Hazel said, shaking her head. “Michael, something’s wrong.”

Michael slipped an arm around her waist and helped her inside. Once Hazel was settled on the bed he instructed Jessica to stay with her while he went to fetch the doctor.

The doctor arrived with Michael a short while later. Hushed whispers of concern were spoken as he tended to Hazel while Michael waited in the living room with Jessica.

Whereas it had taken hours for Hazel to deliver her little girl, her little

boy was born before the snow man turned to sludge. The doctor didn't have to say a single word; both Hazel and Michael knew their little boy wouldn't live to see Spring. He was too small, the winter too cold and, regardless of all their efforts, their little boy passed away after witnessing only a single sunrise.

Silent tears were cried as Hazel wept over her baby boy. Michael turned to practicalities such as cooking dinner and arranging for a funeral, whereas Jessica mourned for her baby brother with heart wrenching sobs.

The funeral was held the following day. On a dreary day much like the day of their wedding, Michael and Hazel laid their long awaited son to rest. Jessica couldn't be consoled even as Hazel felt her own heart ripped to shreds as the coffin was lowered into the ground.

"Ma, I wanted him so much," Jessica sobbed when the funeral was over.

Hazel wrapped an arm around her daughter's shoulder but didn't have the words to console her. The only consolation she could grasp at during this hard time was that God always had a reason for everything. Although not even that now eased the ache in her heart. What reason could there be for taking a baby boy before he even witnessed a sunset?

Michael was quiet and withdrawn and, although Hazel leaned on him for strength, she couldn't help but wish he would mourn. Mourning was a natural part of dealing with grief and she was concerned that if he didn't deal with his grief it would start eating at him sooner or later.

The following day it was hard to accept that life had to go on. Michael had to go back to work, Jessica needed to continue with her lessons and regardless of the ache in her heart, Hazel knew she had to continue to be a mother to her daughter.

Hazel continued with her chores but every now and then she found herself imagining what it would have been like to have a baby in the house again. In the mornings while Jessica had her lessons, Hazel wept in private because she knew she had to be strong for her daughter who had taken her

brother's death very hard.

For a week Jessica cried herself to sleep every night, while her mother and father tried to console her. Hazel knew that Jessica was young and resilient and would soon get over grieving for the brother she only had for a day, but it was Michael she was concerned about.

He returned to his construction job at the docks and retreated into himself a little more every day. By the time the second week rolled around, he barely spoke to Hazel at all. Hazel couldn't help but wonder if it had been the snow fight that had caused her baby to come early, but the doctor had made it clear that something else was wrong. He had seen it before when there was a heart defect or when something worse was wrong. Although the doctor insisted the early birth was no fault of Hazel's, she had a hard time accepting that.

Whenever she tried to talk to Michael he had somewhere else he had to be or something else he had to do. It was as if time had stopped for Michael and it didn't matter how Jessica and Hazel tried to cheer him up, her husband's joy had been buried along with his son in the cemetery beside the small chapel where they had once said their vows.

CHAPTER 3



April 1878 Boston, Massachusetts

*A*lthough spring had chased away the chill of winter, the chill hadn't yet left the Irvin home. Hazel grew more concerned over Michael with every passing day, but no matter how hard she tried to talk to him, he refused to discuss the son they had lost.

Before that horrible day in January, Michael had hardly ever enjoyed a drink. But when he returned home from his shift after the funeral he had brought with him a bottle of rum. Hazel didn't say anything or even comment on the drink, since she suspected he only wanted to forget about his heartache for the evening. But night after night, Michael kept returning with a bottle of rum.

It was as if the smell of it had seeped into their bedclothes. As if it clung to the moldy walls and every item of furniture they owned.

Hazel found herself preparing to confront Michael many times about the horrible habit he had become accustomed to but every night when he returned home with that look of defeat in his gaze, Hazel promised herself that she would try again tomorrow.

Although Michael was no longer the man she had fallen in love with, she was grateful that he never became violent with the drink. Instead he would sit by the wood stove staring off into the distance, barely touching his food, as he drank a bottle a night, sip for sip. Most nights he would stumble to bed without saying a single word to either Hazel or Jessica while on other nights he would fall asleep right there at the table.

Hazel tried to protect Jessica from her father's alcoholic preferences by explaining how hard he worked, but it was hard to protect an eight year old from an event that occurred every night.

One night Michael came home to find that Hazel had arranged for Jessica to play at a friend's so that she could talk to her husband. It had been three months since they lost the baby and, although Hazel would mourn him for the rest of her life, they needed to keep on living.

Michael walked in at the usual time and took a seat at the table. Before he could pull the cork on the bottle of rum, Hazel sat down beside him and reached for the bottle. Michael's brows arched in surprise, but Hazel didn't let that deter her. "Michael, how would you feel if I drank the rum tonight and you took care of supper and Jessica?"

Michael reached for the bottle, anger flashing in his gaze. "I've been working all day, Hazel, don't start on me."

Hazel pushed the bottle towards him before she let out a heavy sigh. "Michael, you've drunk your way through all our savings. You barely talk to me or Jessica, and when you do you're so inebriated we barely understand a single word you're saying."

Michael shrugged as he took the first sip of rum. "It's a hard life."

Hazel laughed wryly. "You're not the only one who buried a son. I buried him as well and Jessica buried her brother. We're not going to get through this by drinking away our sorrows. We have to be there for each other. We have to talk about what happened to be able to put it in the past."

Michael chuckled. "It is in the past. Don't you see me trying to forget him

every night?”

“We shouldn’t forget, we should move on,” Hazel pleaded. “We don’t have money for a new coat for Jessica; we don’t even have money for milk on most days. You’re draining this family, Michael. I’ve let you have your grief and your rum for three months, but it’s time you realized we are still a family.”

Michael grunted before grabbing the bottle and shoving himself away from the table. “I don’t have to listen to this. I work for the money I earn, the least I can do is spend some of it. Maybe it’s time you did something around here. It’s not like you have a baby to take care of.”

Hazel flinched as if he had slapped her. Michael had never spoken a harsh word to her before, and to see the condescension in his eyes now hurt more than any blow of the hand ever could. “Michael?” Hazel asked, confused, as he started towards the door.

Michael turned to her, the shadows and grief darkening his blue gaze. “I’m going to drink my rum somewhere where I don’t have to explain myself. Good night.”

Hazel felt the tears burn the back of her eyes, but she said the words she believed he needed to hear. “I love you, Michael, I miss you.”

Her heart clenched when a tear slipped over her husband’s cheek. “I loved him, Hazel. Although we only had him for a few hours, I loved him.”

With that, Michael walked out the door.

Hazel took a few deep breaths before she left to collect Jessica. She told a white lie about Michael working a double shift before putting her daughter to bed. She didn’t sleep a wink that night; all she could do was pray that God would help Michael. That he would help him put the grief behind him, as well as the drink.

When morning came, he hadn’t returned home. Hazel gave Jessica breakfast and sent her off to her lessons before she prayed again for strength and guidance.

A knock on the door caught her off guard just before noon as she was sweeping the floors. Even before Hazel opened the door she knew something horrible had happened. A shiver ran down her spine when she opened the door only to find two men in suits and top hats standing on the threshold with apologetic expressions. Hazel clutched her throat even as she spoke. "It's Michael, isn't it?"

The one man nodded. "I'm afraid Mr. Irwin had an accident this morning during his shift. We express our sincerest apologies, Mrs. Irwin."

Hazel felt her heart stop even as the first tear slid over her cheek. "He's dead?"

"It happened so fast, he would have felt no pain."

Hazel nodded but she couldn't seem to find anything to say. The man she had loved, had dreamed with, had built a life with was now walking with God and the only thing Hazel could think of was that she and Jessica were now all alone.

The men in suits took care of the funeral arrangements and were forthcoming with giving Hazel a small amount of money as compensation. She wanted to laugh in their faces; how they ever imagined that money could replace her husband. On the day of the funeral she wept, but in her heart she knew she had buried Michael on the day they had buried their son.

Michael's colleagues had done a small collection to help Hazel and Jessica and although it wasn't a large amount of money, Hazel realized that every penny would help. She hadn't worked in eight years and without Michael's income it was only a matter of time before they were destitute.

While Hazel soothed her daughter and accepted condolences, a few men stood over Michael's grave shaking their heads.

"I feel for the widow. I can't imagine what's she's going to do now," Pete McCabe said with a heavy sigh.

"I worked with Michael for five years and I still don't know he plummeted from the road to success into the depths of hell with drink."

Andrew Tanner shook his head, glancing at Hazel who was talking quietly with other funeral goers.

Pete shrugged before turning to Andrew. “It was the death of his son. He told me on the day of the funeral that he might as well climb into the coffin then, because he couldn’t face living after God robbed him of his only son.”

“Such a sad affair.” Andrew sighed.

“Do you think we should tell the widow about the accident?” Pete asked in a hushed whisper.

Andrew quickly shook his head. “No. The last thing that poor woman needs now is to find out that he arrived drunk for his shift and took a fall because he couldn’t stand on his own two feet. Let her believe what the suits told her: a tragic accident.”

“I wish I could have contributed more money for the collection,” Pete said sadly. “But I got to take care of me wife and children.”

“We all do,” Andrew agreed. “She might be alright for a few months yet. I’m sure the suits gave her somethin’ as well.”

“Probably did.” Pete nodded.

Together they glanced at the widow and her daughter, knowing it would only be a matter of time before they were homeless and hungry. Boston was no place for a woman and a child alone and regardless of everyone’s well wishes, tomorrow everyone would forget about Michael Irvin and get on with their lives, leaving Hazel to fend for them herself.

CHAPTER 4



May 1878 Boston, Massachusetts

On the day of Michael's funeral, Hazel had believed the money she had received from Michael's employer along with the collection from his colleagues would last her and Jessica at least a few months. But Hazel soon learned that after paying for coal, rent and Jessica's lessons that the money wouldn't last. She used the money sparsely and began taking in laundry and accepting cleaning jobs in the mornings while Jessica was at her lessons.

It was Tuesday morning and she was due to clean at the Smith home in the better part of town. A friend had secured her a position there and although Hazel appreciated the work, she didn't appreciate the long walk.

She arrived exactly on time and began cleaning the bedrooms that were hardly ever used. Mr. and Mrs. Smith owned a shipping company and had moved to Boston the year before. Although she had yet to meet Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith was a dear old soul. Hazel often wondered if she hadn't just hired Hazel for the company.

She finished the upstairs rooms and was soon headed downstairs to start

in the parlor. She only cleaned for them once a week, whereas their permanent housekeeper took care of the cooking and cleaning on a full time basis.

“There you are, dear,” Mrs. Smith said with a warm smile as soon as Hazel stepped into the parlor.

“Good morning, Mrs. Smith.” Hazel returned the smile. On the first day she had come to work for Mrs. Smith, the older woman had peppered Hazel with questions until she knew everything about Hazel.

“How are you this morning?” Mrs. Smith asked patting the seat beside her.

In any other brownstone in Boston it would be frowned upon, but it was clear Mrs. Smith didn’t care what anyone thought of her.

Hazel moved towards her and took a seat. “I’m doing well.”

Mrs. Smith cocked a brow with a questioning look. “I’ve seen beggars do better.” A wry smile curved the corners of her mouth.

Hazel attempted a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Although Mrs. Smith was her employer, she considered her a friend and confidante.

“I just can’t seem to make ends meet,” Hazel admitted ruefully before quickly shaking her head. “Please don’t think I’m asking for charity, I’m not.”

Mrs. Smith smiled and patted Hazel’s hand. “I know you wouldn’t, it’s not your way. Is it just the money or is there something else bothering you?”

Hazel considered shaking her head, but Mrs. Smith was older and wiser and perhaps she would have some advice. “No, it’s not, I’m afraid. It’s Jessica; she seems to have withdrawn just like Michael did before... I don’t know how to help her. After losing her father and her brother in such quick succession, it’s like the light has just died inside her.” A tear slipped over Hazel’s cheek. “I’m sorry. I’m sure you don’t want to listen to my woes.”

Mrs. Smith’s smile was endearing. “My dear girl, do you think I don’t care? I know exactly what you’re going through. I lost my daughter. She was

only eight years old when the scarlet fever took her. Mr. Smith and I couldn't seem to get over the loss. She was everywhere we looked; the memories seemed to follow us around London..." She let out a heavy sigh before summoning a smile. "Do you know what you and your daughter need? You need a fresh start. One far away from here. A life out from under the shadow of your ghosts"

Hazel frowned. "But where? We have nowhere we can go, no family and... I'm not sure leaving Boston is the answer."

Mrs. Smith patted Hazel's hand with renewed excitement. "Have you heard of the matrimonial times?"

Hazel frowned; the words ignited a memory, but she couldn't exactly place it. "I think so..."

"Well, let me tell you about it. Men are heading west faster than we can build roads out there. There's gold in the west, business to be done, and big money in ranching and merchandise. But you see the problem with the expansion to the west is there are no women."

Hazel's frown deepened. "So you suggest I take my little girl to an uncivilized frontier in the hopes I find a man?"

Mrs. Smith chuckled shaking her head. "Of course not. These men, cowboys and prospectors and such, place advertisements in the Matrimonial Times for wives. You see, you can choose with which man you correspond. After some time if you feel you have a connection, you might consider travelling west to become what we call a mail-order bride."

Hazel laughed at the absurdity of it all. "I'm not sure picking a husband from a catalogue is the right answer for me."

"Perhaps," Mrs. Smith agreed before a sad smile settled on her face. "But sometimes there isn't a right answer, sometimes you have to grab the only option you have. Don't let that little girl follow in her father's footsteps, Hazel. You can still give her a happy childhood, but only if you leave Boston and the horrible memories it holds for her."

Hazel sighed heavily. She couldn't fathom marrying again, but perhaps Mrs. Smith was right. "Where do I get a hold of the Matrimonial Times?"

"Any news agency, I suppose," Mrs. Smith said reaching into her pocket. She dropped a few coins in Hazel's hand. "The house is clean enough. Go on and find yourself a husband, just promise me you'll keep working for me until you leave."

Hazel thanked Mrs. Smith graciously for her generosity before putting the cleaning things away. She still couldn't imagine finding a husband or moving away from Boston, but the image of Jessica's downtrodden expression came to mind and she knew she had to do something.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



April 1878 Boston, Massachusetts

Hazel stopped by the news agency on her way home. She bought a copy of the Matrimonial Times and tucked it into her purse before she rushed of home to her tenement on the other side of town. She had another hour before Jessica would be done with lessons and preferred to engage in this wild goose chase without Jessica having to know anything at all about it.

As soon as she arrived home, she made herself a cup of tea and opened the windows and the front door to allow the cool spring breeze to clear out the musty smell before taking a seat at the kitchen table.

Taking a deep breath Hazel opened the paper and began reading the advertisements placed by men looking for wives. Soon she was engrossed by the tales of men looking for love, partnership or companionship on their vast and lonely ranches.

As she read she began forming an idea of what she was looking for in her own mind. The list grew longer by the minute. Subconsciously, Hazel knew she was creating a list of impossible expectations only to have an excuse for

not writing to any of the eligible men.

But on the very last page, her breath caught. She ticked off the items on her list and the man in question met every single criterion she had formed, except one; he didn't live in Colorado. Hazel had hoped if she went through with this that she would find a man in Colorado. Jessica had always loved the snow and she couldn't imagine relocating her daughter anywhere without snow in which to play during the cold winter months.

She pushed thoughts of Colorado aside and took a deep breath before she read over the advertisement again.

RANCHER JOE SPENCER seeking wife to complete his family.

JOE SPENCER HAS LOVED and lost. At the age of thirty five he is ready to find love again. He owns a vast spread of land in Texas where he breeds cattle and on which he is raising his five year old son. Although Joe understands that any woman might be hesitant raising another woman's child, he wishes to give his son the mother he so desperately needs. A man of even temper and sober habits, Joe assures any woman willing to write to him that she will be rewarded with honesty and generosity. A man of substantial wealth, Joe can provide for his family whilst offering his wife a lifestyle many only dream of. Although the ranching life might be hard, especially during the hotter summer months, Joe looks forward to spending the cooler months with his family. If you are an even-tempered woman of child-bearing age, looking to find love and willing to raise Joe's son as your own, Joe is looking forward to hearing from you.

ALL WITHIN THE advertisement that have Hazel reason for pause was the fact

that Joe was in Texas. Otherwise Joe Spencer sounded like the solution to all her problems. No longer would she have to clean or do other people's laundry. She would live on a ranch instead of a musty and moldy tenement home which she couldn't afford. They might not have snow in winter, but Jessica would finally have the brother she had always dreamed of. Hazel glanced at the clock and calculated that she had a short while left before she needed to collect Jessica.

Her minds swirled with reasons for not even attempting to write to Joe Spencer, but Mrs. Smith's words kept resounding in her mind. If she didn't do something, she might lose Jessica as well. Hazel glanced towards the bedroom where her son had died, to the table where Michael had drunk away his sorrows, and she knew that she had to do something.

Before she could change her mind, she reached for a quill and a sheet of paper and began writing the letter she hoped would change her life.

Dear Mr. Spencer

I TOO HAVE LOVED and lost. I never expected to find myself in a position writing to a stranger, but I believe we are two grieving souls looking for redemption for our children. Your son needs a mother and my daughter needs a father. After losing her baby brother Jessica (8 years old) is still yearning for a brother. Boston has brought us nothing but grief and bad memories and although I don't expect leaving will heal our broken hearts, I do believe the hope of a new future is what we need.

I am an even-tempered woman of the age of twenty nine. I believe myself to be kind, loving and gentle and a good mother to my daughter. If given the opportunity, I will raise your son as my own. Although I realize you are looking for love, I should admit I am a little hesitant to fall in love again.

After losing my husband, I haven't given it much thought, but perhaps through correspondence we might explore the possibility further.

If you believe that I might be the woman you are looking for, I look forward to hearing from you. If not, I wish you and your son all of the best and God's richest blessings.

YOURS TRULY,

Hazel Irvin

Boston, Massachusetts

HAZEL READ the letter over and almost crumbled it, but quickly placed it in an envelope. It might not be perfect, it might not be what Joe Spencer wanted to hear, but Hazel prided herself on honesty. After grabbing her coat, Hazel tucked the letter into her pocket and left to fetch Jessica from her lessons. She dropped the letter in a mailbox on her way and said a prayer for God to guide her to her fate. She glanced around the busy streets of Boston and had a feeling for the first time in her life that Boston was not the place of her future.

Perhaps Mrs. Smith had been right. Perhaps sometimes we weren't just offered one chance at happiness; perhaps sometimes we were offered happiness twice. Just maybe Hazel would find that happiness again, but more than anything she wished Jessica would find that happiness. Although she still quietly mourned both Michael and their son, Hazel knew that she needed to think of Jessica and her future now.

She wasn't sure if she would ever hear from Joe Spencer, but if she did she would accept it as a sign that God was steering her towards her fate.

CHAPTER 6



June 1878 Boston, Massachusetts

*I*t was a lovely summer's day in Boston. Although Hazel had learned to love the long cool winters, she enjoyed the warmth. It was as if, after a winter that had only brought her sorrow and loss, God had finally pushed away the dark clouds to allow a little sun into her life.

Not even Jessica's despondent mood could break Hazel's good mood this morning. She knew it had more to do with the letter in her handbag than it did with the weather, but Hazel pushed the thought aside as she ascended to the brownstone in which Mr. and Mrs. Smith lived.

She wasn't due to clean for Mrs. Smith today, but she did need some friendly advice. Regardless of their different stations in life, Mrs. Smith had become a dear friend to Hazel over the last few months. She lifted the brass knocker and waited for the housekeeper to open. Mrs. Plum, a heavily set elderly lady cocked a brow. More than once during the last few months Mrs. Plum had made her disapproval known over Hazel's friendship with Mrs. Smith.

"You're not working today." Mrs. Plum informed rudely.

Hazel smiled beneath the housekeeper's intimidating gaze. "I know, Mrs. Plum. I was coming to pay Mrs. Smith a visit. Is she available?"

Before the housekeeper could answer, Hazel heard Mrs. Smith's voice from inside the house. "Hazel, is that you?"

Mrs. Plum let out a heavy sigh of resignation. "I guess you'd best come in. You'd probably be expecting tea as well."

Mrs. Smith smiled at the housekeeper. "That would be lovely, Mrs. Plum."

Mrs. Plum hurried away but not before giving Hazel a stern look of disapproval. Hazel flinched beneath her gaze, but Mrs. Smith just laughed. "Don't pay her any mind. Come, let's sit in the parlor. It's such a lovely morning; I want to bask in the sun."

Hazel smiled as she followed Mrs. Smith into the parlor. The sun's rays reached through the windows, touching almost every corner of the parlor. Hazel took a seat and turned to Mrs. Smith with a questioning look. "I hope I'm not interrupting your day."

"Nonsense! Mr. Smith headed out to the docks early this morning and I'm all but starved of conversation. I was invited to a luncheon by the ladies of the ton, but who has time to discuss dresses and the upcoming debutante balls when there are people starving in the streets?" She shook her head clearly disgusted at the thought. "What brings you here, my dear?"

Hazel drew in a deep breath. "I received this in the mail yesterday."

Mrs. Smith reached for the letter Hazel held out just as Mrs. Plum arrived with a tea tray.

"Thank you, Mrs. Plum," Hazel said with a smile, but Mrs. Plum just huffed before hurrying away. Hazel prepared their tea while Mrs. Smith read the letter. When she was finally done she turned to Hazel with a beaming grin. "Hazel, this is the best news!"

Hazel frowned, shaking her head. "No, it isn't. It's horrible. He wants me to come to Texas and marry him. I don't even know him. What if he's mean

and hateful and takes to the bottle like Michael did?”

Mrs. Smith smiled kindly and reached for Hazel’s hand. “Hazel, it’s been three months since you wrote to him the first time. You admitted yourself that he sounded like a wonderful man. For the last three months you’ve been walking around as if a smile had taken permanent residence on your face and now that he’s proposed you’re having second thoughts.”

Hazel sighed. “It’s not that I’m having second thoughts, it’s just that I don’t even know him. It was all well and good when we were just corresponding but taking a train to Texas is another matter. I can’t just pack Jessica up and tell her I found her a new father.”

“And a brother,” Mrs. Smith added with a broad grin. “My dear, I love you as the daughter I once lost, but you and I both know that there is no one in Boston who would take on a widow and her daughter, especially not a pair from the tenements. Although it’s a fact I hate more than anything, this world is filled with snobs and not one of those snobs will take a second look at you. You have no dowry and no family with connections. If you want to find a new life for yourself and Jessica, this is it.” Mrs. Smith waved the letter in the air. “I know it feels strange, I know you must be horribly frightened, but Hazel, God has a hand in everything we do. Do you not think it was God’s work that you wrote to Joe in the first place, or that he replied? He must have received dozens of letters, but he chose you. Joe Spencer had faith in you, isn’t it time you had faith in him?”

Hazel glanced out the window at the beautiful day outside and wished the answer was easier. She was so afraid of leaving Boston and the memories of Michael and her baby son behind only to find a worse fate in Texas. A tear slipped over her cheek and she shook her head. “I just don’t know if I can do it. I don’t love him.”

Mrs. Smith chuckled softly. “My dear girl, you were lucky to fall in love and marry at a very young age. Not all of us are that lucky. Did I ever tell you how I came to be Mrs. Smith?”

Hazel shook her head. “No, you didn’t.”

“Well you see, I was a quite a handful even as a young girl. No man would look at me twice, thinking I’d only cause them headaches. I suppose they were right in a way.” She chuckled softly. “When I turned twenty eight my father arranged for a match. I was abhorred at the thought of marrying a man I didn’t know. On my wedding day I didn’t speak two words to Mr. Smith. But with time I came to like him. Once I did so, we became friends.” A dreamy smile settled on her face as she reminisced. “I still remember thinking there can be worse things than being married to a friend. But before I knew it I was falling in love. Sometimes it takes a while, Hazel, but I can assure you the love I feel for Mr. Smith is no less than the love you had for your Michael.”

Hazel sighed. “What if I don’t even like him?”

“You will. You’ve been telling me about his letters every week with such fondness that I just know you will. Go to Texas, Hazel, go find your happily ever after, and with time I’m sure you’ll find love as well.”

Hazel searched Mrs. Smith’s face and wondered if she was right. This morning she had been elated by the letter, but too hesitant to make a decision. She was flattered that Joe Spencer had asked for her hand in marriage, but terrified about saying yes. But now, after listening to Mrs. Smith’s reasoning, Hazel had to admit to herself that she didn’t really have a choice. They barely had any money left and Jessica wasn’t any better than a few months ago. Marrying a stranger might not be what she had in mind, but right now it was the only option she had if she wanted to see her daughter smile again.

Perhaps with time, she might even smile at her new husband as well with love.

CHAPTER 7



2 July 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

*F*or the last ten days Hazel and Jessica had been cooped up in a train heading south. Hazel couldn't even count the number of times she had debated whether boarding the train to Texas had been the right decision, but Jessica enjoyed pointing out interesting sights on the constantly changing landscape; Hazel hoped she had been right.

Hazel had expected her daughter to be reticent at the thought of leaving Boston, but as soon as Hazel explained that she would have a brother at her new home on the ranch, Jessica's excitement couldn't be contained. Jessica didn't care about leaving Boston or that her mother was practically marrying a stranger, all she cared about was finally having a little brother to play with.

Hazel was a little more cautious. Over the last few days she had so many nightmares on the train. Nightmares about Joe Spencer being a horrible man who beat on his son. Other nightmares about him drinking and becoming violent. Every time she woke up in a cold sweat, her heart racing, debating abandoning the train journey at the next stop.

But her reality wasn't easy to face. She had no money, no family and

right now Joe Spencer was her only chance at offering her daughter the life she had always dreamed of giving her. Hazel slipped an arm around Jessica's shoulders as the conductor announced that the train would be stopping in Fort Worth in less than an hour. Together mother and daughter watched out the window as the landscape changed once again into flat lands and dusty fields. It was so different from the lush mountainous vegetation of Boston, the heat already palpable inside the train. Regardless of it being summer in Boston, it was clear that Texas summers were much harsher.

The train's whistle sounded as they pulled into a station. Hazel glanced at Jessica with a smile. "Ready?"

Jessica nodded eagerly. "Will my brother be here?"

Hazel couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not sure. Best behavior, remember?"

Together they disembarked the train and, after collecting their luggage, they waited on the platform. For the first time Hazel realized she had no idea of Joe Spencer's appearance. Fear clutched at her heart even as Jessica began tugging on her hand.

"Ma, is that them?"

Hazel turned to see a tall man standing to one side with a hat riding low over his brow. Even with the distance between them, Hazel could see his eyes were a clear green. They reminded Hazel of the color of the ocean right before a storm. He had a strong face, a chiseled jaw, and thick brown brows guarding his eyes. Beside him stood a little boy of about six. The boy had his father's green eyes and brown hair, but his nose was scrunched up, a few freckles dotted on the tip as he curiously looked up and down the platform.

Hazel couldn't stop the smile that formed on her face even as her heart clenched in her chest. He was simply adorable. Ruddy, petulant and curious, just like every little boy should be.

"Ma!" Jessica persisted, tugging at her arm again.

But Hazel didn't answer. Just then the tall man met her gaze. His green eyes searched her face and Hazel felt her heart skip a beat even as her cheeks

turned rosy. She didn't hear Jessica's nagging because suddenly the man was moving towards her.

Hazel swallowed past the anxious lump in her throat and took a deep breath, wondering if the handsome man could indeed be Joe Spencer.

He stopped directly in front of her, his mouth tugged into a charming grin. "Hazel and Jessica, I hope?"

Jessica stuck out her hand first. "I'm Jessica and this is my ma Hazel. Are you Mr. Spencer?"

Joe chuckled at her forwardness before shaking her hand. "I am indeed, and this here is Stephen."

Jessica turned to the little boy with a wide-eyed gaze. Hazel watched as her little girl stepped forward and wrapped her arms around the boy with so much love. "I'm your big sister!"

The boy stepped back, clearly not appreciating the strange girl's directness, but Hazel knew it would only be a matter of time before he warmed to his new sister.

Hazel turned to meet Joe's eyes and cleared her throat. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Spencer."

"And you. You never mentioned how attractive you were in your letters. I must say it warms a man's heart to know he has a beautiful wife."

Hazel felt her blush deepen even more. "Thank you."

"Shall we get on our way? The pastor will be waiting," Joe said as he lifted her and Jessica's carpet bags as if they weighed no more than a feather. The bags had been a farewell gift from Mrs. Smith, who said she wouldn't need them again.

Together the four strangers started towards the wagon that waited at the end of the platform. Once everyone was inside, Hazel took a deep breath to calm herself. It had been arranged that they would marry on her arrival. It wouldn't be right for a woman to accompany a man to a ranch house unmarried.

They arrived at the chapel a short while later. Unlike the stone chapel in which she had wed Michael, this was a timber frame chapel. Some of the slats were faded and split with age and weather, but no one seemed to care except for Hazel.

Joe stopped the wagon and helped the children out before holding out a hand to Hazel. Her tummy flipped upside down as soon as their hands touched. Hazel quickly pushed the feeling aside as guilt rushed over her. She had never been attracted to any man other than Michael and she had a feeling of betraying him by marrying Joe.

Since it was too late to change his mind now, she followed Joe and their children into the chapel where the pastor was already waiting. Regardless of their situation, the pastor presented a wonderful sermon about patience, kindness, love and consideration being the four cornerstones of marriage. By the time he said the vows, Hazel's heart was racing a mile a minute. She turned and looked into Joe's green gaze and wondered if she would ever love him in the way she had loved Michael.

The children sat quietly in the first pew as Hazel promised to honor Joe for the rest of her life. When the pastor announced them husband and wife, Hazel couldn't help but wonder if she had just made the biggest mistake of her life. She turned and looked at Jessica who was smiling and knew she had done it for her daughter.

Beside Jessica sat Stephen. He hadn't said a single word since their arrival and his downtrodden expression made Hazel's heart yearn. Did he not want his father to marry, or was he simply disappointed in his father's choice of wife? Hazel pushed the thoughts aside when Joe suddenly reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to the top of her knuckles.

"Fort Worth welcomes you, Mrs. Spencer. May you only find love and happiness here."

Hazel knew he was only being kind and smiled. "I hope so too."

"Shall we go home now?"

Jessica jumped up and rushed to their sides. “To the ranch?”

Joe chuckled. “Yes, to the ranch. Have you ever been on a ranch before, Jessica?”

Jessica shook her head. “No. But Ma says there are horses and chickens and sometimes even cows on a ranch.”

“That’s right, and we have a little of each, don’t we, Stephen?” Joe asked turning to his son whose gaze remained determinedly fixed on the floor, clearly not approving of strangers taking up residence in his home.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



Joe stopped at the merchant store in Fort Worth and Hazel couldn't help but feel her tummy rumble at the sight of fresh cheese and the like that she had not been able to afford to buy back in Boston for quite some time.

They were all eventually back in the wagon, which was now loaded with purchases, and headed out to Joe's ranch.

"It'll take us 'bout two hours to get back to the ranch. You're welcome to nap if you'd like," Joe said with a charming smile as they started out of town on a dirt road.

"Thank you, I must say I am a bit tired after the train journey," Hazel replied before glancing over her shoulder at the children. Stephen had yet to talk to Jessica. It seemed not to have bothered Jessica too much that her new brother hadn't said two words to her.

As the road climbed and fell Hazel found sleep the furthest from her mind. The landscape was so different from the north east part of the country where they had lived. There were dusty flats before rocks seemed to tower out of nothing before it gave way to rivers carving their way through the countryside. It was rugged, dusty and absolutely breathtaking. Hazel and Jessica were both completely enthralled by their surroundings. When an eagle swept low past them, Hazel gasped in awe just as Jessica did the first time

she saw a mule approaching from the opposite direction.

It was new and exciting and Hazel couldn't help but feel that coming to Texas had been the right decision. Her daughter was excited for the first time in months and instead of the sullen expression that had become commonplace on her pretty face, there was now a beaming smile.

The next two hours flew by as both mother and daughter were captivated by everything around them. By the time Joe turned the wagon onto a smaller dirt road, Hazel had completely forgotten that she had been tired.

"Here she is, I know she's not much, but she's home," Joe said with a shrug.

Suddenly there were fences on either side of the road and cattle grazed, completely oblivious to their arrival. Hazel gasped at the sheer size of the cattle before being taken aback by the size of Joe's herd. "Are all these cows yours?"

Joe chuckled. "Cattle. Yep, they're mine. Got another herd over that hill. Grazing's better there this time of year. But these are the steers I'm hoping to take to auction come winter."

"You have more?" Jessica cried out from behind them.

"It's a big herd," Joe admitted. "Hard work, too."

The dirt road carried on for a while, curving around an outcrop of rocks before a house suddenly came into sight. It was a large cabin made of timber with a few large trees towering around it. It was the size of the entire block of tenement homes in Boston. Hazel shook her head in awe. "It's.... big!"

"It's big enough," Joe admitted.

"Four bedrooms, a kitchen and a fireplace for winter. And a wraparound porch. Thought it might be a good idea, that way I get to watch the sunrise and the sunset." Joe smiled at Hazel and she felt her tummy flip upside down again.

She quickly cleared her throat and turned back to the house noticing the outbuildings. A large barn stood a short distance from the house. A chicken

coop held position beside what looked like a kitchen garden, and the outhouse wasn't far off. It was more than Hazel could ever have imagined.

A few horses grazed close to the house and, just as the wagon came to a stop, a wolf rushed past the horses and took up a terribly frightening noise. Jessica all but jumped onto Hazel's lap in pure terror even as Stephen uttered his first sound for the day.

"He won't bite, unless I tell him to."

Stephen jumped off the wagon and rubbed the wolf's ears while Hazel and Jessica both remained frozen in place.

"Lobo might seem intimidating, but he won't do you no harm," Joe said, climbing off the wagon. "Got him from a Mexican that came through when Stephen was just a cub himself. Lobo's pa was a Mexican wolf but he's ma was dog. He's a gentle soul but helps keep other wolves at bay."

Not believing that the wolf was harmless at all, Hazel shook her head. "I won't let my daughter be mauled by a wolf."

Joe chuckled. "You're not afraid, are ya, Jessica?"

Jessica broke free from her mother's grasp and into Joe's waiting arms as he helped her down. He called the wolf over and Hazel couldn't help but flinch when the wolf rushed at Jessica.

"Lobo, this is Jessica," Joe said in a gentle voice.

Before Hazel could warn her daughter off, the wolfdog rolled onto its back, tongue lolling to one side as Jessica laughed and scratched his belly.

"See, he's just a pup," Joe chuckled holding out his hand to Hazel.

Hazel tentatively climbed out of the wagon, her heart still racing as Jessica petted Lobo. Stephen had already rushed towards the house and Hazel couldn't help but wonder why the little boy seemed so upset. Not feeling as if it was her place to ask, she helped Joe carry their luggage and purchases inside.

The cabin was even larger on the inside than it had seemed from the outside. Hazel had heard of Mexicans coming into Texas, but it was her first

experience of Mexican influence inside Joe's house. Colorfully weaved rugs covered the floor. The kitchen was large with a table dominating the center for family meals. The fireplace was large enough to roast a pig, whole.

"We're in Texas, we do things big," Joe said with a smile noticing her shocked expression.

"I can see that," Hazel commented as she turned to Joe. "Your home is amazing."

"Our home," Joe corrected with a warm smile before taking her hand. "Come; let me show you to your room."

Hazel's heart jumped into her throat, remembering she was now Joe's wife. But instead of the main bedroom, he showed her to a bedroom across from Stephen's. It was large enough for two beds and a wardrobe. Larger than her entire home in Boston. She stepped into the room, shaking her head at the breathtaking view through the window.

"Joe, this is perfect."

Jose shrugged. "I thought you might want to share with Jessica. For now..."

Hazel quickly nodded. "Thank you."

"I'll leave you to unpack and wash up after your journey. But before I go, I just want to say... I'm mighty happy you came, Hazel."

Hazel felt a blush color her cheeks. "I think I am, too."

Joe smiled at her; really smiled for the first time. He was the most attractive man Hazel had ever met, his height and broad shoulders only adding to his appeal. Her breath caught before she quickly turned around and opened her carpet bag. "Come Jessica, the sooner we unpack, the sooner you can go and explore."

Jessica jumped onto the bed and tossed all her belongings out before turning to her mother with a petulant frown. "You don't expect me to wear dresses here, do you? No one is going to care if I wear pantaloons on a country ranch."

Hazel let out a heavy sigh. “Could we at least settle in before we start arguing over your choice of clothing?”

Jessica pouted. “Alright. Ma, but please consider it.”

“Only if you wash up like a good girl and help me unpack first,” Hazel said with a cocked brow although she already knew sooner or later she was bound to give in.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



After unpacking and taking a long desired bath, Hazel was ready to face her new husband. She found him in the kitchen, stirring a pot and couldn't help but be slightly surprised.

"You're cooking?" Hazel asked, peeking into the pot to see a rich vegetable stew, its aroma making her mouth water.

Joe nodded. "Thought you might be tired after your journey. It isn't much, just stew."

Hazel shook her head. "It smells delicious after living on train meals for a week." A frown creased her brow as she realized Jessica was nowhere in sight. "Jessica?"

"She's outside, exploring. Don't worry; I've got her in my sights. She's right there by the chicken coop. Never seen anyone so fascinated with chickens before," Joe chuckled.

Hazel moved towards the window and saw her daughter standing beside the chicken coop having a conversation with the hens. A smile curved her mouth as a sense of calm settled over her. She hadn't known if Jessica would enjoy living on a ranch, but clearly the hens already made up for the friends Jessica had left behind in Boston.

On the other side of the yard, sitting in front of the barn, was Stephen, all alone. Her heart ached for the little boy who seemed so quiet and lonely, but

she didn't mention her thoughts to Joe. They barely knew each other, and it wasn't her place to comment on his son.

"Can I do anything to help?"

"Sure," Joe said. "You can set the table if you like. You'll find plates and such in that cupboard."

Hazel felt a little intimidated by the large kitchen and promised herself that she would acquaint herself with the layout tomorrow. Once she found the plates, she set the table and then took a wander through the house to explore it just a little. It was so different from the home she had shared with Michael for so many years. Despite the size, this house felt welcoming. The warm breeze sneaked in through the windows, bringing with it the scents of summer.

Hazel took a deep breath before letting out a contented sigh.

"It's your place now too, Hazel. If there's anything you'd like to change, please feel free."

Hazel turned to find Joe standing behind her. "Really, to be honest I don't think I'd change a thing. It's a wonderful home."

Joe chuckled before dragging a hand through his thick bark-brown hair. "I'm sure with time you'll change a thing or two. Especially the kitchen. I've never been much of a cook, but I taught myself when... When I needed to," he stumbled over his words before quickly turning away.

Hazel understood what he meant and simply nodded. "Shall I call the children?"

"Yep, you can. Tell 'em to wash up, too. Stephen always forgets," Joe said, shaking his head before heading to the kitchen.

Hazel stepped out on the porch and called to the children. Jessica rushed towards her, her cheeks pink with excitement. "Ma, did you see the hens? And the cows? And the horses?"

Hazel laughed. "I did. I'll take a closer look tomorrow. You best be careful; you're not used to these types of animals. You might get hurt."

Jessica laughed. "Ma, they're just animals. I'll be fine."

Jessica rushed into the house, past her to wash up and Hazel waited on the porch as Stephen slowly made his way from the barn.

"Hiya, Stephen. Your pa says you need to remember to wash up," Hazel said in a gentle voice.

Stephen barely looked up at her; he just nodded and walked past her into the house.

Hazel waited another moment and quickly said a prayer. "*Lord, please give me the patience and the kindness to be the mother he needs.*"

Everyone sat down at the table and although Joe and Hazel were talking about menial things, getting to know each other as they ate, Jessica and Stephen barely said a word. When their plates were empty, Joe turned to his son.

"Stephen, tomorrow you can show Jessica around the ranch. Just not too far from the house. I'm sure she's dying to see more."

Jessica nodded eagerly. "Can I get the eggs from the chicken coop?"

Joe chuckled. "I'm sure you can. Stephen will show you how."

"Might get bitten by a rattler. its summer and they're hunting," Stephen said in the angry voice of a little boy. It was the first words he'd spoken since their arrival and Hazel couldn't help but feel as if he didn't want them there.

Jessica flinched before sticking out her chin. "I'll bite him first."

Joe chuckled. "Stephen knows what to do when he sees a rattler. Don't you, son?"

Stephen shrugged, making it clear he wasn't going to look out for Jessica.

By the time the dishes were washed, and the sun had set in the west, Jessica was just as sullen as Stephen. Hazel had looked forward to Jessica finally having the brother she had dreamed of, but clearly her daughter wasn't very impressed with her angry and withdrawn brother.

"Time for bed," Joe announced, clapping his hands together. Without a word, Stephen walked to his room, and shut the door.

Jessica turned to Hazel with a sad expression. Hazel forced a smile. “Come on, young lady; let’s get you tucked into your new bed.”

After saying their prayers, Hazel kissed Jessica. “I know it’s all still very new, but in no time at all you and Stephen will be playing as if you’ve always been brother and sister.”

Jessica smiled hopefully. “You really think so, Ma?”

“Without a doubt,” Hazel promised although she already had her doubts. She blew out the candle before heading to the kitchen. It was too early for her to turn in, but she couldn’t help but feel anxious about being alone with Joe for the first time.

“I made you coffee. If you like, we could sit out on the porch,” Joe offered.

Hazel nodded and followed him out onto the porch. Instead of the suffocating heat that had been stifling earlier, there was now a cool breeze and the landscape was simply breathtaking in the moonlight.

They sat down and for a while and neither said a word. Joe finally broke the silence.

“I’m sorry about Stephen. You should excuse him; he had his heart set on having a brother some day.” Joe sighed. “I probably should’ve waited.... But your letters....” Joe trailed off and turned to Hazel.

Their eyes met and she knew exactly what he meant. From his first letter she had felt something, almost as if God was nudging her in his direction. She nodded and a smile curved her mouth.

“Well, Jessica is over the moon. She’s always wanted a brother. In fact, I don’t even recall her having any girl friends back in Boston. She might surprise Stephen yet.”

Joe shrugged. “Hopefully.”

“Jessica isn’t your usual girl. She hates dresses and I’ve had to get her out of more than one tumble with the boys back home. She’s always been a little rough and tumble.”

Joe chuckled, shaking his head. “I can only imagine how disappointed you must be.”

Hazel caught herself laughing. “At first maybe, but now... that’s who she is, and I love her for it. She never steps down from a challenge and she doesn’t have a single ounce of fear in her bones. That frightens me more than anything.”

“Sounds like quite a girl. I’m sure she’s going to love it on the ranch if she doesn’t mind getting some dust on her dresses.”

Hazel sighed. “That’s the other thing, Joe, would you mind if she wore pantaloons around the ranch? She’s never been fond of dresses. I made her wear one on the train.”

“She can wear whatever she’s comfortable with. I want you both to be comfortable here,” Joe said with a smile and their eyes met again.

Hazel couldn’t help but remember Mrs. Smith’s words about becoming friends before falling in love. There wasn’t a single doubt in her mind that she could be friends with Joe but as for falling in love... Michael came to mind, and Hazel quickly broke their gaze. She wasn’t ready to be anything more than friends just yet.

CHAPTER 10



23 July 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

Hazel stood in the kitchen late afternoon and caught herself returning to the window every few minutes. This had been happening more and more over the last two weeks. The first week after their arrival in Texas, Hazel had been shy and reserved towards Joe.

But the handsome rancher's charm had soon coaxed her out of her shell. They could talk for hours on end about anything and everything, but Hazel enjoyed it most when he spoke about the ranch. He spoke with such passion that it was hard not to also feel passionate about cattle.

The only problem was that she caught herself watching him more and more. The way he worked with the animals, the way he was with his son and right now, the way he was with her daughter.

Joe held the horse's halter and patiently explained to Jessica about every aspect of the horse. He allowed her to rub the horse down, explaining that you didn't ride an animal you didn't respect. If you wanted an animal to respect you, it was most important to first respect the animal.

Her heart swelled in her chest when Joe suddenly turned and looked

directly at her. Hazel's breath caught as she quickly turned away from the window. It didn't matter how much she denied it, she liked Joe. She liked him as a friend and, if she was completely honest, she liked him a little more than a friend. But every time he returned her smile or held her gaze, she felt a dark cloud pushing down on her with guilt. She had promised to love Michael until the day she died and, although Michael had been gone for months now, Hazel still couldn't help but feel guilty. About losing the baby, about Michael's consequent demise and more recently about being happy living under another man's roof.

The sweet scent of cookies filled the air and a smiled curved Hazel's mouth. She moved towards the oven and pulled the fresh batch of sugar cookies out before placing them on the table to cool. She knew the scent would soon coax Stephen inside, just as she had planned.

Although the boy was still quiet and reserved, Hazel had decided to fatten him up a little. She wasn't sure if his skinny build was due to running around on the farm or because of Michael's poor talent in the kitchen. Regardless, every time she baked he would rush inside and actually spend a few minutes talking to her while he relished in the freshly baked spoils.

She wiped her hands and moved back to the window. Her heart jumped into her throat when she watched as Joe carefully helped Hazel onto the horse's bare back. Just then the back door opened, and Stephen diverted her attention.

"She's not... going to fall off, is she?" Hazel asked the little boy a little nervously. Although he was small he knew a lot more about horses and ranch life than Hazel did.

Stephen shrugged. "Not if she sits still, she won't. Pa insists you get to earn a horse's trust before you ride." He walked over to the table where the cookies were cooling and looked at Hazel with a hopeful expression. "Can I have one?"

Hazel smiled, her heart swelling in her chest as she looked down at

Stephen. His hair was the same shade of brown as his father's and his eyes the same hue of green. He was almost like a miniature Joe who just had to learn how to smile as abundantly as Joe could.

“You can have as many as you like but first you have to answer three questions.”

Stephen's mouth curved slightly. “Again with the questions.”

Hazel laughed. Since it was the only way she got him to talk, she took full advantage of the opportunity. “Firstly, what do you like most about the ranch?”

Stephen thought for a moment before he grinned. “The kitchen, because that's where you bake.”

Hazel's heart warmed. “Good answer. Next; would you like me to sew you some new clothes?”

Stephen frowned. “Like make me clothes?”

“Yes. I've made all Jessica's clothes,” Hazel clarified.

Stephen nodded. “Please, ma'am. My breeches are growing a bit small. Pa says it's because I shoot out faster than a weed.”

Hazel couldn't help but laugh. “Breeches it is. Last question. Are you angry that your pa invited me and Jessica to come and stay?”

It was the first time she had approached the subject of Stephen's blatant dislike of Jessica. He thought for a long while before he finally met Hazel's gaze. “You're alright, I s'pose.”

Hazel wished she could push further but he was only six years old and it wouldn't be right for her to reenact the Spanish inquisition. “Well then, that's three questions answered. Dig in.”

She watched as he scoffed down a few cookies and then headed outside with a few more. Hazel followed him outside, relieved to see Jessica with both feet safely on the ground again.

“Why don't you go put her in the stable for tomorrow, then we can work with her again.”

Jessica hesitated for a moment before she stepped forward and confidently reached for the horse's halter. Hazel couldn't help but smile with pride. Her little girl was brave, and it was clear that Joe enjoyed spending time with her. Once Jessica and the mare disappeared into the barn, Hazel turned to see where Stephen had gone. She saw two feet poking out from the side of the porch and knew he was eating his cookies in peace.

A quick glance at the sun told her it was time to start dinner. Although she loved baking, she had completely forgotten about dinner. Just as she was about to head inside, she caught Joe looking her way. Her tummy tilted upside down as their eyes met and for the first time Hazel was almost unable to draw her gaze away from him. When his mouth turned up into a handsome smile, the familiar guilt had her rushing back into the kitchen as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. As soon as she was alone, she took a few deep breaths to steady herself.

It wasn't that she didn't want to fall in love with her new husband, it was just a matter of feeling too guilty because that would mean letting go of Michael's memory. She pushed the wayward thoughts aside and began making a simple dinner of biscuits and grits.

CHAPTER 11



24 July 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

The following morning Hazel decided to enjoy her coffee on the porch to watch the sunrise. Usually Joe headed out to do chores as such as soon as the sun's first rays touched the horizon, but this morning he poured himself a second cup of coffee and joined her on the porch.

At first Hazel wondered if something was amiss that he had joined her, but after the initial panic wore off, she couldn't help but feel almost content as they sat together on the porch.

The children were still fast asleep, and it was one of the few times Jessica was not underfoot, eagerly babbling or Stephen was not sulking somewhere in a corner.

Joe turned to her with a curious grin after a short while. "You seem to enjoy the ranch, or are you just pretending to for Jessica's sake?"

Hazel caught herself smiling in earnest. "I'm not very good at pretending, even for Jessica's sake." She glanced out over the landscape and sighed contently. "I didn't expect I'd like the hot weather, or the endless plains, but it... It's growing on me, I suppose."

Joe nodded. "I've never lived up north. I was born somewhere on the trail when my parents came South and I never had the urge to be anywhere else. This is home to me, has always been."

Hazel smiled. "It suits you."

"The warmer climate suits you, too. When you and Jessica first got off that train, you were about as pale as snow in the moonlight. Got some color in your cheeks now."

Hazel felt a blush color those very cheeks and shook her head. "You're not what I expected, Joe Spencer."

Joe chuckled, the sound drifting in the cool morning breeze. Soon the sun would tire even the breeze with its relentless heat. "Is that so? Well, ma'am, what were you expectin'?"

Hazel shrugged. "I'm not sure really. Just a new life, I s'pose. After Michael..."

"Your husband?" Joe asked with a frown. "How did he pass?"

Hazel sighed, avoiding Joe's gaze as she told him about their dream of having a little boy and the events up until the day she buried Michael. When she was finished, Joe reached for her hand and squeezed it, offering support.

"I can only imagine how hard these last few months must have been for you. To have a daughter to take care of... to lose so much in a such a short time.."

Hazel shrugged. "It was hard, but God helped us through. He always does."

Joe nodded before letting go of her hand. "With Sarah it happened so fast. She was such a natural when it came to the horses. Even had some Mexicans come ask for her help when they had a gelding they couldn't tame," Joe shook his head. "I still remember getting up that morning and thinking how blessed I was to have a son and a beautiful wife. She was busy breaking in a painted horse, one of them horses the Indians breed... that horse was trouble from the first day he came to us. Kickin' and bitin' and causing a fuss with

the other horses. But Sarah wouldn't give up. She worked him for months; until that day when she finally climbed on and the horse let her sit his back. I remember thinkin' she truly had been blessed with a special way and before I could have another thought, the horse bolted." Joe paused for a moment and Hazel turned to him, she saw the haunted look in his eyes of a man who had loved and lost.

"The horse threw her over in those hills; she was dead by the time I got to her."

"I'm so sorry, Joe. I can only imagine how hard it must've been for you. How old was Stephen when it happened?"

"'Bout three. He was cryin' not knowin' why his ma was gone. It was a tough time."

Hazel nodded without saying a word. She and Joe had both had their share of losses.

"It took me all this time to realize I wanted to love again. I wanted Stephen to have a ma again..." Joe chuckled softly. "Once you lose someone you love, you realize you have to cherish every moment you still have."

Hazel met his gaze with a nod. "I know what you mean. It's as if the air tastes sweeter, the light is brighter, the sun is warmer... as if knowing that at any moment you could lose it all."

They shared a smile and for the first time Hazel wondered if she would ever be ready to love again.

Joe reached for her hand again and smiled. "I cherish every moment of havin' you and Jessica on this ranch. I knew God was at work when I placed that advert, I never thought He'd bless me with such a good hearted wife or quite such a spirited little girl."

Hazel's heart swelled in her chest. "Thank you." She didn't tell him how much she liked him, or how she had fallen in love with Stephen because in her heart she knew she wasn't ready yet. Her smile faded as a sense of guilt rushed over her again. She wasn't sure when she would ever be rid of the

feelings of guilt whenever she looked at Joe.

“Stephen seems to be fond of ‘yer cooking,” Joe commented when they both turned back to watch the sunrise.

“Yes. It’s the only time he talks to me. Do you think he’ll ever get along with Jessica?”

Joe shrugged. “I’m not all that sure. At first Jessica really tried her best to coax him to play with her, but I see she’s also stopped tryin’.”

Hazel nodded. “Yes. I noticed that. I thought about talking to her about it, but how can I encourage her to spend time with Stephen when he doesn’t want to spend time with her? She had so hoped for a brother to play with, but it seems Stephen’s disappointment is going to take longer than we expected for him to get over.”

Joe sighed heavily. “Yep, I thought so, too. But you know what, Hazel, they’re kids. Sooner or later they’ll figure each other out. It’s the adults we should be worried about. Seems like they’re getting on like a house on fire.”

Hazel smiled but quickly looked away. That was exactly what was scaring her. She couldn’t remember ever feeling this strongly about Michael so soon after their meeting. She had known him for three years before she they were married, and here she was already married to a man she hardly knew. A man who made her head spin and her heart race.

“Well, I’d best get on with doin’ the day’s chores. You got anything specific you gotta do today?”

Hazel nodded. “I was wonderin’ if we go to town again, if I could buy some fabric. Stephen mentioned he needed new breeches.”

Joe laughed as he stood up. “That boy shoots up faster than weeds. We’ll get you some fabric, but only if you make somethin’ for your husband as well.”

Hazel chuckled as Joe walked away. She turned back to the sun that was slowly rising in the east and knew Joe was right. They had to cherish every minute, but it was hard when she spent every second minute feeling guilty for

betraying Michael's memory.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



2 August 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

A month after their arrival in Texas, Hazel had settled into a routine. Although there was more housework on the ranch than in Boston, especially with the wind causing every speck of dust to land inside the house instead of somewhere on the range, Hazel loved every minute of it.

Joe's kind disposition and Jessica's excitement about learning everything about ranch life, was contagious. Regardless of the children still not getting along, Hazel was beginning to realize that coming south had been the right decision.

Since the heart to heart she and Joe had over sunrise a few days ago, it was as if they had formed some kind of bond that Hazel couldn't help but appreciate. It was as if both understood that they hadn't chosen the hands they were dealt but knew to make the best of the situation.

If Hazel was honest she would have admitted that she was slowly starting to like Joe more than as just a friend but whenever those thoughts occurred to her, Hazel quickly shoved them back into the corners of her mind.

Stephen helped his father with everything on the ranch. He was a bright

little boy with an energy that only faded whenever Jessica was near. Hazel made a point to make sure Jessica didn't know about Stephen's disappointment in getting a sister instead of a brother. But although Stephen was withdrawn and reserved in Jessica's presence, he had soon crawled into Hazel's heart. Although he wasn't the son she had buried earlier that year, she was soon realizing that she could love another woman's son just as much.

Just yesterday he had grazed his knee while trying to help his father rope a steer, and instead of rushing to his father for consolation, he had headed straight into Hazel's arms. The moment had been so special, such a significant change in the relationship they had shared until then, and Hazel knew that it was only a matter of time before he accepted Jessica in the same way.

As for Jessica, things were better than ever for her little rough and tumble girl. Since her new *pa* didn't care if she wore breeches on the ranch, she now wore nothing but. She spent her days following Joe and Stephen and only came home to help Hazel with chores when her mother insisted. A girl might prefer the company of boys and the fresh air the ranch had to offer but there were still things a little girl had to learn; things like sewing, cleaning, cooking and of course taking the lessons that Hazel now gave her herself.

At first Jessica had been very resistant when it came to her morning lessons, but she soon realized that Hazel was unmovable on that front. Now as soon as breakfast was over, Jessica nagged until Hazel helped her with her lessons and she could rush outside to play.

But it was the relationship between Joe and Jessica that truly warmed Hazel's heart. She had expected him to soon become irritable with the little girl trailing after him day and night, constantly peppering him with questions.

But not once did Joe turn her away or refuse to answer her questions. He was patient with her, kind and, instead of chastening her for being a little rough like Michael had often done, Joe encouraged it. On numerous occasions he had explained to Hazel that a girl needed to know how to take

care of herself. It was a wild world out there and he wouldn't always be there to protect her.

Today Joe was spending the afternoon teaching her to ride. He had spent nearly a week making sure Jessica was comfortable around the horse before he finally showed her how the horse was to be saddled. Her heart had ached to see her little girl struggle with the large saddle that probably weighed more than she did, but Joe had kindly placed a step beside the horse to make things a little easier for her.

Once the morning chores were done and the laundry was gently flapping in the breeze, Hazel made a batch of sun tea before taking a seat on the porch to watch her girl learn to ride a horse. She couldn't help but be anxious, especially after learning that Joe's wife was killed after being thrown from a horse, but she knew learning to ride was an integral part of living on a ranch.

Stephen's mouth was contorted with insolence while his pa helped Hazel and, although he was close by on his own horse, helping whenever Joe told him to, it was clear Stephen would have preferred being elsewhere.

Hazel watched as Jessica adjusted the saddle and Joe helped her fasten the girth. Once the horse was safely saddled according to Joe's firm standards, he stood back and held up his hands.

"Now, Jessy-girl, she's all yours. You need to get up on her back and remember, whatever you're feeling she's goin' to feel, so stay calm."

Hazel held her breath as her daughter held onto the saddle horn with one hand before swinging herself into the saddle. Her heart stopped for a moment, expecting the horse to buck, or Jessica to become frightened and scream, causing the horse to bolt, but instead her daughter's next move was totally unexpected.

Jessica leaned forward and hugged the horse as if it was a large teddy bear. "You won't hurt me, girl, will you? You know you're the first horse I've ever climbed on and you're going to be patient, aren't ya?"

Hazel's mouth curved into a smile, hearing her daughter's newly acquired

western tang, so similar to the tone in which Joe and Stephen spoke. She watched Jessica sit upright and take the reins before turning to Joe with a questioning look. “Can I take her for a walk?”

Joe laughed shaking his head in awe. “If you feel you’re ready, just don’t go far and don’t startle her.”

Hazel jumped up from her spot on the porch and quickly crossed the yard to Joe. “Joe, shouldn’t you be holding the horse, or my daughter, or doing something?”

Joe laughed and as if he had done it a thousand times before he slipped an arm around Hazel’s shoulders. “Relax. Ma, our girl is doin’ just fine. If she sees you’re nervous, she’ll be nervous.”

Hazel wasn’t sure whether to focus on Joe’s arm on her shoulder or her daughter riding the horse at a walk, inexperienced as she was. When Jessica’s laughter floated to them on the breeze, Hazel began breathing a little easier.

“She’s a natural,” Joe said beside her, completely baffled. “I’ve never seen such a thing before.”

Hazel let out a sigh of relief. “Can she come back now?”

Joe chuckled. “Not just yet. She’s doin’ just fine. If we break her confidence today, we’re going to have trouble building it back up.”

Standing side by side they watched Jessica walk the horse in slow circles in front of the house. She cooed to the horse all the while, and the horse obeyed her every command. For Hazel it was akin to watching her daughter walk for the first time. Both terrifying and wonderful.

When Jessica finally brought the horse to a stop she glanced down at the ground before turning to Joe with a foolish grin. “Can you help me down?”

Joe smiled, moving towards her. He lifted Jessica off the horse and set her down on her feet before clapping his hands. “A more natural horse woman I’ve yet to meet. You did wonderfully.”

Jessica’s smile beamed as she rushed towards Hazel. “Did you hear that. Ma? I’m a natural.”

Hazel laughed with a happy nod. “I saw. I was terrified but you were so brave. My brave little girl.”

Jessica nodded before smiling up at Hazel. “Thanks for bringing us here, Ma. I don’t want to be anywhere else in the world.”

Hazel met Joe’s charming smile over her daughter’s head and couldn’t help but feel guilty. Joe was giving them the life she and Michael had always dreamed of and it felt as if being happy meant betraying Michael. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, but she quickly brushed it away. “You go on and put the saddle away, I’m going to get started on dinner.”

Hazel rushed towards the house, wishing that Joe and the children had not seen her unexpected tears. As soon as she was inside she shook her head and glanced up at the roof. *“God, please help me. I know Joe is good man, God, but how can I love him when I was supposed to share this with Michael. It hurts; it hurts to know that Michael isn’t here, and it hurts even more when I look into my heart and see feelings for Joe there. Am I betraying Michael? Please God, help me. Show me the way and help me towards my fate because right now I feel like a flightless bird without direction. Amen.”*

CHAPTER 13



20 August 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

When Joe had posted the advertisement in the Matrimonial Times he had done so in the hopes of finding a motherly figure for Stephen, and possibly also a brother for the boy. He had never thought of finding love again. But ever since the first moment he had set eyes on Hazel on the train platform, Joe had known that love was very definitely a possibility.

Although he had loved Sarah more than life itself, Joe found himself drawn to Hazel in the same way he had been drawn to Sarah before their wedding. Not only was Hazel beautiful in a natural way with her honey blonde hair and rich brown eyes, but her warm and kind personality seemed to melt the ice that had frozen over his heart since the day he buried his beloved wife.

It had been almost two months since he had collected Hazel and Jessica from the train station, and what he had thought to be a slight of attraction at first had quickly turned to like. Over the last few weeks he had come to know her as a gentle woman with a heart of gold. He found himself more and more

attracted to her and had even once or twice found himself just looking at her, unable to fathom how God had blessed him twice with such a wonderful woman to love.

The only problem was that it seemed, regardless of his feelings, that Hazel didn't feel the same way. Whenever he felt a connection, she would flee. Whenever he smiled at her she would hastily look away. Except for the few times they had been alone after the children went to bed or before they woke in the mornings, she always made sure one was about to be a buffer between them.

It wasn't that he thought she was afraid, merely not interested in his affections. When Jessica had learned to ride and saddle a horse a month ago, he had felt something change. In the beginning it had been as if Hazel had tried to deny the attraction between them, but now it felt as if she didn't even feel it at all.

Over the last few days, Joe couldn't help but feel bothered by it. He had known that neither of them had gone into this marriage looking for love, but surely after knowing what it was like to lose someone, Hazel understood just like him that if there was a possibility of love they should grasp it with both hands. And yet she kept avoiding him.

Yesterday, Joe had been certain that ignoring the feelings he had for Hazel was the best option. If he didn't risk his heart, he wouldn't get hurt again. But this morning when he watched her over breakfast he knew he wanted to take that chance again. He wanted to love again, maybe have more children, perhaps even dream of a future with Hazel, but she was making it clear that she didn't share the same dreams.

Usually she escaped to her bedroom the moment Jessica went to bed, but tonight Joe caught her just before she managed to say goodnight. "Would you mind taking a walk with me to cool down? These last weeks of summer can really become stifling."

He watched her debate for a moment before she finally said yes. Joe

knew it was only because she couldn't think of an excuse fast enough.

She followed him outside and together they meandered towards the barn. The moonlight lit the landscape in eerie colors with a heaven of diamonds above them. A more beautiful night Joe hadn't seen in a long time.

"Everything alright? You seem awfully quiet tonight?" Joe ventured, hoping he would finally get the answers he needed.

Hazel shrugged. "Perfectly fine. Just tired I suppose. Like you say the heat can be stifling."

Joe nodded. "Seems Jessica is going to want a horse of her own soon." The corners of his mouth lifted. He had never wanted a little girl, but since Jessica had come running out of the chicken coop a few days after their arrival with feathers stuck to her clothes, she had found a place for herself in his heart.

"Perhaps. I can't help but feel terrified every time she climbs onto a horse," Hazel admitted quietly.

"I'll admit it's terrifying when they start to learn, but she's responsible. Much more than I was at her age."

Joe smiled and searched Hazel's face, knowing it was time to ask the question that had been hounding his mind. "Are you glad you came to Texas?"

Hazel laughed. "Of course I am. It's beautiful here and Jessica simply loves the ranch. Although Stephen still hasn't taken to her, she still adores the animals and all the space."

"I asked how you felt?" Joe asked quietly, searching her face.

Hazel quickly looked away, but Joe gently turned her chin to meet his gaze. "I can't help but feel as if you draw back, as if you're afraid to be happy here."

Hazel took a deep breath and shook her head. "It's different for me, Joe. I lost Michael... my son... it's hard to go on without them."

Joe nodded understanding but he still needed to know if she felt the same

way. “When you wrote to me Hazel, did you hope to find love or safety?” It was as plain as he could put it and as soon as the words left his mouth Joe feared the answer. What if she didn’t feel the same way? What if she was just here to provide a home for her daughter?

Hazel shook her head before her brow creased. “Joe, you must understand the situation we were in...”

“Hazel, love or safety?” Joe had never been one to beat around the bush and he wasn’t going to start now.

Hazel sighed. “Safety.” She answered in a small voice.

One word made Joe’s world fall apart. Over the last few weeks he had been sure he was falling in love again, but that one word made it clear that his wife didn’t feel the same way.

“I’m going to bed, good night Hazel.” Joe turned and walked away, needing a moment to soothe his broken heart. He had been sure Hazel held felt the same way, but it was clear she didn’t. The only reason she was happy was because both she and Jessica were safe, it had nothing to do with his heart swelling in his chest whenever he looked at her.

CHAPTER 14



27 August 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

Hazel had watched Joe walk away from her. He had turned on his heel and rushed back to the house before she could tell him that things had changed for her since writing that first letter. But when she reached the house he was already in his room with the candle blown out.

She spent a restless night, hoping she would have the courage to tell him in the morning how things had changed for her, but the following morning he was gone when she reached the kitchen. He left word with the children that he needed to check fences on the north border of the ranch. Hazel knew he was only trying to avoid her.

He avoided her over the next few days. Where the house had been filled with laughter and the promise of a new future, there was now a silence hanging over it that Hazel knew affected the children as well.

The more she tried to gather her courage to talk to Joe, the quieter and more reserved he became. It was almost as if he was angry at her and she wasn't sure why. But her own temper was steadily climbing as well. He couldn't ask a question and run from her without giving her a chance to

explain. The silence was grating on her nerves, every minute a little more.

This morning Joe headed out to check on the horses after a thunderstorm had wreaked havoc the night before. Hazel made breakfast and waited for him to join them before calling the children to the table.

After frying the eggs, she had made biscuits and ham to go with it when Joe finally walked through the door.

“Breakfast is ready,” Hazel said with a tentative smile. Joe just nodded and took a seat at the table and Hazel began serving generous amounts of food on every plate. Back in Boston they had never eaten this much or this well, but Hazel had soon learned that unless she started the day by giving everyone a hearty breakfast, they would all be skulking back in an hour looking for something to eat.

“Kids, breakfast,” Hazel called to the porch where Stephen was engrossed in his own game of cowboys and robbers and Jessica was practicing her lasso tying.

One by one they came into the kitchen and took their seats. They said grace and once everyone’s eyes were open again they began to eat.

“I noticed there were some berries growing close to the tree line, would you like to come help me pick some after breakfast, Jessica? We can make a berry pie for dinner?” Hazel asked her daughter, trying her best to dispel the awkward silence.

Jessica shrugged before turning to Joe. “Aren’t we going to ride this morning?”

Joe nodded. “You can go with your ma first, if you like.”

“I can go on my own,” Hazel said, feeling a little petulant that her daughter would rather spend time with Joe than with her.

“You can’t go on your own. Rattlers, coyotes and a few other things are out there you wouldn’t have the first idea how to handle,” Joe’s voice said with a bite of sarcasm.

Hazel stood up; her appetite suddenly gone. “I can take care of myself, I

assure you.”

“You came here for safety and no use if you don’t abide my warnings about inherent dangers,” Joe said under his breath.

Hazel narrowed her eyes feeling her temper simmer beneath the surface. She glanced at the children who were clearly waiting for her retort, but she turned instead and walked out of the house. She rushed toward the oak tree beside the barn, knowing that if she stayed she would have had a few choice words for Joe Spencer, some that were better left unsaid.

She had barely taken a breath when she saw Joe’s long legs eat up the distance between them. His green eyes were sparking with anger, but she wasn’t afraid. Who did he think he was to warn her off when he felt like it after barely saying a word in three days?

“I was only tryin’ to protect you from the dangers you don’t know,” Joe began in an angry voice. “Isn’t that why you came here, for safety?”

Hazel shook her head even as she narrowed her eyes. He had gone and twisted her words again and before she could stop herself the words spilled from her mouth. “Yes, Joe. I came here for safety, only I didn’t realize the biggest danger was going to be you.”

Joe’s eyes narrowed even more. “I haven’t done anything to hurt or offend you.”

The fight simply left Hazel’s body as she searched his handsome face. “No, you haven’t done anything you know of, Joe, but I’m beginning to fall in love with you and that terrifies me. It terrifies me more than the rattlesnakes, coyotes and heaven knows what else is waiting for me out there.”

Joe opened his mouth to argue but he closed it just as soon.

They stood in the shade of the old tree just looking at each other, both realizing that things between them had changed and neither knew how to go on from here. It was Joe who finally broke the silence. “But you said you came for safety?”

Hazel laughed wryly. “Yes I did, and before I could explain to you that things have changed, you rushed off in a temper and have been avoiding me since. You of all people should know how hard it is to love again after losing someone....”

Joe let out a heavy sigh and dragged a hand through his hair. He had been in such a rush to go after her he hadn’t even bothered to grab his hat first. “I... didn’t realize.”

“I noticed...” Hazel shook her head. “You’ve been so quiet and distant I’ve been waiting for you to put us on the first train back to Boston.”

“I won’t do that. This is your home now. I just... I’m falling for you and when you said you came for safety, I thought that meant you didn’t want more.” A smile played on the corners of his mouth. “Hazel, we can have so much more.”

Hazel nodded, but she still couldn’t help but feel guilty about Michael and afraid of losing her heart again. “I know, and I think I want more; it’s just that I’m... I’m afraid, Joe.”

Joe stepped forward, closing the distance between them before carefully wrapping his arms around Hazel. She felt safe in his embrace, loved almost. She breathed in his scent and took a step back, shaking her head. “What are we going to do?”

Joe flashed her that charming grin that made her knees go weak. “We’re going to forget about the letters, about what we expected would happen when you came to Texas. Instead, we’re going to take it one day at a time and see where it leads. I’m just as afraid, Hazel, but I’m more afraid of losing you than I am of loving you.”

Hazel’s heart clenched in her chest even as a tear quietly slipped over her cheek. She hadn’t known how to word her feelings, but Joe had just said it perfectly. “You’re right, let’s take it one day at a time.”

Joe slipped his hand into hers and searched her eyes. “Can we finish breakfast now? My new wife is a rocket and she might just grill us for letting

our food go cold?”

Hazel couldn't help but laugh as they walked towards the house. Over the last few days she had been terrified of how things were going to play out, but instead of being afraid now she could feel the first sparks of excitement. She glanced at Joe and smiled to herself knowing that it wouldn't be very hard to let herself fall in love with her husband.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



29 August 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

*A*lthough the tension between Joe and Hazel had lifted, it was still evident between the children. Joe couldn't help but wish he could do something to make Stephen spend a little time with Jessica. It was clear they would be great friends if only Stephen could get over his preference for a brother.

He could see that Stephen was slightly jealous of all the time he was spending with Jessica, and although Joe tried his best to include Stephen, his son refused to take part in anything when Jessica was involved.

His mornings were filled with ranch work but every afternoon he would take a little time to teach Jessica how to ride. She was learning faster than he could have imagined and, given her age, would soon be more help on a horse than Stephen. Although Stephen was just as good on horseback, Joe still hesitated to let his son help him when it came to herding the cattle. Apart from the fear of Stephen falling off and getting hurt like his mother, there was the matter of Stephen's fear of cattle that Joe simply couldn't seem to help his son get over.

Once the morning chores were done, Joe gave instructions to his ranch hands to ride the fence before he returned home. Jessica was at the chicken coop, counting all the new chickens that had hatched the day before, and he couldn't help but be curious as to where his son was. He walked up the porch and quickly stopped when he heard voices inside. Instead of entering through the door, he moved to the window and glanced inside.

His son was sitting at the kitchen table holding a pencil and mimicking the letters Hazel had written out before him.

"There you go. Now sound this one for me," Hazel said patiently as she pointed to three letters.

Stephen frowned with concentration before he finally started. "D - o - g. Dog!" Stephen exclaimed. "Ma, I can read!"

Stephen had not called Hazel ma before this, and in that moment Joe couldn't help but swallow back the tears. Neither he nor Hazel had insisted the children call them ma and pa, but for his son to do it on his own... surely that meant something. He swallowed back the emotion and headed into the house.

"Did I just hear someone read?" he asked, meeting Hazel's gaze over his son's head.

Stephen bounded out of the chair towards his father. "Pa, Hazel taught me how to read." Stephen quickly glanced down at the floor. "Is it alright if I call her ma?"

Joe knelt down to meet his son's gaze and smiled. "If you want to call her ma, that's just fine by me."

"Can I go play now?" Stephen asked Hazel before he bounded outside.

Hazel stood up and smiled. "He's a fast learner, Joe, a very fast learner."

Joe shook his head. "I never had the time... thank you, Hazel. I didn't expect you to...."

Hazel frowned. "Joe, I teach Jessica her lessons, it's only fair that I teach Stephen as well."

Ever since they had reached a truce behind the barn, they had barely had any time alone together, but as Joe searched Hazel's gaze now he knew he was falling a little deeper in love with her every day.

Although Stephen still detested Jessica, it was clear he had taken to Hazel. "You're a blessin' to us, Hazel."

He watched her cheeks turn a pretty pink and couldn't help but smile. Did she even know how pretty she was when she blushed?

Hazel quickly looked away and began putting away all she had used for the lessons. "Jessica says the same about you."

The smile spread on his mouth without realizing it. "She's a real wildcat that one. I'm sure if I told her to fetch the cattle in the north paddock, she'd ride off without even considering it."

Hazel sighed, shaking her head. "That's what I'm afraid of. She doesn't care about danger, I'm afraid that one day that's going to get her into trouble."

"Not if we teach her right." It was the first time Joe accepted his position as Jessica's father. "I make a point of it to show her prints in the dirt, to tell her which prints are coyotes, wild cats and where rattlers might be hiding. I know it's not much, but at the end of the day we can only teach her as much as we can."

"She's enjoying the horses," Hazel said meeting his gaze.

Joe nodded. "Perhaps her ma will enjoy them as well if she ever wanted to learn how to ride."

Hazel laughed freely. "I don't think I have the courage or the skill to ride a horse."

"You have both; you just need to trust me." Joe smiled warmly. Their gazes locked and Joe felt his heart swell with love. They had promised to take it day by day, but right now Joe wanted to leap to the part where he could tell her how he felt. Instead he nodded once and headed outside. "Jessica, time for your ridin' lesson."

Without hesitation Jessica jumped up and rushed from the chicken coop to the barn. Joe chuckled under his breath, sooner or later he would need to get her a horse of her own.

Jessica led the bay mare out of the barn just as he had taught her. "Wait there," Jessica instructed Joe as she dropped her hand from the halter. "I want to try this."

Joe knew the horse could very well take off at any minute, but he gave Jessica the freedom she needed to build confidence. She began walking away from the horse, not looking back once, instead heading straight to the porch where Hazel was watching.

Instead of bolting, the horse kept its eyes on Jessica before it finally began following her. Joe could feel his jaw drop in awe. The horse was willingly following Jessica. When Jessica stopped and turned around the horse was right behind her. He watched as Jessica rubbed the horse's muzzle and he shook his head in awe. "Where did you learn that?"

Jessica shrugged. "Nowhere. I just thought if she follows me, it means she trusts me."

From the side of the barn he heard a guffaw. He turned and saw his son standing to one side with a jealous look in his eyes. "She's probably got sugar!"

"I don't!" Jessica quipped back.

While the children argued, Joe turned to the porch and met Hazel's eye. For the first time she didn't look away or rush inside. Instead she held his gaze with a warm smile. Joe couldn't help but feel his heart swell in his chest. He was falling in love with the mother and couldn't help but fall for the daughter as well. Suddenly he couldn't imagine what life had been like before they had come to Texas. Having them there made his heart feel whole again, his house like a home again. The only problem was Stephen. Joe wondered if he shouldn't give Stephen a talking to but pushed the thought away. It might only make matters worse and perhaps Hazel was right. Sooner

or later the children would find each other, on their own terms.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



10 September 1878 Fort Worth, Texas

What had initially been blatant disregard between the children had now turned into constant warfare. It didn't matter how many times Hazel chided Jessica for fighting with Stephen, her daughter seemed intent on standing up against her new little brother.

Things between her and Joe were steadily moving forward. Although neither had made any declarations of love, Hazel could openly admit to herself that she was falling in love again. The feeling both overwhelmed and excited her but it was constantly dampened by the rivalry between Stephen and Jessica.

Hazel and Joe had discussed the problem numerous times, but it seemed it didn't matter what they did the children seemed intent on hating each other, causing a new fear to take hold of Hazel's heart. If the children didn't make peace and finally accept each other as their new sibling, it was going to drive her and Joe apart. Hazel couldn't expect Joe to turn his back on his son just as Hazel would never turn her back on Jessica. Matters seemed to escalate every single day to the point where Hazel and Joe were trying their best to keep the

children out of each other's way, making it even harder for them to find time to themselves.

Summer was slowly receding, allowing cool autumn breezes to change the landscape. The luscious grass of only a few weeks ago had stopped growing and one by one the leaves on the trees were beginning to turn different hues of gold and burgundy. It was nothing like the colorful autumns of Massachusetts, but it was still pretty.

On one such autumn morning Hazel was hanging the laundry out to dry when she heard raised voices coming from the barn. She paused for a moment thinking it was Joe scowling one of the ranch hands, when she realized it was the children. Dropping the sheet she was about to hang out back into the basket, Hazel lifted her skirts and started towards the barn.

Halfway there she saw Joe approaching from the other side. He held up his hand. "Don't go in, not just yet," Joe cautioned her before she could rush into the barn and scold both children for being impossible. "They need to sort this out sooner rather than later, let's hope an argument will finally let them both see reason."

Hazel shook her head, "They're children, Joe. Not adults having a disagreement."

"Maybe, but let's hope," Joe said without moving another step.

They both kept quiet as they heard the voices raise even more from inside the barn.

"You're a girl; you shouldn't even be in the barn. This barn belongs to my pa!" Stephen shouted angrily.

Jessica didn't hold back. "I might be a girl, but I ride better than you do. And you won't tell me where I'm allowed to be. Your pa said I could visit the mare any time I like."

"You're taking everything over. The chickens used to be my work," Stephen called back in a huff.

"Yeah? Well it's not like you're helping me. Instead you just sulk the

whole time. I lost my pa, you now, I know what's It's like, and your ma wouldn't have wanted you to sulk for the rest of your life. We're still alive, and so is my ma and your pa."

"I didn't want you to come!" Stephen shouted again.

Jessica's voice reached a pitch and Hazel knew her daughter was about to cry at any moment with anger. "Really? Then why did your pa ask us to come? You're just jealous because I ride better than you do. You keep complaining that we're here, but I don't see you complaining when you're eating my ma's cookies or when you're taking your lessons. You're being petty, Stephen, either you want us here or you don't."

"Why! Why should I decide when it's clear Pa doesn't care what I think?"

Jessica's voice lowered an octave. "What? Are you crazy? Your pa thinks the world of you. Just yesterday he told me no one has a way with Lobo like you do. I've never met a boy with a wolf for a pet. You're a brave boy, Stephen!"

Stephen was quiet for a moment before he called back. "You're a girl, I wanted a brother!"

Hazel and Joe held their breaths, knowing this was the moment of truth.

When Jessica spoke again her voice was soft. "You wanted a brother? Is that why you've been so mean to me? Because I'm a girl?"

"Girls play with dolls and put on pretty dresses. I wanted a brother who I could play with. One that would look out for me. A brother who would help me stop being afraid of the cattle. Instead I got you."

"Stephen, can I tell you a secret?" Jessica asked.

Joe and Hazel moved a little closer to hear what was being said.

"What?" Stephen asked, still upset.

"I wanted a brother, too. You see, I've never much done what the other girls do. I don't even have dolls and as for dresses, do you see me wearing one right now?"

Stephen shook his head.

“Exactly. I’ve always preferred playing with boys to pretending to host tea parties. I’ve always wanted a little brother just like you. I had one... but he’s with God now.”

“You had a brother?” Stephen asked, clearly baffled.

“Yep. He passed shortly after he was born. But in my heart I always knew that someday God would give me a brother. A brother just like you.”

Silence hung over the barn for a few moments as Stephen digested the information.

“So... you don’t want to play with dolls and steal my pa?” Stephen finally asked in a small voice.

Jessica laughed. “I’ll never steal your pa, Stephen, I was hoping we could share him. Just like we share my ma. So what do you say we go play down by the creek? I’ve wanted to go since we arrived, but your pa said no one knows the creek like you do.”

Stephen debated for a moment before he finally answered her. “Alright, but you have to walk behind me. I know the way to the creek and as long as you do as I tell you to and you don’t mind getting dirty, we can go.”

“Now?” Jessica asked hopefully.

Stephen laughed. “Yep. Come on, let’s go!”

The children didn’t even notice Joe and Hazel as they rushed out of the barn towards the creek. Hazel simply shook her head in amazement. Joe had been right; it was time the kids had it out and finally realized they could be friends and not just rivals with different parents.

She turned to Joe with a broad smile. “How did you know?”

Joe brushed a stray strand of hair from her brow and searched her face. “Just like I knew that I wanted you to be my wife in every sense of the word the moment you stepped off the train.”

“Joe...” Hazel sighed searching his gaze. “Do you really think we can be a real family?”

Joe cupped her face with his hands and smiled warmly into her gaze. “Hazel, we already are.”

When his lips softly brushed over hers, Hazel felt her world return to its orbit for the first time in years. She felt love swell in her chest and knew that this was the happily ever after God had always planned for her.

When Joe stepped back she smiled and shook her head. “Will they be alright down by the creek?”

Joe shrugged. “They might.” When he noticed the horrified look in Hazel’s gaze he laughed. “They’ll be fine. The creek is barely two feet deep and ten foot wide. This time of year the snakes are already settlin’ in for winter. The worst that could happen is they might get in another fight.”

Relieved Hazel smiled. “Then why don’t I make us some coffee?”

“That sounds like a plan. We can drink it on the porch and discuss when you’d like to move into our room.”

Hazel’s eyes widened, but not with fear, with surprise. Because Joe was right, with the children having settled their feud there was finally nothing standing in the way of them having the marriage they had both dreamed of having again.

EPILOGUE



2 July 1879 Fort Worth, Texas

A year before when Hazel had stepped off the train as a grieving widow with her daughter in her care, her whole life had been uncertain. It still baffled her how life had simply fallen into place after her first letter to Joe.

She glanced over to Joe and the children who were bringing in the herd, and her heart simply swelled. Although Stephen and Jessica were merely along for the ride while Joe and the ranch hands controlled the herd, they were both laughing as they handled their horses.

For a while there she had thought Stephen would never be able to accept Jessica as his sister, but now the two were inseparable. Stephen taught Jessica everything he knew and in turn she was an avid learner, helping him with the tasks that were still a little daunting for a boy of only seven. They had become two peas in a pod and that was the very reason Hazel was dreading tonight's conversation.

She turned back to the task at hand and checked on the cake in the oven. She had baked it especially for the occasion and hoped the sweetness would

help cure any sour reactions from the children.

Once the horses were cooled off and the ranch hands had headed off to the bunkhouse Joe had built for them a few months before, Hazel waited patiently for her family to return. Her heart skipped a beat when Joe walked in and met her gaze. That charming smile of his still had a way of catching her breath. Never in a million years would she have expected to fall in love again. But she had. She had fallen head over heels in love with the man she now called her husband with all her heart.

Of course they still had their arguments every now and then like any married couple did, but afterwards there were always apologies and sweet words to heal the scarred egos. He was a kind and gentle father, one who could be tough when discipline called for it but also one that could love when his son and daughter needed it.

Hazel wasn't sure when it happened but at some time after the argument that had brought Stephen and Jessica together, both Hazel and Joe had stopped thinking of the children as her daughter and his son, they were their children in every sense of the word.

Jessica was still as rough and tumble, although Hazel insisted she wear a dress when they travelled to Fort Worth for Sunday service a few times a month. Stephen was growing up to be the mirror image of his father in every way. Hazel couldn't have been prouder if he was her own son.

Joe moved towards her with a questioning look. "Are you ready?"

Hazel nodded as she glanced at the cake cooling by the window. "I just need to add frosting and then we can call them in."

Joe nodded. "Stop worrying, Hazel, all is as it should be and if it takes a few quarrels for them to accept the news, then so be it."

Hazel welcomed her husband's embrace and drew strength from it, just like he had drawn strength from her in the winter months when the rain had suddenly disappeared. Over the last year Hazel had learned that for a rancher few things were as important as rain. Not even the price of beef on the hoof

mattered if your cattle were scrawny because the fields were dry.

He stood back and smiled lovingly at her. “I never thought I’d be this happy again, Hazel. God blessed us by bringing us together.”

Hazel nodded in agreement. “He couldn’t have blessed me more than by giving me you. We’ve lost a lot, and I’m sure the future will bring more heartache, but at least I’ll always have you by my side.”

“Exactly. I’m going to go wash up while you frost that cake.”

Hazel made quick work of spreading the chocolate frosting over the cake. As the time grew closer to sharing their news with the children, her heart began racing in her chest. She wasn’t sure what their reactions would be, she only knew that she didn’t want to bring them anymore. They had had such a hard time finding each other; the last thing Hazel wanted now was for them to go through it all over again.

Joe summoned the children inside and waited patiently as Hazel carried the cake to the table.

“Ma, is it someone’s birthday?” Stephen asked curiously, glancing around the table.

“No, don’t be daft, Stephen. You already had your birthday, mine’s next month and Ma and Pa are both in October,” Jessica quickly informed in.

“Actually, we’re celebrating,” Joe said reaching for Hazel’s hand. “Your ma and I have something we’d like to share with you.” Joe glanced at Hazel with an encouraging look.

Hazel took a deep breath. “This Christmas you’ll be getting a different kind of gift,” Hazel began.

Jessica frowned incredulously. “I know because I already got my horse last Christmas and Stephen got his steer.”

Hazel laughed, shaking her head. “This Christmas it’s a different kind of gift. You’ll be getting a baby brother or sister.” Hazel held her breath waiting for the children’s reaction.

Stephen burst out laughing, shaking his head as he turned to Jessica. “It

happened! I didn't think it would work, but it happened.”

“What worked?” Joe asked curiously as the children laughed.

“We found a pond a little ways downstream from the creek. We figured it would be our wishing pond and we each tossed in a rock and made a wish.”

“What did you wish for?” Hazel asked, terrified they were going to say a brother. What if they were disappointed?

“For a baby brother or sister,” Jessica announced proudly.

“Not a baby brother?” Joe asked hesitantly.

“Nope,” Stephen said firmly. “We figured our family has two parts now, and we need a baby to tie us all together as one. We don't really care what it is, as long as we can teach it to tie a lasso and ride a horse, we'll be happy.”

Over the children's heads, Joe and Hazel locked gazes with a relieved smile.

Joe chuckled shaking his head. “I guess it's settled then.”

Hazel laughed with relief, feeling happy, excited and more loved than ever before. “It's settled then. Who wants cake?”

ALWAYS & FOREVER



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



Jennifer Goodman was having a restless night's sleep. Unseasonably warm for fall, she awoke for what seemed the umpteenth time. She was thirsty. The slight woman eased herself quietly out of bed so as not to disturb her husband, although waking him was unlikely.

Mark Goodman was blessed with an easy-going temperament and a clean conscience. Most nights, the hard-working merchant barely had his head touch the pillow before he fell fast asleep. Jennifer joked that the only thing that could rouse him was the smell of bacon cooking for breakfast. Truly.

Jennifer lifted the pitcher on the nightstand and poured herself a glass of water. After several refreshing sips, she set the glass down gratefully. She plumped her pillow in the hope it might cast magic for her to drift off to sleep.

Lying down again, she heard gentle snores coming from her husband. Mark was fast asleep, that was for sure. He hadn't budged when she climbed back into bed.

The pretty woman smiled as she thought of the day ahead. They were having an afternoon picnic with friends from out of town. They would travel the Hudson River on a steamship. Fancy that!

Mark had suggested a Sunday picnic as the weather promised to be fine.

Her ever-practical husband reasoned it to be a perfect way to relax. Besides, it was less fuss after a busy week.

Jennifer closed her eyes, willing sleep to take over. Tired, but peaceful, she consoled herself with the reminder that they'd be attending the later morning church service. They could enjoy a relaxing start to the morning which would be a rare treat.

Lizzy was likely to seek their attention first thing, with the latest outfit her doll was wearing. The six-year-old was unusually attentive to fine detail for her age.

Lizzy could be quite unbudging if coaxed to wear clothes she didn't like. She had even restyled a jacket, all of her own doing. When Jennifer found her cutting the plaid buttons off of a blue jacket, she didn't know whether to be mad or impressed.

"Lizzy, please check with me first next time, you hear?" Jennifer had asked rather than scolded. She'd turned away to hide her urge to burst into laughter at her daughter's impish delight in her creation. Perhaps she'd be a seamstress one day.

Casting aside her thoughts, Jennifer's eyes opened wide in alarm. The sound was unmistakably the latch on the front door being eased back. She froze her senses on high alert. Perhaps she was mistaken?

The floorboards creaked on the landing. Jennifer's heart beat furiously as panic set in. She pressed her mouth against Mark's ear. "Mark, wake up, there's someone in the house!"

He grunted a response his eyes still closed as he snuggled up to her.

"Mark, I heard someone in the house!" she whispered urgently, loud enough to startle him into action. She clambered out of bed.

Mark sat up, alert to her fear, as he figured out what to do. "Are you sure?" he whispered. Jennifer nodded vehemently. Her first instinct was to lock the door, but...

"Get Lizzy!" she told him, her eyes wild as the gravity of the situation

dawned on her. Shocked but calm, Mark gently pressed his index finger to his mouth and then hers.

Her brave husband tiptoed swiftly in the direction of Lizzy's bedroom which was right next to theirs.

Jennifer stood, barely breathing, against the doorway. She drew back quickly as she glimpsed a man shuffling through papers in the writing bureau in the parlor.

"Please let us be safe," Jennifer prayed.

Mark swept their sleeping daughter into his arms. She awoke bewildered. "Lizzy, don't ask questions. After I get you safely outside, run to Uncle Tony's house to get help!"

Lizzie stuck out her chin defiantly as she absorbed the information. With Lizzy in his arms, her father barreled past the angry man in the woolly hat who yelled insults after them. With seconds to spare, her father set her down outside.

"Go, Lizzy!" he ordered. "Remember that we love you!"

Lizzy ran as fast as her legs would take her over the uneven pathway towards Uncle Tony's inn.

Her father tackled one of the men in an attempt to deter him from following her. She heard something crash to the ground as her mother threw a pitcher at the man in the woolly hat. Lizzy decided to concentrate on running. The brave determined little girl ran so fast that she wondered if an angel was helping her. The ground was cold and damp under her bare feet. Although her chest heaved with exertion, she did not stop even once.

While her uncle's inn was a short distance away, the darkness didn't help matters. Her route even took her past an alleyway or two, which were to be feared. Her father always reminded her to stay clear of alleyways.

"Hooligans lurk there," her father would warn. The closer Lizzy got to Uncle Tony's house, the more the full-blown panic set in.

"Uncle Tony, help us!" Lizzy yelled, loud enough to wake any travelers

overnighting in the inn.

The inn door opened even as several faces peeked through the curtains of the rooms above to find the cause behind the commotion. Uncle Tony stood inside the entranceway, reluctant to go into the street in his nightgown. He held a lantern in one hand.

Not minding his attire, Lizzy hurled herself into her uncle's arms as she revealed the reason for her panic, albeit in fits and starts. Stocky in stature, Uncle Tony had a kind heart beneath his gruff exterior.

"Lizzy, stay put here with your Aunty Ellen while I get help," Uncle Tony said sternly with compassion in his eyes.

"Yes, Uncle Tony," Lizzy replied solemnly as Aunty Ellen drew her protectively into her arms.

"Here, Lizzy, let's sit in the kitchen. I'll warm us some milk. Would you like that?" Lizzy nodded, partly hopeful and partly fearful of what was to come of her and her parents.

A blacksmith who had lodgings at the inn offered to accompany Tony to the police station for assistance. They made for the shed and the bicycles within.

As her burly uncle and his friend set off on their bicycles, Lizzie wondered if her parents had managed to chase the intruders off. She didn't dare to think about it. Lizzy focused on their would-be rescuers as they pedaled off as best they could. Lizzy did allow herself a little giggle as she witnessed her uncle's large girth in his nightgown, cycling off, his bald head gleaming in the moonlight like a beacon of hope. In the rush of attending to his sister and brother-in-law's welfare, he had quite forgotten all etiquette. Lizzy imagined that the police would be as startled at his disheveled appearance as he was when she had appeared at the inn.

"Best you come in now," Aunt Ellen commented quietly from behind her. "They'll be a long time coming back. These things take a while."

It was then that Lizzy released her pent-up anxiety. She sobbed into her

aunt's apron. "What if they don't get there in time?" she asked.

Her aunt couldn't think of a suitable answer, so she merely patted Lizzy's back soothingly until her sobbing eased. Morning dawned brightly despite being cooler than the day before. Lizzy told herself she would see her parents soon. She *would*. Her father was smart and strong, and her mother would never give up without a struggle. Lizzy knew that, having seen her mother rescue a cat stuck in a tree, against all wisdom to the contrary. At first, her father had been as mad as a snake while her mother regaled the encounter. Jennifer embellished the story for Lizzy's entertainment and her father doubled up with laughter.

"You are some woman, to be sure," he told his wife, love shining in his eyes.

They were a family and families stuck together, right? Lizzy reminded herself. She touched the sole of her foot gingerly, feeling out the spot from standing on a sharp object the night before. It was her good fortune that it hadn't bled.

"Lizzy, please take the washing off the line for me," Aunt Ellen asked. "There is a basket in the scullery to put the linen in. You can keep the pegs on the line."

Aunt Ellen looked worried. Maybe she was just tired from the events of the previous night, Lizzy mused. An obedient child, she got to the task immediately.

Lizzy was grateful for something to do, instead of just sitting around waiting. Waiting for what, she wondered, as she watched a sparrow land in the courtyard to peck away at a crumb as if its life depended on it. After she had finished folding the linen, Lizzy decided she'd rather be outdoors. It would be happier, with the birds chirping their morning chorus. People were walking to the market, and some were heading for the river to fish.

This would be their last opportunity to fish before the really cold weather set in and the river froze over. Just as Lizzy set the final pillowcase on top of

the pile of folded linen, she heard her aunt's cry of dismay.

"Oh, no!" Aunt Ellen wailed from the parlor.

The firm control of her emotions for Lizzy's sake gave way to grief as she heard the news of her sister's passing. Lizzy stood in place wondering if this was all just a horrible dream and hoping to wake up soon. She walked slowly towards the parlor.

Perhaps it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Lizzy convinced herself at the moment that her parents were hurt, in hospital, wounded, but alive, and asking for her. They'd be fine. They had to be!

"There you are, Lizzy," her uncle acknowledged quietly when she entered the parlor.

Two police officers were with her aunt and uncle. Uncle Tony had his arm protectively around his wife's shoulders as they sat on the sofa together. The police officers held their caps in hand, the younger of the two twirling his cap nervously. Their downcast expression confirmed the news Lizzy had feared to hear even before she got the details.

"I will take it from here," her uncle told the police officers who were clearly relieved as well as sympathetic.

"Thank you, sir," they chorused in unison.

Lizzy reckoned that the police officers were a lot younger than her father despite being grown-ups. In a flash of insight uncommon in one so young, she recognized that the situation made them nervous, although they were trying their best not to show it. She sympathized with them.

"Please contact the police station should you require further assistance in handling this matter," the more confident officer offered.

"Thank you, Officer," Aunt Ellen said, exchanging a glance with Uncle Tony.

"I will see you out, gentlemen," Tony said, thankful for a reason to leave the room if only for a while. Lizzy stared at her aunt as if seeing her for the first time, feeling her family ebbing away.

“Come here, dear,” Aunt Ellen said. Lizzy sat down heavily on the sofa as if a burden had been added to her young shoulders. Her aunt took her hands in her calloused ones. “There is no easy way to say this, dearest child,” Aunt Ellen explained. “Your parents passed away last night. They are with their Father in heaven.”

Lizzy sat still as a church mouse. Then, as tears welled up in her eyes making the room look misty, she asked, “What’s to become of me?”

“You are to live with your half-sister, Mary, and her husband, George Mickleweight, and their children, Martin and Katy. We have telegraphed them. They are sending a horse and cart in the morning.

“We’d have you, dear, but an inn is no place in which to raise a child.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



“*H*ave you finished polishing the door knocker yet, Lizzy?” Mary Mickleweight asked the twenty-year-old Lizzy Goodman as she stepped into the entrance hall.

Mary wore her familiar disapproving look, Lizzy noted. She paused before answering as much to gather her thoughts as to prolong the lingering annoyance she saw reflected in her half-sister’s eyes.

“Yes, ma’am,” Lizzy responded quietly, stifling the urge to bob a curtsy.

“Good, then you can get started on brushing down the brickwork around the front step,” Mary commanded imperiously. She whisked the sleeping cat off her lap in a sweeping motion as if it were a fly rather than her pet. “There’s time enough before our guests arrive. We must keep up the appearance of respectability.”

“Would it be acceptable for me to break for a cup of tea before I do that? It’s warm out today,” Lizzy explained. Her forehead was damp with sweat and her work dress felt sticky on her back.

Mary nodded absentmindedly as if her attention was miles away. The dainty, industrious young Lizzy had paused to catch her breath in the stifling heat and when she took to her feet again to resume her laborious task, she discovered with horror that she had sat on the polish rag. Mary wouldn’t take kindly to a skirt stained with polish, threadbare as it may be. To exacerbate

matters further, tendrils of her silky blonde hair had escaped the confines of her cap.

Lizzy walked briskly towards the kitchen before her guardian of the past fourteen years could change her mind.

“Maaa-ry,” bellowed the rasping voice belonging to George Mickleweight from what seemed the bowels of the house. This was followed by a fit of wheezing and coughing which thankfully kept him quiet for a while thereafter.

Ashamed by her uncharitable thought, Lizzy returned to her half-sister in the parlor. She decided to keep her company while she waited for the water to boil on the cooker. George was a lot to contend with, what with his gambling and drinking habits.

Lizzy was startled to see Mary stretched out on the settee with her eyes closed and both feet at rest on the armrests. A hand shielded her face as if it were a fan, in an attempt to stop the sunlight filtering through. Lizzy sat down in the armchair. Mary hadn't yet responded to her husband's plaintive call. She seemed loathe to.

“Is he alright?” Lizzy asked after a demure cough to announce her presence.

“WHO BE HE? The cat's father?” Mary retorted indignantly. Lizzy took note that the nap had done nothing to relax her, which was a pity. Mary sat up stiffly, albeit reluctantly. “When are we to get any peace around here?” Mary reflected with a heavy sigh.

“Yes, George! What is it?” she caterwauled with such a shift in tone and volume that Lizzy jumped in her seat. “George!” Mary repeated, her hands held at the sides of her mouth like a loud hailer.

Lizzy would have found their exchange quite comical if she wasn't obliged to board and lodge with them. But to witness this interaction night

and day took its toll, although she had giggled on occasion at the ridiculous façade Mary insisted on maintaining.

All the pretense and social nuances that formed the fabric of respectable society. Visiting at a certain hour and accepting invitations after careful consideration of their social merit. “Being seen with influential people could enable our entry into high society,” Mary had explained dourly when Lizzy had once asked why Mary didn’t just call on friends when she felt like it.

Nonetheless, Lizzy was in an uncommonly energetic mood especially considering she had just spent the better part of an hour polishing the door knocker to perfection. The sheen on their door knocker must surely be unrivaled in the district, she reckoned.

Her knuckles were proof of that, stained a treacle hue from her exertions, where she’d dabbed the polish onto the rag a good many times. Her tiny, calloused hands were at risk of bleeding with this.

She turned her attention to Mary who had woken up to the fact that her tippling husband hadn’t yet responded to her inquiry about his well-being. Mary walked off determinedly in the direction of the study where George was likely to be asleep, going by the snores reverberating down the passage.

Lizzy was aware that he had already finished off the brandy she had decanted for him that morning. He’d swallowed a tumbler full immediately after breakfast and consumed the rest steadily throughout the morning saying it eased his rheumatism.

“George is in a bad way,” Mary announced dolefully to the world at large when she returned to join Lizzy in the parlor. “He brought up his breakfast this morning. The whole lot. He’s certainly in no fit state to have tea,” Mary added with a shudder. Lizzy understood that to indicate that the discussion was closed. Lizzy also feared for George’s health, as much for her own well-being as his.

HER BROTHER-IN-LAW SHOWED her the occasional kindness and Lizzy would prefer to keep him around a while longer if she could help it, troublesome though he was. “Perhaps if I make George jam squares, that will cheer him up?” Lizzy suggested to induce better behavior from the man.

“Yes, that would be grand,” Mary conceded graciously. Lizzy almost fainted on the spot. This meant her half-sister had released her from cleaning duty.

Even if her roster remained full, pastry making was preferable to polishing and dusting! Without a doubt, the day was proving to be relatively fine, Lizzy decided. “I’ll make the jam squares now then, ma’am?” Lizzy double-checked to be sure she had the royal nod.

Mary looked at Lizzy appraisingly as if weighing the options in her mind. “Yes, do that, dear,” Mary approved. In all the years that Lizzy had lodged with Mary, she only recalled one occasion other than this that she had been referred to as dear.

A year after she took up lodging with them, on Lizzy’s seventh birthday in August, Uncle Tony and Aunt Ellen had turned up mid-morning with a strawberry flan and a jug of cream to go with it. They were beaming from ear to ear.

Her niece, Katy, then only five years old, had caught the festive mood and leaned over to touch the cake. Lizzy’s brattish cousin, Martin, was only one year old and asleep in his cot. All these years later, Lizzy reflected that Mary’s children couldn’t help the fact that they were spoiled rotten. Lizzy remembered her seventh birthday fondly. Mary had made her a birthday card inscribed simply with ‘Happy birthday, Lizzy, Love Mary and George, Katy and Martin’.

Katy had drawn a yellow daisy on the front. Lizzy still had the card tucked in her Bible. George had declared on behalf of all present, “Oh good, let’s eat cake!”

George’s talent for stating the obvious had made everyone laugh. As the

family gathered around the table, Lizzy at the center, she had felt a sense of belonging for the first time in many months. There had been a happy, relaxed atmosphere as if none present had a care in the world.

“It is your special day, dear,” Mary said. Lizzy’s guardian had knelt down eye level and given her a brief hug. Mary had seemed as moved by Uncle Tony and Aunt Ellen showing up bearing a cake as Lizzy was.

Mary was eighteen years older than Lizzy which according to Lizzy’s calculations made Mary twenty-five at the time. George was six years older than his wife who must have been thirty-one.

Mary and George would now be thirty-eight and forty-four respectively. They were seemingly of a different generation to Lizzy, evident more by the manner in which they treated her than the actual age gap.

WHEN LIZZY TURNED ten and Martin was just four, Lizzy was moved to the basement, separated from the family. Martin relocated to Lizzy’s former bedroom. Mary told her that Martin, as the future heir, should have his own bedroom rather than share with Katy.

“We all have our station in life,” Mary said curtly. “Get used to it. We have taken you in as a gesture of great charity. You should be expected to thank us for our hospitality.”

Lizzy nodded, hurt and angry. In that moment an employer servant relationship was firmly established and Lizzy decided never to display her true feelings towards Mary again, unless hard pressed. Lizzy wouldn’t give her that satisfaction.

Mary and Lizzy shared the same father, Mark Goodman. Mary’s mother, Martha, was Mark’s first wife and she had passed away when Mary was just twelve, following a bad bout of influenza during a very cold winter.

She had still been pining for her mother when Mark married Jennifer a few years later. As a teenager, Mary had resented his new wife. By default,

she also resented her half-sister Lizzy when she was later born into the scene. Mary saw her sibling as a disturbance to their already fragile family unit.

Back to the present, Lizzy told herself. No point dwelling on the past. Lizzy enjoyed making pastries, having discovered her knack for baking at an early age.

Lizzy had baked a small pastry tart that had turned out exquisitely golden and puffy going by the same recipes as Mary whose creation had been simply satisfactory. George had heralded Lizzy's as simply splendid.

"What's your secret?" Mary asked, baffled and not displeased.

Lizzy's talent could serve them well, in terms of securing a housekeeping position with a wealthy family one day. They needed to look to their future, not just Lizzy's.

"Love is the secret," George declared as a matter of fact shortly after making his presence known in the kitchen by his tuneless whistle.

"Don't I take good care of you, then?" Mary demanded, but she didn't seem cross.

"You are indeed attentive," her husband replied mildly. He smiled at Lizzy, humor showing in his eyes. Fortunately for him, he was a distance from Mary, preventing her from knocking his hat from his head but rendering it askew, nonetheless.

CHAPTER 3



Today, all these years later, twenty-year-old Lizzy considered that she had no particular reason for being in such a joyful frame of mind. She considered her reflection in the scullery mirror, without vanity, while she washed her hands. Her closest friend, Gloria, had told her how blessed she was to have the silky, golden hair found only in fairy tales.

“Perhaps you’ll meet your handsome prince one day,” Gloria added, which had made Lizzy laugh. Staring at her face in the mirror, Lizzy conceded that her eyes were bright and quite a nice shade of blue. She thought dark eyes more exotic.

Lizzy shook her head at her fanciful imaginings and wiped her hands on her apron. She was looking forward to a rare Saturday off. The family was traveling out of town without Lizzy.

“We need to get our house in order,” Mary had said firmly over breakfast the week before. “Make sure our financial affairs are sound and the family is well provided for.”

Lizzy almost choked on her tea in an attempt to curb the giggle that was bubbling under the surface.

Only the week before, George had spent the week’s housekeeping allowance on a bet. Usually his wins outlasted his losing streaks. His gambling had kept the family adequately provided for, as long as Mary hid

spare cash for the lean times. George was uncannily talented at cards.

But now George's gambling prowess seemed to have taken a turn for the worse. As he continued to lose and amass a debt, the family's source of income dried up. Lizzy often heard Mary and George argue into the early hours of the morning.

In a bid to escape his problems, George took to drinking heavily. His drinking sprees were becoming more frequent and prolonged.

"You stay healthy, girl," Mary scolded.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am," Lizzy replied. "It's just that the tea is still warm."

Mary seemed unconvinced and Lizzy added a generous helping of milk to her tea.

"Ah, much better," she declared.

George chuckled. He adopted a serious face as he noticed his wife glare at him. For all the trouble he brought on the family, George was sometimes the only cheer in Lizzy's day. He would offer her a peppermint or toffee when he'd won a game and had once gone so far as to buy her a hat, much to his wife's dismay.

On Saturday, Lizzy was going to the dress shops with Gloria on the pretext of being a lady of means. She might even fit a dress.

WHEN GLORIA HAD SUGGESTED the outing, Lizzy had shared her fear that the sales assistants would be averse to allowing her to fit an outfit. Her dresses were mostly hand-me-downs and they'd assume she couldn't afford their prices.

Some New York shop assistants were snobbish and seemed to want to put themselves at a distance from people of their own rank, now that they were mixing with the well-heeled. Lizzy thought their attitude quite peculiar.

She could never shun people in that way. Imagine turning a blind eye

whenever an acquaintance or neighbor walked in, Lizzy pondered. No, she decided, it was plain rude.

Lizzy's skepticism had caused Gloria to be all the more determined that they try on several dresses.

Gloria opened her wardrobe with a flourish. "Here, you can wear this dress on Saturday," she announced.

Gloria held the prettiest day dress Lizzy could ever remember laying eyes on, and Lizzy gasped with delight. The dress was a pale blue gingham with a high collar and wide flouncy sleeves. The style and color were exactly what she would have chosen if she had a purse of her own.

Grateful to her kind-hearted friend, they agreed that it made more sense for Lizzy to change into the dress while at Gloria's house. If Mary saw the dress hanging in her wardrobe she'd know something was up. Only three days, Lizzy told herself, and then they'd have some fun.

CHAPTER 4



George and Mary planned to leave early with eighteen-year-old Katy and fourteen-year-old Martin in tow. Martin usually behaved better when his older sister was around. On this particular morning, his sister was nowhere to be seen.

Perhaps Martin sensed that Lizzy was anxious to see the back of him, keen as she was to spend the morning with her friend, and he was being unusually precocious. Weren't all teenagers, Lizzy reminded herself.

The thought occurred to her that Martin may have turned out more pleasant if only his parents hadn't given in to his whims. Unusually tall for his age, he was smart and good-looking.

Fed a constant stream of compliments from an early age, Martin reached the conclusion that the world revolved around him. This morning, Lizzy eventually coaxed him to gather his clothes under her supervision.

She was just congratulating herself on Martin's obedience when he told her, "If you smiled more, perhaps I'd listen better."

Lizzy paused in her endeavor to help him pack his clothes into an overnight bag and counted to ten in her mind. With her anger showing no signs of abating, she continued to count to twenty for good measure. Lizzy reflected that she should probably have continued counting to a much higher number seen as Martin had taken to grinning at his own impudence.

“Martin!” she scolded and he had the good grace to look alarmed, given that she had never spoken to him like that. Never. “Gotcha!” she replied.

“I was going to pack toffees for the trip, from your father, but I’m having second thoughts.” She watched his face as he struggled to get the words out. He knew what to say, he just didn’t like admitting he was wrong.

“Yes?” Lizzy asked. She felt a smile curling around the corners of her mouth and she couldn’t help it. Young Martin stood quietly, as stubborn as a mule.

Martin’s stubbornness was a family trait they shared, courtesy of his grandfather, Mark Goodman. His success as a merchant was as much based on his ability to stand his ground, as on his sharp intellect.

“Sorry, I was horrible just now,” Martin mumbled sheepishly.

“Apology accepted, thank you,” Lizzy conceded.

“You are pretty, even when you don’t smile,” Martin added as he packed a book in his bag. Lizzy smiled at him, astonished.

“It’s so quiet in here, I thought the boy was asleep,” George interrupted when he entered the room with a debonair swagger. The lean man was freshly shaven and smartly dressed in beige trousers, a navy jacket, and a bowler hat. He looked more like the uncle Lizzy remembered as a young girl.

Lately, George had taken to rising later and his grooming habits had become less than satisfactory. Mary had put her foot down the day before.

Martin looked at his father with approval. “You look smart, Father,” Martin said. “You should dress like that more often.”

“He’s quite the charmer this morning,” Lizzy said of Martin.

“I do my best,” George said with a wink. They laughed at his joke.

“Are we ready?” Mary asked as she appeared in the doorway. She stopped as she noted her husband’s appearance. “Is that really you, George? You look ten years younger!”

“I try,” George said dryly, removing his hat with a flourish.

“Keep the hat on rather,” Mary suggested. Despite her crisp tone, she

looked pleased and almost proud of her husband.

Mary had also taken extra care with her appearance. Dressed in a mint green dress with a pale-yellow cardigan, she looked feminine rather than formidable. She usually wore dull browns and greys, seeing them as practical.

“Shall we, madam?” George asked as he took his wife’s hand to lead the family down the passage. Katy appeared from inside her bedroom, dragging a bag behind her that was twice the size of her brother’s.

Lizzy wondered if she had packed her entire wardrobe in there. Maybe she wanted to be sure she packed appropriately since the weather could be unpredictable at this time of year.

“Katy is meeting up with an old acquaintance,” Mary explained when she saw Lizzy’s surprised expression. “Please take Katy’s bag to the carriage, Lizzy. George cannot manage everything himself.”

Katy dropped her bag without a word and walked on ahead without a backward glance. Lizzy, accustomed as she was to Katy’s airs and graces, ignored the rude behavior.

“Katy, say thank you,” Martin instructed his sister, surprising Lizzy for the second time that morning.

Katy turned, her eyes haughty as they met Lizzy’s. “Thank you,” she smirked.

Lizzy reminded herself that one day Katy would have her comeuppance. George had not heard the exchange, busy as he was maneuvering his wife’s luggage and his own into the horse-drawn carriage.

Lizzy handed Martin a cowboy-style hat as he climbed up back after giving his sister a foot up. They were heading West to Texas and Lizzy could not resist buying the Stetson when she saw it a few days earlier.

Martin was clearly thrilled with the gift. “Whoop ha!” he whooped, immediately putting it on at a jaunty slant. “Thank you, Lizzy.”

“Only a pleasure,” she replied. Mary pursed her lips and George laughed

while Katy pretended to be unimpressed.

“Lizzy, we will be back before sundown on Tuesday,” Mary reminded. “Please see that there is a warm dinner waiting and the table set. Mrs. Robertson will check on you every evening to make sure you are behaving and she will stay the night.”

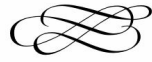
Lizzy wondered what she could possibly get up to without money of her own and no beau. “Yes, ma’am, I shall do so. Should I make her dinner?”

“Yes, indeed. Good, then,” Mary said. She turned to her husband, anxious to get going. “Take care, Lizzy,” George greeted, his eyes kind as he clicked the reins to move the horses on.

“Don’t miss me too much!” Martin called.

Lizzy smiled demurely. “Bye,” she said with a parting wave to them all.

CHAPTER 5



“My goodness, Lizzy, you look so glamorous, I scarcely recognize you,” Gloria exclaimed. She looked at her friend, enthralled by the transformation. Lizzy was just as surprised at the reflection of the woman staring back at her in the full-length mirror.

Could that image really be her? She looked confident and ever so stylish. “I love the dress, Gloria,” she said shyly.

Lizzy was overwhelmed by the heady sensation of appearing to be a lady. To hide her awkwardness, she joked, “I just need someone to serve me tea and scones and then I’ll be thoroughly spoiled!”

“Not in my dress you don’t!” Gloria said.

Gloria smiled as Lizzy pretended to sulk. “What are you going to wear?” Lizzy asked. Gloria pulled a face. “You’re a hard act to follow. Should I even bother to change?” Gloria asked.

“Of course, silly!” Lizzy said. She looked at Gloria as if seeing her through the eyes of a stylist. “With your dark hair, you should wear a deep blue or pink.”

“How about this?” Gloria asked, pulling a pink dress off its hanger.

The style was looser than Lizzy’s, with a longer hemline and big buttons. She looked radiant.

“Yes, that’s perfect!” Lizzy responded. “What if someone sees me?”

“Oh, they surely will see you, honey,” Gloria replied.

“No, what if someone sees me whom I know?” Lizzy clarified earnestly with a worried frown.

Gloria thought her friend’s innocence made her all the more beautiful, unlike those girls who were unashamedly vain. “I don’t know,” Gloria mused. “Greet them with a good morning. Ask how they’re doing,” she continued. “When they ask how you’re doing, reply with I’m just dandy.”

“I would never say that!” Lizzy said, horrified before she realized that Gloria was pulling her leg. They doubled over with hysterical laughter, girls again, rather than women. They sensed that their outing ushered in a new era.

Their families would soon expect them to find their own way in the world, get married and start a family of their own. Some of their friends were already speaking of an engagement whereas neither Gloria nor Lizzy were so much as dating. Their families wouldn’t allow it. Lizzy certainly wouldn’t have wanted to be chaperoned by George or Mary and she giggled at the prospect.

Her friend looked at her, dumbfounded. “What is it?” Lizzy asked after she’d wiped away her tears of laughter.

“Please keep that dress as a gift from me, Lizzy,” Gloria requested.

“I couldn’t,” Lizzy declined, looking at the dress wistfully. “Much as I appreciate the

GESTURE. “You’re the sweetest friend. Why do you make it sound like I’m leaving town? I’m not planning on going anywhere.”

“I overheard Mary speaking to a man last week outside the library,” Gloria confided. Lizzy’s hand flew to her mouth. “You mean a secret admirer?” she asked.

It was Gloria’s turn to chuckle. “Do you think that’s very likely?” she asked.

“Perhaps not,” Lizzy admitted. “So, what did this stranger look like? And why were you eavesdropping in the first place?”

“I was bored,” Gloria explained. “I was meeting Joan to return a book I’d borrowed and she was late. Mary and the man were sitting on a bench outside. Actually, he looked rather unsavory, truth be told, which is another reason I stuck around longer than I should have. I was intrigued.” Gloria looked shamefaced.

“It’s fine, Gloria. I would have done the same in your shoes,” Lizzy soothed. “Anyway, it isn’t like you would go about town broadcasting a rendezvous. I know you are a loyal friend.”

“Thanks, Lizzy. The next part gets really interesting,” Gloria announced. Lizzy held her breath. “Joan arrived. After she apologized for keeping me, she asked if I’d seen the man on the bench. When I said I had, Joan told me the strangest thing.” Gloria hesitated. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be sharing this with you, Lizzy…” her voice trailed off. “It may make you uncomfortable.”

“You started the story, you can’t stop now,” Lizzy admonished, wondering where on earth this was heading.

“Okay,” Gloria demurred.

“His name is Frank Evans. He arranges mail order brides for men out west.” Her expression was serious and Gloria realized Lizzy hadn’t understood the implication.

“But why would Mary arrange a marriage for Katy?” Lizzy asked. “She wouldn’t want her to leave town let alone allow it. Besides, Katy and Marvin are speaking of an engagement.”

Gloria was quiet. She looked at Lizzy intently. “You are not serious!” Lizzy said, as the penny dropped.

“Sorry, Lizzy. I’m not mistaken,” Gloria confided. “I clearly heard your aunt say that Lizzy has the potential to attract a wealthy suitor.”

“What about love? Would I get to meet him first? Do I have any say in this?” Lizzy asked, her face pale.

Gloria shrugged. “That’s all I know. I thought I had better tell you. Lizzy, I’m sure you will be able to say yay or nay to the marriage.”

“I’D RATHER SAY NEVER,” Lizzy said glumly. “Not never to marriage. But not this way!”

“You never know. He could be dashing, kind, wealthy, and wise,” Gloria said hopefully. “Or none of the above,” Lizzy retorted.

Gloria continued, “He could be the best thing that ever happened to you. I heard of a lady who ended up living in a country manor house with servants when she used to be a housekeeper. Imagine that!”

“Let’s go shopping,” Lizzy suggested. “I can’t bear to think about it.” Gloria wasn’t prepared to let her friend off so lightly.

“You wouldn’t want to live in a manor house?” Gloria teased. “I could visit. Just imagine the fun we’d have!”

Their faces brightened at the prospect. They linked arms and walked towards the nearest dress shop. Fun beckoned.

CHAPTER 6



Lizzy decided to make a simple meal for the Mickleweight's homecoming on Tuesday afternoon. Beef stew, including potatoes and turnips. Pancakes and syrup for dessert. One of George's favorite meals.

She wished that someone else would cook for a change. Lizzy was tired of her own recipes. She should have asked Mrs. Robertson to share hers. That would have passed the time better.

The parson's wife had spent most of their shared meals listing her various ailments. This enthralling topic was peppered with the occasional reference to a Psalm she thought fit to share for Lizzy's benefit. Lizzy had no objection to Psalms. But the rest of the conversation left her searching for a reason to excuse herself. As Lizzy was a poor liar, she concentrated on her meal and nodded occasionally.

"You're a good listener," Mrs. Robertson remarked on Tuesday morning as she said goodbye. "That virtue shall serve you well as a married woman."

Lizzy smiled politely. She wondered whether Mrs. Robertson was in on the plan that Mary was hatching. Most probably. Maybe even the parson.

Lizzy spent the early afternoon looking out the window awaiting their arrival, in between darning socks. That task complete, she put a hot press to Mary and Katy's dresses and her own. While they didn't have many dresses, Katy's were far grander and newer than Lizzy's.

The family returned just before teatime. Lizzy heard the horses whinny as they drew up outside. She opened the door to assist with the luggage.

Lizzy noticed Martin wasn't wearing his cowboy hat but it had pride of place on the seat beside him. Katy was petulant, as usual.

"Good afternoon, Lizzy," George said, as he fastened the horses to the hitching post. He looked rested and happy.

"Good afternoon, George," Lizzy replied. She smiled at them all.

Lizzy was content to have company. She had felt surprisingly lonely at times. Mrs. Robertson, while a companion, was a relative stranger.

"Mrs. Robertson tells me you were a good girl," Mary reported. Lizzy hid her surprise. They must have communicated via telegraph.

"Yes, ma'am," she replied.

WHY HAD Mrs. Robertson not mentioned they'd been in contact? Lizzy felt cross for no reason other than a rising unease about the future. Tomorrow is another day, she reminded herself.

"Lizzy, go ahead and draw our water," Katy instructed when her parents were out of earshot. "You are soon to leave us," she said condescendingly.

"I shall wait for your mother to brief me," Lizzy said quietly. Her reply was the closest she came to telling Katy off for being obnoxious. And to think that Katy was two years younger than her!

Katy acted like the lady of the house. Lizzy doubted whether she knew how to run a household other than to tell those of lower rank off. She laughed.

"It's good to hear your laughter, Lizzy," George said, leaving his study with a tumbler of brandy. He looked crestfallen as his wife marched toward him.

"George, we spoke about your drinking. Remember?" Mary scolded. He nodded. She held her hand out to him. "Give that to me," she demanded.

“I could pour you a glass, my love,” he said weakly.

Mary shook her head. “That won’t work on me, George.”

George slowly handed the glass over like a child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. Her uncle looked so forlorn that Lizzy felt sorry for him. She knew what it was to feel alone in the world.

“George, if you don’t mind. Mrs. Robertson shared a Psalm that may ease your rheumatism,” Lizzy suggested. Mary and George turned to look at her, astonished. They had never heard her quote Scripture.

Lizzy shared, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom will I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom will I be afraid?”

They were silent and then George spoke. “You dear girl,” he said. “That was a thoughtful deed.” His eyes were swimming with tears.

“Thank you, Lizzy,” Mary said. “I see Mrs. Robertson has left an impression. We shall join you for dinner presently.”

CHAPTER 7



Mary had been uncharacteristically relaxed of late, Lizzy thought. Her half-sister wasn't exactly kind, but she seemed altered. She couldn't quite put her finger on what was different about her.

Lizzy still had to rise early, and she spent her days on household chores. She only got Sundays off, apart from having to prepare breakfast and dinner. But, Lizzy reflected, Mary seemed softer around the edges somehow.

Mary even laughed occasionally. The atmosphere had improved, although Lizzy longed for the day when she could establish her own home. However, was that likely to happen what with her cooped up all week long, at the Mickelwait's beck and call?

On the very day that Lizzy wondered how she could ever break free, Mary surprised her with an unexpected decision, delivered shortly after the family had finished their breakfast. George and the children had already gone their separate ways. Lizzy was clearing the last of the plates off the kitchen table.

"Lizzy, when you're done carrying those, come sit with me a moment," Mary beckoned with a brief smile. She smoothed the folds of her new skirt. Mary actually looked quite striking in that maroon color, Lizzy observed.

"Yes, Mary?" Lizzy asked as she sat down. Lizzy hoped she wasn't about to be scolded. She was feeling decidedly fragile as she hadn't slept well.

“Thanks, Lizzy. George and I thought at length on this matter before we reached a conclusion.” This doesn’t sound good, Lizzy thought wryly. She told herself to be calm. “Perhaps we should both have another cup of tea while we discuss this,” Mary suggested. Lizzy was tempted to say she’d rather get it over with. As she was not inclined to speak so rashly, she held her tongue.

“I shall put on the water in the meantime,” Lizzy said dutifully. She rose and returned to the hearth. The embers were still glowing, fortunately. Lizzy stoked the coals and as she watched the flames jump alive, she reminded herself that whatever Mary told her would just be her opinion. Lizzy could agree, but it wasn’t likely to be earth-shattering, was it?

Feeling calmer, she returned to her seat with a smile.

“As I said, this decision has been made, Lizzy. There shall be no argument concerning our decision after I have told you our plans for your future.”

Lizzy waited attentively, wishing her half-sister would hurry up. Was Mary enjoying prolonging the suspense, Lizzy wondered.

“As you well know,” Mary continued. We took you into our home when you were as yet unable to make your way in the world. You were only six. For the most part, you have been dutiful, however, as you are approaching twenty-one one, we need to be assured of your best future. As you have no dowry to speak of, and no parents, this has made matters difficult in terms of attracting a suitor.”

“Yes,” Lizzy murmured, her face pale as she waited for Mary to announce the verdict. “George and I have arranged for you to be married,” Mary explained. “You will be well provided for, of that you can be certain.”

“Do I get to meet him first?” Lizzy asked bleakly.

“Yes, of course,” Mary said. “And you shall have a chaperone living under the same roof prior to your marriage; his sister, Clara.”

“When are we to meet?” Lizzy asked. “Do I know him?” Perhaps, she

thought, this wasn't as bad as it sounded.

She wanted to start afresh. Maybe her husband-to-be was kind. Maybe she would grow to love him.

"No, you haven't met," Mary said. "You see, he lives out West. He owns a ranch in a little town called Rosewood in Texas."

Lizzy felt nauseous, although she had eaten a full breakfast. "I shall see to our tea," she said to steady her nerves.

"Good idea, I shall give you all the details over tea," Mary said approvingly before Lizzy returned not too long after.

"This tea tastes good," Mary said with a satisfied sigh after she took a sip. Lizzy hadn't touched hers. "Okay, where were we?" Mary asked.

"What is his name?" Lizzy asked. "Is he my age or much older?" Her aunt looked annoyed at Lizzy's questions.

"His name is Lance Cromwell. He is comfortably off."

"And his age?" Lizzy repeated.

"He is twenty-six," Mary said dourly as if she disliked that detail of the arrangement. "I would have thought you'd be grateful," she added sternly.

What difference would anything she said, make anyway? Lizzy realized. While she resented the fact that Mary and George had arranged all this behind her back, perhaps in some ways it was a blessing. Maybe this new life as a wife to a stranger was better than her current situation.

"Thank you, Mary. Yes, I understand and appreciate that you were seeing to my future," Lizzy said.

Mary nodded curtly. "Good, because you just have a day before departing,"

"A day?" Lizzy gulped. "Does that mean I leave tomorrow? Who is taking me?"

"Yes, tomorrow," Mary said firmly. "I have bought three dresses for you," her half-sister added. "Two for the journey, and another to wear once you arrive. First impressions are important."

“Thank you,” Lizzy conceded. Three new dresses of her very own! Now she felt quite giddy with excitement, although bewildered.

“It is a long journey by train. Six days,” Mary added.

“I see, thank you,” Lizzy replied. She would be sad to say goodbye to Gloria, but they could write to each other.

“You can pack and say your goodbyes today,” Mary instructed. “I am relieving you of your duties. Just see to our evening meal later.”

When Lizzy saw Gloria later, her friend’s first reaction to the news was to look crestfallen.

“What am I going to do without you?” she wailed. “But, Lizzy, this is exciting; remember how I said you could live in a country manor?”

“I am going to live on a ranch in Texas,” Lizzy said with a pronounced twang.

“When can I visit?” Gloria joked.

“Just let me settle in first,” Lizzy laughed.

The friends exchanged a bear hug as they said their goodbyes. They would stay in touch. Maybe it would be Gloria’s turn next and they would both be married women; just imagine!

After packing her few belongings Lizzy went downstairs to make dinner. The family was quieter over dinner. They were probably all thinking about how different things would be without Lizzy in the house.

George managed to cheer Lizzy by saying, “The next time you see me I will probably

be grey from all the extra tasks that Mary has given me.”

“You’re grey already,” his wife retorted with such good humor that they all burst out laughing.

CHAPTER 8



Lizzy woke up early. She was glad the sky was blue rather than overcast on such a momentous day. The day marked the start of a new future for her.

New beginnings could be exciting, she declared as she bounced out of bed. Lizzy was nervous. Any person would be, she knew that.

Lizzy had already decided to wear the sun yellow dress for her departure. It made her feel more confident that things would work out fine. Mary was to walk her to the train station.

It was a short fifteen-minute walk to the station. As Lizzy had few possessions, her bag was relatively light.

As they drew level with the train station, Mary stopped. “I shall leave you here, Lizzy. We shall go our separate ways.”

Lizzy suddenly felt very alone in the world. It was quite peculiar how the feeling came over her, out of nowhere. Mary cleared her throat, business-like rather than sisterly.

She reached into her purse safely tucked in her jacket pocket and handed a few notes to Lizzy. It seemed quite a substantial sum in Lizzy’s eyes. “Here is your train fare,” Mary said. “Have you something to keep it in?” she added. Lizzy nodded. She could put it in her vanity case. “The train should arrive in half an hour,” Mary explained. “No point in me staying with you. The train

conductor will see to it that you get off at the right stop. It is a six-day journey to Rosewood.

“Lizzy, you will reach your destination early on the afternoon of the thirtieth,” her half-sister continued. “There shouldn’t be too many passengers on the train in the latter part of the journey. I am sure you will find it quite interesting as the train leaves the city and you see a bit of the country.”

“Who will meet me at the station?” Lizzy asked as the full enormity of her new life dawned on her. She was alone in the world even if she was soon to be married.

“Clara will meet you,” Mary said. “I have arranged for her to meet you at three on the day you arrive. The train is scheduled to arrive well before that.”

“HOW WILL SHE IDENTIFY ME?” Lizzy asked worriedly.

“She has a photograph of you,” Mary said blasely. Lizzy stared at her.

Of all the cheek! Lizzy thought. How many more surprises did her half-sister have in store for her? Mary’s casual way of speaking about her situation emboldened her usually shy disposition.

“Well,” Lizzy began. “Thank you for raising me all these years.” That was all she could think of to say that seemed apt in terms of their relationship.

“It was my duty,” Mary shrugged. “Wishing you all the best for your marriage and your future. You be a good girl.”

“All the best to you and your family,” Lizzy replied politely. To her ears, they sounded like strangers rather than relatives. Their restraint spoke volumes. Lizzy smiled. She would much rather recall this moment on a happy note, she decided. “Please tell George I will miss his jokes.”

Mary groaned. “That is kind of you,” she replied. “Goodbye, Lizzy.”

“All the best, Mary, goodbye.” They both turned and headed in their respective directions as a train chugged into the station.

Lizzy approached the ticket office at the center of the hall nearest the platform. “You look the picture of springtime, my dear,” an elderly gentleman greeted her. “How can I help you?”

She smiled in return, relieved that her dress had made a good impression. “Good morning. I’d like to purchase a ticket to Rosewood.” Seeing his surprise, Lizzy added, “Rosewood is in Texas.”

“Yes, my dear. That is a long journey, traveling on your own. Been there before?”

“Never,” she shook her head.

“I went there once,” he commented. “Watched a rodeo with my wife. One of the best days of my life,” he declared. It was Lizzy’s turn to be surprised. He handed her a ticket. “The train departs in twenty minutes. Enjoy your journey, miss.”

“Thank you, I shall,” she answered, hoping she would.

Lizzy stepped gingerly onto the narrow step to board the train. She had only

ever been on short train trips, never more than thirty minutes at most. Now here she was traveling clear across the country. Life was filled with surprises

Lizzy chose a cabin towards the middle of the train. That way she figured she would be bothered less by people who were making short trips or who were possibly unruly. Although, as security was strict she doubted there would be any commotion other than the train’s sideways motion.

She felt the tension in her neck ease after she had put her baggage in the overhead stowage of her cabin. What would the meals be like, she wondered. Six days was a long time...

Lizzy wouldn’t have minded a cup of tea but she dare not ask about buying refreshments until the train was well on its way. The young woman hadn’t thought to pack herself refreshments of any kind and nor had her half-sister, for that matter.

“It’s my birthday!” she exclaimed out loud as the train driver blew the whistle to indicate that the train was leaving the station.

There was a brief tap on the cabin door. “Did I hear you say it’s your birthday?” the train conductor asked.

“Yes, you heard correctly,” Lizzy replied shyly.

“Have a toffee, miss,” he offered. Lizzy hesitated to accept the treat from a stranger. “Here, they are delicious,” he added. The conductor popped one in his mouth as if to reassure Lizzy.

“Thank you,” Lizzy smiled as she helped herself.

She blushed with embarrassment, yet she was delighted by his gesture.

“Miss, lunch is served at one o’clock in the dining car if you’d like to get a bite to eat then. Their prices are quite reasonable.” He tapped his cap in acknowledgment before he continued on his way.

Lizzy sat down again. She wished she had thought to bring a book to read or knitting to occupy herself. It was quite peculiar not to be working or scrubbing and washing, although it was liberating. Being her birthday, she chose to savor the day and the adventure of it all. Although Mary could be harsh and she had always been demanding, perhaps on this occasion she had provided Lizzy a new start. That’s the second time I have thought that she reflected, so maybe it was true.

Lizzy’s spirits lifted as the locomotive driver sounded one last pull of the whistle to signal the steam train’s imminent departure. The train began its journey with a slow start.

As the train gathered speed, Lizzy thought, this is it. Would she ever visit New York again, she wondered; the only place she had ever known. The furthest she had ever traveled from home was forty miles to attend a friend’s wedding.

She had her work cut out for her to plead her case to get that Saturday off a few months ago. Lizzy and Gloria had traveled together by horse carriage. The cart driver explained that they swopped horses halfway to ensure fresh

legs for the last leg of their journey. And, he had told them, the first horse needed to rest for their return journey the next day.

Mary had given Lizzy an extra load of washing on her return, no doubt to remind her that she was meant to attend to household chores rather than go gallivanting around the countryside. On many occasions, her strictness had meant that Lizzy lost touch with friends as they moved out of the heart of the city.

While she could sympathize with the Mickleweight's need to budget and not to spend money unnecessarily, it wasn't as if they paid her a salary or even an allowance. Besides, Mary was her half-sister rather than her employer.

Lizzy shifted her attention to happier thoughts and the changing scenery outside the window. It's a new day and a new season, the bride-to-be reminded herself. As the locomotive left the city, vast expanses of land seemed to open up before her eyes.

Farmworkers working in the cornfields looked up and smiled as the locomotive rumbled past them. George had told her that steam trains reached speeds of twenty miles per hour. Although it wasn't particularly quick, traveling by train was far more comfortable than traveling by a horse carriage on bumpy, uneven tracks.

Lizzy felt snug and safe in her cabin. As the miles widened between Lizzy and the life that she had left behind her, the journey was starting to feel marvelously freeing. After an hour or so, the repetitive sound of the train on its tracks, and even the occasional voice speaking in hushed tones in the passage outside her cabin, soothed her.

The twenty-one-year-old felt herself nodding off to sleep. Rather than resisting sleep, as she usually had to, she succumbed to its deep bliss. The shrill sounding of a bell woke her a while later.

Startled, Lizzy opened her eyes. The scenery outside was still farmland. Horses were drawing plows that were making deep furrows in what looked

like rich soil. A farmhand grinned and waved as he saw her face pressed against the window. Lizzy waved back, why not? Just then, there was a tap at the door.

“Yes?” she answered politely as she cautiously slid the cabin door open.

“Miss, lunch is being served now if you would like to partake,” the conductor invited. “The maple syrup pancakes are always good, or there’s soup and fresh rolls if you would prefer something more filling.”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you,” Lizzy replied.

She really is a pretty young woman, the conductor observed, thinking that it did not seem right for her to be traveling unaccompanied, especially over several days.

The railroad man felt protective towards her. His youngest daughter had recently married and she was about the same age. Anyway, he was looking to visit his daughter the following spring out West. His wife was already planning their excursion for next year.

Lizzy checked her appearance in her handheld vanity mirror. She looked fresh aside from a slightly crumpled bodice. She undid her long hair, drew a comb through it, and then fastened it loosely at the nape of her neck with a clip. Satisfied that she was presentable, the young woman closed her vanity case, checked her money, and secured it inside her bodice.

The dining car was fuller than Lizzy had expected, although several tables were still unoccupied. Thankfully she wasn’t the only passenger dining alone, which made her feel less conspicuous. Lizzy sat down at a table near a lady in her sixties.

Elegant in appearance and manner, she looked up from the menu she was scanning and then tilted her head downwards again to study the menu. Relieved to be left to her thoughts, Lizzy was startled by a familiar voice.

“Well, I never, if it isn’t Lizzy Goodman.” Anne Booth, Lizzy’s middle school teacher stood looking down at her with an expression of both delight and curiosity. She had taught Lizzy geography and Lizzy remembered that

she had been entertaining as well as knowledgeable. She had told the class of ten-year-olds that the world was much smaller yet bigger than people imagined; it all depended on their frame of reference.

Up to this moment, Lizzy had never grasped the gravity of what the teacher had said. After having watched what seemed endless fields of farmland unfold before her eyes, the world seemed immense. Now, with Miss Booth's appearance, the world seemed to have shrunk.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," Lizzy replied, a smile lighting up her pretty face.

"You may call me Anne now that you are a young lady," the older woman suggested. "Hello, Anne," Lizzy corrected.

"I am famished," Anne declared as she sat down, took off her hat and placed it neatly beside her. "Have you decided what to order yet?"

"No, not yet," Lizzy said, surprised at her question. "I am also quite hungry, but the pancakes are apparently very good," she added as if to explain her indecision.

"You need more than a pancake to sustain you on a journey, Lizzy," Anne said.

"I am going to order the fish," the teacher declared. She sat back in her seat and studied Lizzy frankly. "Do you mind if I ask the purpose of your journey?"

"I don't mind you asking," Lizzy said. She was happy to have a companion she knew to talk to. She lowered her voice, "I am traveling West to marry a rancher. My sister arranged it all," she continued.

"I see," Anne said, her face brightened with interest. "Have you been writing to each other for several months then?"

Lizzy felt her cheeks blush before she answered. "No, I was only advised of the arrangement yesterday."

Anne's face registered shock, followed by sympathy. She extended her hand to gently cover Lizzy's. "Is he a good man as far as you can tell from

what you have been told?”

Lizzy hesitated. What did she really know of him besides his apparent wealth? “My sister advised me that he is a rancher. He is 26 years old and handsome,” Lizzy confided. She paused as a waiter appeared to take their order.

Lizzy ordered a sandwich after Anne had placed her order of fish. The waiter left them with a courteous nod and Anne leaned forward, her face earnest yet kind. “So you have a photograph of your husband-to-be?” she asked.

Lizzy shook her head. Anne looked puzzled. “But he surely has a photograph of you?” she said slowly, as she considered the arrangement.

“Yes, he has a photograph of me,” Lizzy said. She decided that she didn’t want to speak of this anymore. She could understand Anne’s reservations, but this new beginning had already been set in motion. As if reading her mind, Anne was silent. She opened her bag, and after a moment of searching, she retrieved a pencil and a notepad. Anne placed it on the surface between them.

“Please write to me if you are ever in need of anything,” Anne said encouragingly. “If you are agreeable, please write down your address and the name of your husband to be.”

“Thank you,” Lizzy said quietly. She wrote his name and address as Lance Cromwell, Steer Ranch, Rosewood, Texas, adding for good measure: Bess Cromwell, sister of Lance, at the same address. Anne read the details carefully after first putting on her spectacles.

Satisfied, she turned over to the next page, wrote her details, and tore the page out of the small notepad. Anne handed the slip of paper to Lizzy who accepted it gratefully, folding it and placing it in her lap, out of sight.

“I am sure your sister would have arranged that you marry a decent man,” Anne said consolingly. “We can stay in touch and exchange pleasantries about the Texan style of living,” she teased.

“I am so glad we have met up again,” Lizzy agreed, grateful to have

renewed acquaintance with Anne and astonished that they would be living in close proximity to each other. Anne lived in the closest town to Rosewood.

“How wonderfully small the world can be!” Lizzy declared.

“Amen to that,” Anne said as her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Ladies, luncheon is served,” the waiter announced as he set their plates down with a flourish.

“To Lizzy and her happiness,” Anne said raising a glass.

Lizzy raised hers in return. “To good friends, old and new,” Lizzy suggested.

“I am not that old!” Anne joked.

“I never meant that,” Lizzy giggled.

After they had finished their meals, which they agreed were astonishingly tasty, the waiter reappeared with the conductor in tow. “This gentleman wondered if you ladies would care to try a dessert on the house...um, train,” the waiter offered.

“Seeing as it’s your birthday,” the conductor added.

Lizzy burst into delighted laughter, while Anne looked on, amazed. “Thank you very much. We would like that. That is very generous of you,” the birthday girl accepted.

“You never told me it’s your birthday!” Anne said as the waiter bustled off to fetch two chocolate desserts.

“We were too busy catching up,” Lizzy said. “I can hardly believe I am twenty-one myself!”

“Well, you are off to a good start to your new life out West,” Anne said in a hushed tone. She was aware that the couple at the next table was watching them with keen interest. “Happy birthday, young Lizzy, please accept the meal as my treat.”

“Thank you. I look forward to returning the favor in Texas,” Lizzy confided. She wasn’t used to people she barely knew being so kind to her.

Later that evening, as she settled into her bed in her cabin, Lizzy cast her

mind back to her room in the basement in New York. It had been cool and musty even in summer. Her first day on the train had been far happier than she could ever have imagined.

Her thoughts returned to Lance Cromwell. She pictured him as tall with broad shoulders, or on second thoughts, perhaps not. Her logic told her if he spent a lot of time herding cattle on horseback, he was more likely to be lean.

When she tried to picture his face she couldn't, or rather she dare not. That way she wouldn't be disappointed. Anyway, it was the heart that mattered in a marriage, not appearance, she told herself.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Lizzy woke up the next morning feeling stiff. At first, she assumed the cause of her aching muscles to be sleeping in the cabin bed but she recalled falling asleep almost as soon as she closed her eyes.

She had only woken once during the evening when the train had stopped at a small station in what seemed the middle of nowhere. No one had got on or off as far as she could see. It must have been the early hours of the morning by then.

She touched her forehead to see if she was feverish. It was cool rather than warm. She shrugged off the aching feeling as the result of sleeping on a firmer bed than she was accustomed to.

Lizzy opened her baggage. She didn't want to wear the sun yellow dress for two days running if she could help it. Perhaps she could dab the collar and cuffs with soap in the washbasin later so that she could wear it the following day.

She decided to wear the sage green dress. The cool blue dress seemed best for the day she arrived at the ranch. Lizzy felt instinctively that she had made the right choice.

While they may have an arranged marriage, she didn't want to appear a walkover or desperate. She was neither, even if her half-sister had arranged it behind her back. Lizzy wanted to meet Lance as an equal, regardless of

having no say in the matter of their marriage up to that point.

Anne Booth wasn't in the dining room this morning. Lizzy chose oatmeal and settled back in her seat. A toddler played a game of peek-a-boo behind the shelter of his mother's basket until she told him off for staring. He kicked the table instead until his mother raised her voice at him. Then, to his mother's relief, his oatmeal arrived and he tucked in with gusto after first swirling the milk around until the sides of the bowl were all milky.

Lizzy could understand his restlessness. A child that age had so much energy and there was nowhere to direct all that exuberance. She considered offering to help the young mother and then decided against it.

She had enough mountains of her own to climb in the foreseeable future. Best she conserve her energy for her arrival and the adjustment that would come with new surroundings and life with a man she had never met.

LIZZY FOCUSED her attention on her hands which were dry and calloused. Hopefully with time, and less housework, they would become softer.

A different waiter served her this morning. This one was younger and quite flirtatious. Lizzy ignored his hint that they meet after lunch on his tea break. She wouldn't have taken him up on his invitation in her own neighborhood let alone on a train far from home.

Her oatmeal tasted better than her own attempts at it made back home. The cook had added a dab of butter, making it creamy. Lizzy made a mental note to try that out in her kitchen in Texas. Her very own kitchen.

Breakfast over, Lizzy contemplated how to spend her day. She glanced at the map of the route printed on the back of the menu which provided no clues.

Anne had mentioned how, on a previous train journey, she had been fortunate to sit in the rear car with no other passengers in sight. She had enjoyed watching the sunset, uninterrupted for a full hour. Anne confided that

she had been so mesmerized by the beautiful crimson and peach hues that she almost forgot about dinnertime.

Lizzy returned to her cabin. The same lady that she had seen at breakfast had settled in on the seat Lizzy had sat on the previous day, her toddler alongside her. They had taken up residence on the lower bunks, which meant she would have to sleep on the upper bunk.

“Good afternoon,” the lady greeted her. “Good afternoon,” Lizzy replied politely. She placed her baggage carefully on the top bunk and then settled herself opposite them on the seat below, her hands folded in her lap. The little boy’s toys were scattered next to her.

She wasn’t quite sure whether to initiate conversation or to admire the scenery. Quiet by nature, Lizzy decided she would leave it up to the lady. She seemed content, just sitting there quietly, while her little boy pretended he was the locomotive driver.

He asked his mother for her train fare. She playfully told him not to be silly and that she had already paid. He giggled at her joke then turned to face Lizzy.

“Madam, could I have your ticket please?” he asked. Lizzy pretended to search her baggage and then peered under her seat. She looked up at the ceiling as if a ticket would magically appear from thin air.

“I appear to have lost it,” she replied with an exaggerated sigh. The boy’s mother was also smiling now, enjoying her play-acting.

“You must have your ticket,” the boy said sternly.

HE SAT DOWN NEXT to her as if to console her. Lizzy leaned forward and plucked an imaginary ticket from behind his ear. “Oh my goodness, here it is!” she exclaimed.

The boy giggled, delighted by her comedy. “Do that again!” he insisted.

“Do what again?” Lizzy asked as she feigned ignorance.

“Find the ticket behind my ear,” he pronounced as he moved closer to sit alongside her.

“David, please leave the lady alone. My apologies,” his mother said with a smile. “My name is Catherine Townsend.”

“No harm done,” Lizzy laughed. “David is delightful. My name is Lizzy Goodman. Pleased to meet you both.” David looked at them solemnly.

“Are you also traveling far?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” Lizzy replied. “All the way to Texas.”

“Why, so are we,” Catherine replied. Lizzy just smiled.

She wasn’t going to share her reason for traveling with a stranger. Especially when the little boy, sweet though he was, would not have the discretion to keep her status a secret. People talk, especially in rural settings.

Lizzy doubted that Lance would want people to be talking about the arranged marriage either. No, she decided, this is not for public consumption until Lance and I have met.

“I am a governess,” Catherine said as if to break the ice.

“I see,” Lizzy said. She waited for Catherine to continue. When she didn’t, Lizzy considered her options. Tell her the truth or a watered-down version of it? “I am assisting with the cooking at a ranch in the area,” Lizzy said. She noticed Catherine’s surprise. “I needed a change in scenery,” Lizzy added.

Catherine seemed to visibly relax at her explanation, no doubt wondering why she would travel so far from home on her own.

“It is a big step,” Catherine said. “I am moving for a different reason but it’s big for anyone, especially for women. I have family who settled in the region a few years ago. Their children are almost school-going age so it was decided that I assist with their schooling. It is a good arrangement for both of us.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a tap on the cabin door. Lizzy stood up and slid the door open a notch.

“Oh, good, this is your cabin,” Anne said.

“Come in,” Lizzy invited her. She introduced Anne to her new acquaintance after which she sat down with a satisfied sigh.

“I have had the loveliest morning,” she declared. “I met a lady competent in playing the piano. She has given me the details of a tutor in Rosewood. Guess what her name is?”

“I give up,” Lizzy said. Anne was a lady to be admired. Was there no end to her talents?

“Clara Cromwell,” Anne said.

Astounded at the coincidence, Lizzy raised her eyebrows. “She is known in the region for her musical ability, and what’s more, Lance is a good singer.”

“Tell me more over dinner,” Lizzy suggested. She ignored Anne’s surprise at her reserve. “I know of the Cromwells,” Catherine remarked. Lizzy and Anne exchanged a glance, as they registered surprise.

“Lance Cromwell is engaged to be married. I hear she is very beautiful. Lance lost his parents a few years ago and has been quite lonesome without them, or so my uncle says.”

“Good for him,” Anne said. “Rather commit to someone than wander aimlessly through life.” Lizzy held her tongue and her breath.

She wondered how Anne managed to keep a straight face. “Anne, would you like a walk up the passage for some exercise?” Lizzy suggested. She prayed Anne would behave and agree.

“Umm, yes, certainly,” Anne replied, much to Lizzy’s relief.

“Please excuse us,” Lizzy said.

Catherine smiled, “Of course. I know it’s early in the day, but I will take the opportunity to have a nap.”

David grumbled. He was clearly unimpressed at the idea of having to stay put when Lizzy and Anne left the cabin.

“You are impossible!” Lizzy whispered to Anne as soon as they were out

of earshot.

“That was a close call, Mrs. Cromwell to be,” Anne said softly. “You do realize your traveling companion will know soon enough.”

“Not if I can help it. Just let me meet him first,” Lizzy retorted in good humor while also serious. She prodded Anne on the arm. “Why don’t we see if there’s space to sit in the rear car?”

Anne turned and looked at her skeptically. “Okay, but it’s likely to be full.”

“I shall take my chances,” Lizzy said, her fear of the future subsiding as she decided to enjoy the present instead.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



Lance Cromwell felt as nervous as a wild colt settling in a corral as he remembered that today was the day. Not the day of his wedding. That was still a month away.

Today he was meeting his bride-to-be for the first time. Lizzy. He prayed that her appearance would live up to her photograph. And most of all that Lizzy's character and disposition were as appealing as Mary Mickleweight had indicated.

Mary had first described Lizzy in a letter after responding to Lance's advertisement for a mail-order bride. As much intrigued by curiosity as the longing to have a suitable wife by his side, Lance finally agreed to meet Mary.

She had indicated in her letter that she was representing Lizzy's best interests, by her insistence on meeting Lizzy's prospective husband face to face. Lance had thought her request quite noble. That was until Mary Mickleweight had turned up at Rosewood Ranch along with her husband and children two months ago.

Lance had indicated quite plainly to Mary and George that his generosity did not extend beyond a fee for the bride. He recognized Mary as a manipulator. He wasn't accustomed to a woman bargaining or insisting that an arrangement be on her terms, or she would call it off.

The ranch owner would never have admitted to Mary Mickleweight that the photograph of Lizzy had captivated him from the start. Not only her beauty, that was there for anyone to see. What had surprised Lance was the intelligence and candor in Lizzy's eyes, to an extent that held his attention.

Lizzy's photograph was tucked behind a picture of his parents. And just as he had loved them dearly, he hoped to cherish Lizzy too. He missed his parents' love, their friendship, and the easy banter they used to share.

He was blessed in the knowledge that they had lived a good life, even if their start had not been easy. His parents had earned the right to be known as the finest cattle breeders in the area. And they were well-liked too; except by those jealous of their success, who thankfully were few and far between.

Today, the reality of Lance's decision was finally here. There was no going back on his

WORD. He planned to marry Lizzy Goodman at the end of September, well before winter set in. Lance thought it only fair to give Lizzy time to settle in at Rosewood Ranch before pledging herself to be married to him. He laughed wryly. He needed some time to settle into the idea too.

Clara Cromwell was excited for her brother. She knew he would make a good husband. He was kind, fair, and handsome. She hadn't shared his decision with anybody. Lance had only told her of his decision a week ago. After the initial shock had subsided, Clara had warmed to the idea. Clara could tell that Lance was lonely at times even though he led an active life. Lance rose well before dawn, and he worked until after dusk on most days. Cattle didn't keep regular hours, Clara considered. A cow could be in distress and need help with calving. Sometimes a coyote got into a cattle pen or a field and wrought havoc. Life was never dull, that was for sure.

Yet life was mostly rewarding at Rosewood Ranch. Casting her brother's arrangements aside, for the time being, Clara put on a bonnet. It was still

warm despite heading towards late afternoon.

She got in the buggy. “All set, ma’am?” Robert asked. He was keen to get going.

“Yes, thanks, Robert,” she answered, clutching the buggy as the horse set off at a trot.

It wasn’t his place to tell Clara when to leave for the station but she was cutting it fine. The horse could only go so fast. On top of that, Clara had decided at the last minute to take her friend Bessie up on her offer of a drink together at the diner on the way there.

Why she couldn’t have met Bessie on another day was beyond him. Still, she was a good girl, Robert reflected. Clara was a woman now, he corrected himself.

Clara was having similar thoughts. She was the same age as Lizzy, having turned twenty-one a few months before. She didn’t know Lizzy’s exact birth date but Lance had said she was almost twenty-one.

Robert had worked on the ranch since the early days when Clara’s parents had arrived. He reckoned this afternoon Clara was running considerably behind schedule. It had been unavoidable, Clara explained.

Robert didn’t know why but he never quite trusted Bessie, even as a young child. She struck him as a bit of a schemer. Robert being a charitable man had never shared his misgivings with anyone, not even his wife.

When Clara had finally said she must get going, Bessie had cajoled the reason for her trip to the station out of her. Clara had felt a pang of disloyalty to her brother immediately afterward. She reasoned that Bessie would know soon enough anyway, so no harm done.

Bessie lived at the ranch and kept house for Lance. She lived on the property in a small cottage nearby. She had her heart set on marrying Lance, not that she had ever made this admission to his sister.

Clara didn’t notice the jealousy in Bessie’s eyes as she had been distracted by a person entering the general dealer. When Clara turned her

steady gaze on her friend, Bessie appeared composed.

“How soon is the wedding?” Bessie asked, her voice level.

Bessie’s feelings were a seething current of anger and hurt behind her cool composure. She would never disclose her plans to Clara, despite their friendship. Bessie was too proud for that.

“They are getting married in a month. Can you believe it?” Clara asked. “Their wedding is to be held at Rosewood Town Church.”

Bessie took a long sip of her drink to hide her dismay and internal shaking. Then she looked up. “It is very sudden,” Bessie said quietly. She gave a brief smile as a thought occurred to her. “You better not hold up Lance’s bride-to-be. Please could I tag along so I get to meet her too?”

Clara looked doubtful. “I don’t know if that’s wise,” she considered.

“I thought we were friends,” Bessie pouted. Inwardly Bessie felt a rising panic. She saw her childhood fantasy of marrying Lance drifting away. She would do everything in her power to stop the wedding, Bessie decided.

Meanwhile, as the train came to a standstill at Rosewood Station, Lizzy felt time slow down. She had pictured this moment many times and now it was here, Lizzy wondered what would happen next and how she would feel in a day or two, or even a year.

After waiting for close to an hour for Clara to show up at the train station, Lizzy gave up glancing up and down the station platform. Clara was nowhere in sight. Had Lance changed his mind about marrying her?

Perhaps Clara had just been delayed. Or maybe Mary had muddled the days when she had made arrangements. Knowing her sister, that wasn’t very likely.

The bride-to-be was starting to feel anxious about her predicament. She sat down on a bench and closed her eyes to compose herself. Lizzy took a deep breath in and then exhaled.

A midwife had told Lizzy that breathing in that way could soothe the nerves. Her eyes were still closed when Lizzy heard a young female voice

call out, "Oh my goodness. What a relief! There you are."

Lizzy opened her eyes to see a pretty young woman about her own age walking briskly towards her, with another lady beside her. The lady who had spoken held out an outstretched hand. "My name is Clara Cromwell. I am Lance's sister."

The other lady looked on aloofly. Her manner reminded Lizzy of Mary, only she was much prettier and younger. Also about her age, Lizzy figured.

Lizzy took Clara's hand and shook it warmly. "I am Lizzy Goodman. I am so relieved to see you. I was becoming quite concerned," she admitted.

"My apologies for being late," Clara said. "I met my friend on the way and we were delayed. Lizzy, meet Bessie." When Lizzy extended her hand out to Bessie, she accepted it but shook her hand limply, as if she pitied her.

Bessie's lack of warmth was lost on Clara as she tried to cover her embarrassment at being so late. "Oh dear, that is not much of an excuse, is it?" Clara added with a wry smile. Bessie looked on as if she would much rather be elsewhere.

Lizzy decided to ignore Bessie's bad manners. Clara seemed pleasant and that put her mind at ease. She was Lance's sister after all.

"Apology accepted. Is the ranch quite a distance from the station?" Lizzy asked out of curiosity as much as to make conversation. She was still trying to get her bearings.

As far as she could gather, Rosewood Town appeared to have a population of no more than seventy people. Lizzy was surprised, quite frankly, that they even had a train station. She kept that observation to herself.

"No, it's not far from here at all," Clara replied after a moment's reflection. "About three miles, that's all."

Lizzy was relieved to hear that. "Are we walking to the ranch?" she asked. Lizzy accepted Clara's offer to take her baggage. They could take turns carrying it, although looking at Bessie's demeanor, an offer of help

from her was not likely to be forthcoming.

“My goodness, no,” Clara laughed. “We would never expect you to walk after your long journey. We have a horse and buggy waiting outside. I understand you left New York on the twenty-fifth of August,” Clara continued.

“Yes, I left on my birthday,” Lizzy said. “I only realized as I was settling into my seat.”

Lizzy is not spoiled then, Clara noted. “On your birthday!” she exclaimed. “Did you have cake on the train? I wouldn’t want to celebrate my birthday alone,” she confided.

“Yes, I was fortunate to have both dessert and company,” Lizzy said. “I renewed acquaintance with a middle school teacher of mine and she treated me to lunch. And the conductor treated us to dessert, which was very sweet.”

Clara absorbed this revelation with concern. Lance had been assured of Lizzy’s reticence in social situations. She was well-liked but shy with people she did not know and was not really partial to small talk.

She hoped Lizzy’s sister had described her character accurately. Should she mention her observation to Lance? Clara decided against it.

Lance was already anxious about meeting Lizzy today, which was understandable. He had tried to hide his anxiety. She knew her brother well enough to recognize the signs.

Lance had pushed his breakfast aside that morning and left it half-eaten. It was unusual for him to let food go to waste. She suggested that he fetch Lizzy from the station himself. He had told Clara that there would be time enough for them to get to know each other. Lance hadn’t meant that in a grumpy way. He was just being his kind, considerate self.

The general talk was that Lance was considered a catch. He was a gentleman despite his mental toughness and strong physique. He was the first to admit that he set high standards, perhaps too high.

Bessie observed Lizzy’s profile as she turned to gaze in wonder at the

scenery. She was exceptionally pretty, which bothered Bessie as much as the realization that she was about to meet Lance face to face. And he was likely to reach the same conclusion.

Rosewood Ranch came into view as the buggy rounded the curve of the narrow, dusty track. Lizzy looked with wonder at the scene that greeted her. A large oak tree was the first thing she noticed and then lush green grass.

Several horses were grazing on the grass beyond the oak tree. A separate corral was empty but looked well used. There was a worn path around its perimeter. When Lizzy's eyes finally rested on the house, she was overawed. The whitewashed building was not only generous in its dimensions but was positioned to face west. The dappled sunlight which filtered through the windows created a hazy effect.

"Your homestead is lovely," Lizzy said shyly. Clara glanced at Lizzy's face. She looked quite fragile.

"It is to be your home," Clara said gently and then Lizzy quite unexpectedly burst into tears.

CHAPTER 11



Lizzy had been so overwhelmed by the contrast between her old life of drudgery and endless chores and the new possibility of being truly loved. That realization, as well as the beautiful surroundings, caused the tears to flow freely down her cheeks. She wiped at them with the corner of her handkerchief.

“Lizzy, you must be tired after your journey,” Clara said gently. She remembered Bessie and turned to speak to her, and was surprised to see that Bessie had already stepped off the buggy although they had barely stopped.

“See you in the house,” Clara instructed. She remembered that Bessie wasn’t even supposed to know about her brother’s upcoming marriage to Lizzy.

“See you soon,” Bessie replied gravely.

Clara watched her friend thoughtfully as she entered the house; she didn’t seem herself today. “I am fine now, Clara,” Lizzy said as she tucked her handkerchief into a small holdall alongside her baggage. “Thank you for your kindness.”

Clara smiled in reply, relieved that Lizzy was feeling better. A tall figure appeared in the front doorway, silhouetted against the late afternoon sunshine, he walked swiftly towards them with energy and purpose.

As Lance came alongside the buggy, he looked up at his sister and then at

the woman seated beside her wearing the sky blue dress and featuring flyaway blonde hair. His first impression of Lizzy took his breath away; not just her beauty. She had such a sweet face and he hadn't expected her to be so dainty.

"Lance, meet Lizzy," Clara introduced, amused at her brother's reaction. Usually confident, he seemed at a loss for words.

Lizzy held a hand out to him. "Hello, Lance. It is good to meet you."

He laughed with relief. Her voice was lovely too. Lance extended his hand to Lizzy and then helped her out of the buggy. Her hand felt small in his. As they stood together, he realized that he hadn't yet spoken.

"Welcome to your new home, Lizzy," Lance said as his dark eyes met hers intently. "I hope that you will be happy here."

"Thank you, Lance," Lizzy said shyly. "Clara has been most kind to me already."

"I was a bit late," Clara confessed. She stepped off the buggy's siding board with joyful exuberance after taking her brother's offered hand for support. Lance raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I met up with Bessie and time ran away with us," Lance's sister explained. He frowned but in a playful way. Lance decided to overlook his sister's tardiness on this occasion as Lizzy seemed well taken care of in other respects. Although it couldn't have made a good impression for his wife-to-be

"Clara, I suggest you take Lizzy to her room so that she can settle in. Then she can join us on the porch for tea in about an hour," Lance suggested. "Would you like that, Lizzy?" Lance asked.

Lizzy nodded. "Yes, thank you. That would be perfect," she replied. The bride-to-be felt out of her depth. It wasn't just that Lance was handsome, but that he seemed caring and kind too.

Could she really be blessed with such good fortune? "I will carry that," Lance offered as he relieved Lizzy of her baggage. Their hands touched

briefly and he stopped himself from pressing his hand to her shoulder to reassure her of his good intentions.

Clara and Lizzy trailed behind him. Clara had engaged Lizzy in conversation about her piano skills. Lizzy listened politely, not having much choice.

His sister always became quite animated when she spoke about music. There would be time enough for Lizzy to hear how well Clara played the piano. “Lizzy, I shall see you in about an hour on the porch. Clara, could you please arrange tea for the three of us?”

“Of course,” Clara said brightly. She adored her brother, and she could see he had been mesmerized by Lizzy’s beauty when she had introduced them. He was usually cautious in matters of the heart.

They appeared well suited, Clara reflected, pleased to reach that conclusion. “Lizzy, I shall see you later,” Lance said with a boyish grin. He felt much more relaxed now that he had met her.

“I look forward to it,” Lizzy said.

Her bedroom looked out over the front lawn. Lizzy could see the horses nearby. Some of them had moved nearer to the oak tree.

The horses grazed vigorously and they seemed as content and comfortable as Lizzy felt in that moment. Lizzy stood at the window a while longer.

The sweet smell of jasmine wafted through the open window. Maybe she would get a sprig later and put it in a vase on her bedside table. Jasmine was among her favorite scents.

Lizzy turned and went to the dressing table. She had never had one of her own. Her hair was tousled and she had done the best she could to neaten herself at the train station.

What must Lance have thought of her? Tendrils of her silky hair had escaped her chignon Her complexion was a good color, she noted. Perhaps it was the country air.

Incredible to think that she now lived on a cattle ranch in Texas. She was looking forward to exploring the ranch further and getting to know Lance better, although she was nervous.

When Lizzy returned to the porch an hour later, she could hear the sound of chatter.

“Hello, again,” she said tentatively as she approached Lance and Clara. Bessie was nowhere to be seen, thankfully.

Lance stood up from the wicker chair he had been sitting in. “Hello, Lizzy.” As he looked at her she felt her pulse quicken but gave no hint of it.

Lizzy smiled at Gloria to change her focus. This was their home after all. While she would soon be Lance’s wife, for the time being, she was their guest rather than family.

“Bessie has done us proud,” Lance said with a grin as Lizzy’s eyes rested on the tea trolley. “Would you like a scone, Lizzy?” Clara asked as she leaned towards the trolley.

“Yes, thank you,” Lizzy replied as she accepted a plate from Clara.

“They remind me of home,” Lizzy added quietly. Lance’s eyes were warm and approving as they exchanged a glance. “My mother used to make them.”

“So did ours,” Clara shared. “Lance and I used to help her make them when we were little.” The thought of Lance in the kitchen amused Lizzy. Lance returned Lizzy’s smile with a grin.

“Looking back I was probably more of a hindrance than a help,” Lance admitted. “I used to eat the batter while her back was turned.” Lizzy giggled.

While the day was still warm, some grey clouds were gathering from the east. They looked beautiful against the golden glow of the sunset. “Looks like we may have a thunderstorm later,” Lance commented with a slight frown.

“Where do the horses go when it rains?” Lizzy asked. She blushed immediately, realizing her blunder. “I sound like a real city girl.”

Lance laughed. He appreciated her frankness and her intelligence. “Lizzy,

I know this is all new to you. Don't worry; nature teaches me something new every day. The horses generally stay outside, except for the months when it snows," Lance explained. "And when we have thunderstorms," he added with emphasis. Lizzy smiled. "We have stables in the homestead. Judging by the speed at which those clouds are gathering I may need to excuse myself quite soon."

As Lizzy learned more about life on the ranch from their conversation as well as the banter between Lance and his sister, she wondered what her friend Gloria would think of it all. Lizzy decided she would share little information about Lance, other than he appeared to be a kind man. It seemed proper to treat their courting as a private matter even if they were not yet husband and wife.

Lizzy realized that she needed to speak to Lance about inviting Gloria to their wedding. Gloria was her nearest and dearest friend in the whole world and so it was important that she attend the wedding. Although Gloria wasn't so near anymore, she reflected glumly.

Her friend being so many miles away was the only dim light on what had otherwise been a wonderful day. It was too soon to know for sure whether she would be content here, but she sure was going to give it her best attempt.

Lizzy could scarcely believe that her wedding to Lance was just around the corner and she didn't even have a wedding dress yet. She giggled when she thought back to the afternoon she had practiced being a bride using Gloria's net curtain as a veil and almost taking the curtain track down in the process.

"Share the joke?" Lance asked with a smile. He welcomed the opportunity to chat to Lizzy privately, perhaps the following afternoon after he had checked that the round-up was going smoothly. Much as he loved his sister, he could see that getting to know Lizzy would be much easier without Clara's constant chatter.

"Just remembering my friend back home," Lizzy said.

“This is your home, Lizzy,” Lance said after a brief pause. Her comment worried him. Was Lizzy having second thoughts?

“Yes, thank you. It is just an adjustment to be in a new place. That’s all. Besides, it is truly lovely here,” Lizzy said. She flushed as he met her gaze.

Lance softened as he saw that she was clearly flustered. Give the girl a break, he told himself sternly. She has barely arrived, and here you are trying to convince her to love you.

“You mentioned a round-up when you were speaking to Clara earlier. What are you referring to?” Lizzy asked.

Lance looked at her and then he threw his head back and roared with laughter. Lizzy wondered what she had said that was so funny. Seemed like small talk, so why the hilarity?

She looked at him in confusion. After his laughter subsided, Lance wiped his eyes with the palms of his hands. He owed Lizzy a proper explanation if she was to be a rancher’s wife.

“Ranchers let their cattle loose to roam the prairie. Those who farm sheep do the same. Most of the grazing land is owned by the government,” Lance explained.

Lizzy nodded with interest. “But how do you make sure your cattle and sheep don’t get all mixed up or lost?” Lizzy asked.

“Good question,” he said, quelling his desire to smile at her earnest expression. “That government land is known as the open range. Twice a year cowboys round up cattle so we know which stock belongs to which ranch. In the spring they brand the calves and in the fall we gather steers for sale.”

“That is such a clever system,” Lizzy said as she clapped her hands in wonder.

“Thank you,” Lance said. “Roundups are mighty tiring, I can tell you. Cattle don’t always come when you call them.”

“Now you are teasing,” Lizzy laughed.

“You learn quickly, ‘Lance said approvingly. “Anyway, all this is set to

change soon,” he reflected.

“Why is that?” Lizzy asked, intrigued.

“Some clever inventor invented something called barbed wire to protect fields from overgrazing,” Lance explained. “So a lot more farmers, myself included, are going to fence off their land to protect grazing land.”

“Could I help with a round-up?” Lizzy asked. She wanted to be useful too. Besides she wasn’t accustomed to being idle while others worked.

Lance’s eyes sparkled at the idea of Lizzy on the range among the cowboys, aggressive steers, and sometimes herds of bison. He wondered if she even knew how to ride a horse. “Can you ride a horse?” he asked kindly.

She shook her head. “Well then, I need to teach you,” Lance suggested. “You may enjoy it. Thanks for the offer but tomorrow’s round-up should hopefully work out fine.”

CHAPTER 12



A thunderclap sounded on the horizon. Lance stood up and stared across the field as he tried to gauge how soon the storm would arrive at the homestead and the severity of it. A bolt of lightning shot across the sky like a warning to hurry up.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Clara remarked as the sky flickered above their heads and the rain came pelting down.

“Yes, but from a distance,” Lizzy said. The women scurried into the house for cover, while Lance grabbed his waterproof jacket.

The horses were already edgy. A stallion looked like he was deciding whether to make a go of it over the fence. He trotted over to the other horses instead. They huddled together for comfort as much as protection as the rain increased in intensity.

“See you later!” Lance shouted over the storm as he stuck his head in the front room where Clara and Lizzy were sitting at a distance from the window.

“Be safe,” Lizzy said. She was already concerned for him and he had only dashed outside for a moment to grab the harnesses.

“Yes, be safe out there,” Clara added. “Lizzy, it looks like dinner may be served later this evening. The ranch hands will need to see that the horses and livestock are calm before we all settle in for the evening.”

“Could I help to get the dinner ready?” Lizzy offered.

“No need,” Clara replied. “Bessie is our housemaid.”

“Oh?” Lizzy replied. She was surprised at this information as Bessie and Clara seemed so close. In New York maids and their employers didn’t mix socially. For no reason that she could fathom, Bessie’s presence made her uneasy. Lizzy distrusted her. The thought occurred to her that Bessie may be jealous of her relationship with Lance because she had designs on him herself. He didn’t appear to have feelings for Bessie though which might explain her unfriendliness towards Lizzy.

Eventually, Lance returned. His hair was wet despite his oilskins. Lizzy thought he looked like a man on a mission; determined, exhausted, and thankful his duties were done.

“Don’t get comfortable yet, Lance,” Clara commented.

“Why not?” he asked, water dripping off his raincoat onto the mat.

“With the ranch hands still busy with the cattle, there is no one to take Bessie home in this weather,” his sister explained. “Please be a dear and take her home.”

Lance grimaced. He had been looking forward to relaxing. Thankfully, Bessie’s cottage was a short distance away, perhaps a mile. Although in this weather it would feel further.

“Is Bessie ready?” Lance asked.

“She is just finishing up preparing vegetables for dinner. I shall tell her to go upfront of the house immediately.”

“Do that, please,” Lance said with a relieved sigh. He held up his hands and then let them drop to his sides. “Please excuse me, Lizzy. This change of plan cannot be helped. This is the way of ranching. But it does have its benefits too, I assure you,” he gave her a wry smile.

“Thank you, Lance. I do understand,” Lizzy said. “And it is admirable that you look after your staff so well.” Again she got that uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach; she couldn’t shake off the feeling that Bessie meant trouble.

Bessie walked past the room without so much as a glance in her direction. She was pretty, Lizzy conceded, but she certainly wasn't making her feel welcome. The front door closed with a soft thud behind her and Lizzy was left alone with her thoughts.

"I don't envy my brother going back out there!" Clara exclaimed on her return. She carried a plate of freshly baked treats and a bowl of what looked like steaming broth. "As the weather has taken such a turn, I thought we could eat in here since it is much warmer than the kitchen.

"We shall have a proper dinner later, on Lance's return," Clara added as if reading Lizzy's mind. She was wondering what Lance was going to eat. "You can help me make dinner later. This will give us energy," Clara continued. "Besides, we need to get to know each better if you are to be my sister-in-law. I am excited about the wedding, I can tell you, not just because you are getting married. We seldom have opportunities to dress up in Rosewood Town," Clara explained.

"I was wondering about a dress good enough to wear for the wedding," Lizzy admitted.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Clara said. "We have a surprise in store for you."

Lizzy hoped she wasn't expected to squeeze into some long-forgotten heirloom that had been stored in an attic somewhere. She didn't mind the something borrowed element of wedding tradition. There was a sentimentality in that. But as a mail-order bride, she hoped for a dress suited to her. Sure, she had given up her old life and had made peace with that, but she didn't want to emulate someone else's identity. Lizzy also sensed that Lance would prefer her to be straightforward in her dealings with him.

And so far, Lance had exceeded her expectations as a future husband. When Lizzy how her sister's matchmaking may have turned out if arrangements had gone belly up, she was just thankful to be with respectable, good people.

Lance handed Bessie a woolen throw. It wouldn't keep her dry, but it would stop the damp evening air from making her shiver. He knew only too well how sick a person could become if they were exposed to the elements when they were wet. The buggy had a slight canopy but it only extended a short distance above their heads.

The rain was now pelting down at a slant which was unfortunate. "Thank you, Lance. You are so kind to me," Bessie said as she wrapped the rug around her knees.

"I would do that for anyone, but thank you," Lance said. He realized his words may have sounded blunt but he was just incredibly tired. The rancher didn't feel like conversation while he was concentrating on the muddy track on the way to Bessie's quaint cottage, and the horse was still skittish after the thunderstorm.

Bessie was quiet. That wasn't quite the response that she had hoped for from Lance. "I guess Ma taught me well!" Lance added, to soften his earlier comment.

"Lance, may I confide in you on a matter that is troubling me?" Bessie asked. Lance considered that he didn't have much of a choice, squashed as they were in the buggy together. Their shoulders occasionally touched as the buggy rocked sideways on the sloping track, as they headed downhill towards Bessie's home.

"Sure," he said in a matter-of-fact manner. "I hesitated whether I should address this matter directly with you," Bessie began.

Lance frowned. She surely wasn't about to tender her notice. Bessie was a fine housekeeper, and she and Clara had become firm friends over the past year.

"Clara advised me that you are to wed Lizzy next month. At first, I wasn't going to say anything, but I have to, for the sake of your marriage and you personally."

Lance really didn't feel like bad news. Don't let it be about Lizzy, please,

he mused. “Lance, the thing is, Lizzy already has a child born out of wedlock.

“I fear that she may just be marrying you for your money,” Bessie concluded. Lance absorbed the information, his heart heavy with dismay. It was possible, but how could Mary have neglected such an important detail?

“We shall speak of this matter no more. Thank you, Bessie,” Lance said. Bessie smiled in the darkness as Lance contemplated what to do next.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



The worst of the storm was over. Clara decided to make a stew for her brother's return. She asked Lizzy if she would mind making a hot dessert. Lizzy gladly obliged. She was content to be useful, unaccustomed as she was to spend an entire day on relaxation.

Lizzy considered how wonderful it was to have their own lemon tree. She squeezed the cut-up lemon into the batter, whisked it briefly, and then set the mixture in the basin that Clara had provided. They even had fresh cream to go with it, which had been a rarity in New York. Clara took the dessert basin from Lizzy.

"I am looking forward to this," she remarked. Clara placed a lid on the basin and then placed it on the hearth. She had been surprised at Lizzy's industry in the kitchen.

Clara reflected that despite her slight stature, Lizzy's movements were purposeful and organized. Exactly the qualities that would complement her brother's life on the ranch. As the evening had proven, an unexpected turn of events required the ability to adapt.

Strong determination was needed to succeed as a rancher. Clara remembered how her mother had stood by her father, helping him when she could and placing no demands on him when she knew he was exhausted. They had enjoyed a strong marriage built on a foundation of love and respect.

The women heard the sound of a horse whinny when Lance returned home. He still had to put the horse in the barn. He would be a good fifteen minutes longer by Clara's calculation before he joined them for dinner.

Clara glanced at Lizzy as she chopped the fruit. Lizzy had promised a fruit crumble for tomorrow's dinner, steamed with oatmeal biscuits. It was a delicious, nutritious dessert for a cool evening.

"I shall finish up, Lizzy," Clara said, to Lizzy's surprise. Lizzy had been so engrossed in her task that she had quite forgotten Clara. "You go greet Lance and take his coat when he comes in the house," Clara suggested.

"He must be soaked!" Lizzy replied as she took off her apron.

"Offer him a glass of port while you are at it," Clara agreed. Lizzy couldn't deny feeling happy at the prospect of greeting Lance especially after he had been in Bessie's company.

Clara suppressed a smile as she noticed Lizzy glance at her reflection in the small mirror in the crockery cupboard. "Perhaps change into another dress for dinner?" Clara called. Lizzy's dress, while pretty was not appropriate in this inclement weather.

Lizzy returned, relieved but shy at sharing her dilemma. "Clara, may I wash my dresses tomorrow if the sun's out? I don't have another dress to change into."

Clara was astonished. She had enough dresses for several outfit changes.

"Just leave your dresses in the scullery," Clara said kindly. "Bessie can wash them in the morning, weather permitting." The women laughed as the rain came down in a torrential downpour.

"If you are chilly, please wear my jacket," Clara offered, slipping out of it and handing it to Lizzy without waiting for an answer.

"Thank you," Lizzy said thankfully. She had been feeling the cold but was too shy to admit it.

Lizzy was surprised that the jacket fit her perfectly. While Clara was the same height, she had a fuller figure. "Please keep it," Clara said. "I have

hardly worn it and it suits you better.”

They heard the sound of the front door being opened. Lizzy walked briskly towards Lance. Her face showed her delight at his return. “Welcome back, Lance. May I take your coat?”

“I can do it myself,” he said curtly. His eyes were cold as she looked at him, confused at the contrast in his behavior from earlier. Was she mistaken?

“Clara said you may like a glass of port?” Lizzy suggested.

He grimaced. “Don’t put yourself out for me,” he retorted.

Annoyed at his rudeness, Lizzy replied, “I shan’t offer to help you again.”

Lance was torn between admiration and fury. “Suit yourself,” he commented bluntly. “Is dinner ready?”

Even to his own ears, his reply sounded objectionable. The rancher hesitated as he saw hurt reflected in Lizzy’s eyes. “Why don’t you ask your sister?” Lizzy said, her voice cool, as she regained her composure.

Lance strode away, furious at himself for the situation he found himself in. He should have researched her history. He had been foolish to trust Mary Mickleweight’s word. The rancher had assumed Lizzy’s character was beyond reproach.

Clara was startled to see her brother in such a temper. She was also annoyed that he had been so discourteous towards their guest. How must Lizzy feel?

“I heard that exchange, Lance. You owe Lizzy an apology. She helped me prepare dinner and she has been delightful company.”

Lance ignored the prickle of conscience that told him his sister was correct. He would not be bamboozled by a woman who was clearly just after his money. He remained tight-lipped.

“Lance, I may be your younger sister, but I will not see you treat a woman with such disrespect.”

Lance had the grace to look shamefaced. “Please forgive my behavior, Clara. Bessie told me that Lizzy has had a child out of wedlock. I am

understandably deplored by this information,” he added. Clara’s intuition told her that Lizzy had not borne a child. Lizzy gave no indication of being manipulative nor did she project the tiredness associated with being a mother.

“I doubt that is true, Lance,” Clara said as she took stock of the situation. “We shall eat dinner together. Then I suggest you ask Lizzy directly in the morning.”

“I have to be on the range at sunrise,” Lance said grimly. “The sooner this situation is sorted, the better. Perhaps you could get to the root of the matter.”

His sister looked at him sharply. “We were raised to be charitable people. You should not be forming such strong judgments based on hearsay from another person.”

“We shall see,” Lance said. “Let’s eat dinner.”

Clara took off her apron. “The stew should be well tender by now,” she remarked. “Just like the emotions around here.”

Lance made no conversation aside from thanking them for the meal. Lizzy was bewildered. She recalled how they had enjoyed each other’s conversation earlier that day.

Now he couldn’t bear to be in her company. It was most peculiar. Lizzy could only think that he had a change of heart over their marriage. But why?

As she prepared for bed, Lizzy hoped Lance would be more agreeable in the morning. Perhaps she was making too much of his abruptness, but she hadn’t imagined it. Lizzy slept fitfully.

CHAPTER 14



Lance wasn't at breakfast. "Lance rode out early this morning," Clara told Lizzy in answer to her unasked question hanging in the air between them. Lizzy nodded as if summoning the courage to speak frankly.

Clara noticed Lizzy's pensive gaze towards the pasture. "Lizzy, is there something you would like to tell me?" Clara asked.

"Yes, thank you," Lizzy said. She prayed Clara could provide a plausible explanation.

"I don't understand why your brother is being so stand-offish. After all, he bought me," Lizzy said. Her words came out in a rush as her pent-up emotions were released.

"He did what?" Clara asked. She frowned. It was her turn to be confused.

"He paid Mary for me," Lizzy explained. "I am a mail order bride."

"Yes, but that was per arrangement with you and your half-sister," Clara said. "Arranging a mail order bride is perfectly above board." While polite, she looked defiant as she sprung to her brother's defense.

Lizzy shook her head vehemently. "I knew nothing of the arrangement. I wasn't looking for a husband. Mary only informed me on the day before my departure from New York."

Clara's hand flew to her mouth in dismay. "Oh, Lizzy, I am so sorry. I can assure you that Lance thought you were in full agreement with being a

mail-order bride.

“Mary told Lance you were a shy woman,” Clara continued. “She was assisting in finding a husband worthy of you. Mary told Lance that you didn’t have much opportunity to mingle with prospective suitors.”

Ain’t that the truth, Lizzy thought glumly.

“At first Lance had reservations about not corresponding with you directly,” Clara continued. “After the Mickleweight’s visit, he learned more about your character and was given your photograph. Lance made peace with the arrangement.”

“Could you speak to Lance? Tell him I had no choice in the matter?” Lizzy asked. She felt her anxiety returning as she wondered at the rancher’s treatment.

“Of course,” Clara said. “Lance would never marry under false pretenses. And certainly never against your wishes.”

When Lance returned, he found his home strangely silent. Bessie was nowhere to be seen. Neither were Clara or Lizzy.

Lance regretted his rudeness. The fresh air and hours of rounding up cattle had cleared his head. He wanted to apologize to Lizzy, but his pride prevented him.

Besides, if Lizzy had unscrupulous plans for getting her hands on a share of his estate, it was she who owed him an apology. His parents had made it their life’s work to establish a profitable ranch. Their early years of ranching had been an uphill battle, yet they had persevered.

Lance couldn’t risk letting their legacy be taken over by a calculating woman. A picture of Lizzy sprung into his head. Calculating was too strong a description, he conceded.

But, if what Bessie had told him about Lizzy was true, he would not be marrying her. The sooner he got to the heart of the matter, the better for everybody. Bessie appeared carrying a bundle of dry washing in the laundry basket.

Relieved to see her, Lance enquired as to his sister and Lizzy's whereabouts. "Robert took them to Rosewood Town to stock up on our annual provisions." Bessie blushed as Lance raised his eyebrows. "*Your* provisions," she added.

"They have been out the whole morning?" Lance enquired. It was unlike Clara to take so long buying necessities.

"Yes sir," Bessie said.

"They should be back soon. Clara mentioned wanting to talk to you before you returned to the range," Bessie explained.

"Thanks, I had better wait until their return," Lance said. "That will be all, Bessie, thank you." It irked Bessie to hear her employer address her so dismissively. She was friends with his sister, for goodness sake.

Yes, he was her employer, but they were close in age. He was unwed and eligible. Bessie gave no hint of her disappointment as she returned to her chores. If she was to win Lance over, he would need to think he had chosen her, not the other way around. Bessie was running out of ideas to sabotage his marriage to Lizzy. Time was marching on. She had to come up with a plan soon.

When Clara and Lizzy eventually returned, Lance scarcely had time to indulge in conversation. But Clara told him enough to relieve his fears about Lizzy being a potential gold digger. He thanked his sister for clarifying the matter.

Clara was not accustomed to her brother holding his cards so close to his chest. Given the circumstances, perhaps he just needed to absorb what she had told him and decide what to do next.

Before he returned to herding steer, Lance called Lizzy aside for a private conversation on the porch. "Lizzy, please accept my apologies for being so curt yesterday," Lance said. "Apology accepted, thank you," Lizzy accepted.

"Clara told me that you were unaware of the mail order bride arrangement. I think it best then that you return to New York immediately.

We shall pay for your return ticket and make all the necessary arrangements,” Lance said.

Lizzy found the rancher’s businesslike manner as hurtful as his offhanded manner the previous day. She didn’t trust herself to speak for fear of crying.

“Lizzy?” Lance added.

“I cannot return to New York,” Lizzy replied. “The Mickleweights will not have me. Mary may it quite clear that we were parting ways after the...arrangement.”

Lizzy’s eyes met Lance’s. His eyes were troubled as he contemplated the next course of action. If he was honest, he was largely to blame for this dilemma.

He should have insisted on writing to Lizzy directly. Lance took a deep breath. “Clara suggested that you stay with us a while longer. We can decide what to do after a week or two. The pressure will be off with the round-up then.”

Is that all I am? Lizzy mused. Am I just to be fitted into his routine when he can find the time? Why did he want a wife in the first place? She had done nothing wrong!

Lizzy forced herself to hold her emotions at bay. “Thanks for obliging my request to remain,” Lizzy said. Lance put on his hat and tilted it politely; he really had to get going.

“We shall have to see about that,” Lance said curtly. “Good afternoon.” As he rode off, Lizzy reminded herself that Lance had shown mercy in seeing how they could reach a solution.

Lizzy wondered if she should have told Lance she would like to marry him if he still wanted her. On second thought, that sounded rather pitiful. Lizzy was glad she hadn’t conveyed that message.

As he rode away, Lance realized he was conflicted. On the one hand, he wanted Lizzy to stay. On the other hand, he wanted her to leave as soon as possible.

That way he could forget about her and get on with his life as it was before. When his biggest challenges involved the seasons, livestock, and getting the best prices at auctions. Perhaps it would be better for all concerned if they parted ways.

Before you even gave her a chance, Cromwell? a voice popped in his head. Now he was imagining things. He could have sworn that voice belonged to his father.

Cromwell senior had been a stern but loving father. That voice of reason, or whatever it was, was worth heeding. The rancher heard cowboys holler in the distance.

Lance decided to concentrate on rounding up herds of cattle. That was just the medicine he needed to restore his equilibrium on this warm August day. Tiring as it was.

Clara and Lizzy hadn't spent the whole morning stocking up on provisions. Clara had managed to persuade Robert to take them to a neighboring ranch. They had met Betty, a local seamstress who was renowned for making fine dresses.

Clara provided Betty with enough lace to make a suitable bodice for a dress for Lizzy to wear to her wedding. Betty had taken Lizzy's measurements after first treating them to tea and biscuits. They would meet again in a week to let her know if the wedding was going ahead and if so, place the order for the dress.

The outing had cheered Lizzy up considerably. Neither Lizzy nor Clara felt any disloyalty towards Lance. They were making sure everything went smoothly if Lance decided to go ahead with his marriage to Lizzy.

"Some things are better left to women," Clara observed. "Wedding arrangements are one of them." The women smiled in agreement.

When Lance returned well after sunset, he was relieved to be able to get out of the saddle at last. Getting married was the furthest thing from his mind. The last section of the cattle trail had been treacherous.

The usually slow-moving river on the last stretch of land was flowing fast. The gushing water had broken the surrounding banks, making deep furrows where the solid ground had been days before. The point at which the cowboys usually crossed the river was impassable.

There was no other way to get home, other than across. Fortunately, a cowboy who went by the name of Jeff who exhibited exceptional horsemanship and more than average mechanical ability created a pulley system for the horsemen.

Jeff explained his idea to the doubtful crew. "If a sudden current of water sweeps any of us off our horse, we can hold on to the pulley for dear life. Fortunately for riders and horses, Jeff's mechanism wasn't put to the test in that sense.

After the first horse crossed, it was easier to persuade the other horses to follow suit. They still needed coaxing and sweet-talking before they obliged though. The water reached the horses' flanks, which meant that the riders' legs got wet.

Not the greatest ride, Lance grunted as he felt his trousers cling to him like wet tentacles. Lance instructed the cowboys to give their horses a short rest after they reached the other side, to calm them down.

The cowboys appreciated the opportunity to dry off. Lance called an early lunch just before noon to recover from the challenging river crossing. With the work done, Lance allowed everyone ten minutes to rest in a dry clearing on higher ground beyond the river.

Lance ate with the cowboys. Beans and cornbread mostly, eaten straight out of the saddlebags, to save time dismounting. Thankfully, everyone had managed to keep their food dry by using the pulley system.

Jeff was declared the all-around hero of the day. Food is a cowboy's fuel. Someone even gave him an extra corncake, which is high praise from a cowboy.

The last of the steers had been herded into an enclosure on the upper

boundary of Lance's ranch so there was no risk of losing ground to the cattle. Now, as Lance led his mount to the barn, the reality of recent days returned to bother him. He could see Clara and Lizzy sitting together on a blanket under the oak tree, catching welcome sunshine after the showers.

If the situation were different he may have joined them. Instead, he walked in the opposite direction, to join the ranch hands who were feeding the horses as they settled in their stalls in the barn.

"We did well today, men, thank you. Despite the weather and that darn river crossing, we finished early."

They grinned and then replied as one with a cheery, "Thanks, boss."

Back at the ranch later, Bessie managed to catch a moment with Clara. She had finished preparing carrots and green beans for her employers' dinner. "Is the wedding still set for September?" Bessie asked.

Clara looked at her friend sharply. "Why would you think otherwise?" she replied.

Bessie hesitated. "I just thought Lance seemed out of sorts lately. I didn't mean to pry."

Clara relaxed. She decided it was safe to confide in her friend. After all, she had never had reason to doubt Bessie. "Lance had some concerns that he needed to clear up," Clara said. "Thankfully they have been resolved. But yes, I agree; Lance does not seem himself these last few days. "Please treat this as confidential," Clara cautioned. "Lance should make a final decision concerning the wedding in a week or so. I am trusting that it goes ahead as planned."

"Lance is just nervous. Marriage is a big step," Bessie commented.

"You are probably right," Clara laughed.

Clara prayed that Lance and Lizzy would set a wedding date well before the week was out. She kept this to herself. Bessie was taking an undue interest in her employer's marriage.

Lance wouldn't approve of his sister speaking too freely of his private life

to an employee. Lizzy also needed to be accorded this respect. Bessie was rather forward in this matter, Clara mused.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



Lance joined Clara and Lizzy for breakfast the next morning. Clara noticed Lance paid scant attention to Lizzy. She was getting tired of her brother's reticence to speak to his future wife. Clara had a good mind to tell him that, even if it wasn't her place to do so.

However, there was no need to test her brother's limits of patience towards her. Lizzy surprised Clara with her forthrightness. "Lance, now that the round-up is complete, I wondered if I may put a request to you?" Lizzy asked.

"Sure, go ahead," Lance replied. He put down his coffee mug as he contemplated what Lizzy's request was likely to be. Perhaps she was going to ask for a return ticket to New York. He could hardly blame her.

"Thank you," she said politely. "I was delighted the other day when you suggested teaching me how to ride a horse. Does your offer still stand?"

That was the last thing he had expected to be asked by the oh-so-pretty woman sitting opposite him. "Of course. When would you like your first lesson?"

Lizzy glanced out the window. The blue sky beckoned and there was scarcely a breeze. "How about today, if that suits you?" she suggested.

"Meet you at the barn in an hour," Lance said. His decision surprised his sister. Clara knew how loathe he was usually to take a morning off from

ranching.

“Clara, could you loan Lizzy a riding habit?” Lance asked. Lizzy clapped her hands in excitement as Clara nodded with a smile. Lance finished his breakfast in silence as he considered who to delegate mucking out the stables to, since his plans had altered.

The horse-riding lesson surprised Lance. You are too quick to judge people, he scolded himself. Not only was Lizzy a quick and able student, but she also respected his expertise as a horseman.

Contrary to some people he had taught, Lizzy showed no hesitation in following his instructions. The horse had picked up that the novice rider was relaxed, which made Lizzy’s lesson easier.

Riding a horse side-saddle made it much more difficult to control a horse or to ride at a trot. Lizzy managed both, during her very first lesson. Remarkable, Lance reflected.

While Lance had chosen the gentlest mare for Lizzy to ride, horses could be tricky creatures at the best of times. Yet Lizzy had been so calm that she had the mare at her beck and call. Lance had been astonished.

He privately thought that Lizzy had the makings of a good rider. Good enough to ride out with the cowboys. He promised her another lesson on Saturday, he had been that impressed with her progress.

When the lesson ended, Lance told Lizzy they could enjoy a picnic later. He would fetch her from the house around tea time. Lizzy could scarcely believe the turnaround in Lance’s behavior towards her.

Lizzy almost skipped into the house afterward. She had enjoyed the lesson far more than she had anticipated. It had been such fun learning how to hold the reins and then conveying instructions to the horse. Also learning what not to do.

Clara didn’t need to ask how the lesson had been. Lizzy’s face told a story. Bessie eavesdropped in stony silence as Lizzy shared how Daisy had let her trot around the corral without Lance’s guiding hand.

Lizzy decided to make a peach cobbler for tea. First, she needed to change out of her riding habit. The cinched-in waist was stifflingly tight.

She had been so engrossed in her lesson that she had forgotten that she could scarcely breathe. The outfit was most impractical. Lance had told her about a woman by the name of Annie Oakley who was quite famous in the West.

Annie rode side-saddle, yet she managed to do stunts and competed at rodeo level. Some of her stunts included circling the entire saddle and shooting. She was always spot on target. It was quite astonishing.

Later, as the sun slowly sunk towards the horizon, Lizzy considered that it had been one of her happiest days ever. Lance had taken her in the cart to the pond about two miles beyond the house. Lizzy thought she saw a glimpse of Bessie at a cottage but perhaps she was mistaken.

Bessie hid in the stables after completing her duties. She vowed to stop Lance and Lizzy's wedding and any chance of their happiness. She would set her plan in motion after nightfall.

CHAPTER 16



Lance heard the evidence of fire before he saw the flames. Loud crackling sounds as timber collapsed and flames leaped on their fiery path, destroying everything in their path. He filled his lungs with air and then yelled, “Clara! Lizzy!”

Clara had the foresight to douse her head with using from her nightstand pitcher and did the same for her brother. Lance grabbed her arm and escorted her out of the house in a dash for safety. Several times he pushed her aside to avoid a falling beam or a flame from harming them.

Worried for her brother, Clara offered to go back inside to help him rescue Lizzy. There was no sign of her. A few ranch hands had gathered in a shocked group in front of the house, some holding young children. Lance returned with Robert who appeared dazed, but unhurt.

Clara noticed Lance’s arm bleeding. “Lance,” she shouted. ‘Be safe in there!’ He was gone so long that she feared he had perished. Finally, he emerged with Lizzy in his arms. She was unconscious but breathing.

The fire was on the brink of engulfing Lizzy’s room, but she was spared. “Thanks be to God,” Clara declared.

Lance cradled Lizzy in his arms. “Lizzy,” he pleaded. “Please stay with us...With me. Please marry me.”

Lizzy opened her eyes. There was recognition in her eyes, but she was too

weak to respond. "I love you," Lance said fiercely as he held her close in his arms.

Lizzy had never felt so odd in all her life. Dizzy and scared, then awake and overjoyed. When she heard Lance say he loved her, she knew everything would be all right.

With everybody safely out of the house, a neighbor took Lance, Lizzy, and Clara to the local inn in his cart. The innkeeper shook his head as he heard about the disheveled family's plight.

"What a loss. Such a beautiful homestead."

Lance was too tired to respond. Clara took charge. "Please could we have two rooms for the night? I will share with Lizzy. Lance will have his own room." The innkeeper obliged and provided a substantial discount.

When Lance woke up the next day, he splashed his face with cold water. Other than a gash on his arm, he counted himself lucky to be alive. But, now that he had decided to marry Lizzy, how was he going to provide for her and his sister?

Take it one step at a time. There was that stern, loving voice again. He laughed. How Lance could laugh considering the circumstances was beyond his comprehension, but he laughed all the same.

The minister waived his usual marriage fee for Lance and Lizzy. Lizzy wore an ivory lace dress, the skirt the remnant of the dress that Lance's mother had worn on her wedding day. She carried an orange posy and wore a garland of flowers in her hair.

Lance thought Lizzy the most beautiful creature he had ever seen and she was his wife. They promised to honor and cherish each other all their days together. As the wedding ceremony ended and they were showered with rose petals, a man stepped forward.

He looked pleasant and was dressed in a suit and tie. "Forgive my surprise introduction. May I have a word with you both privately prior to the festivities?"

“You sure can,” Lance said after planting a kiss on his wife’s upturned mouth. “My name is Andrew Harris. I am a lawyer from New York. I was appointed by Lizzy’s parents to ensure that she got her share of the inheritance when she turned twenty-one.”

Lance and Lizzy exchanged glances, startled by his disclosure. “When I visited Mary Mickelweight and discovered that Lizzy’s cash inheritance was depleted, Mary confessed that she had sold you, Lizzy, for a substantial sum of money.”

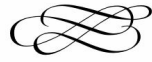
Lizzy gasped at this information.

“We reached an agreement that no more would be said on condition that she hand over the remaining money,” Andrew explained. He handed Lizzy a velvet bag. Lance smiled at his wife’s good fortune, while Lizzy squeezed his hand.

“I have more good news, Mr. and Mrs. Cromwell,” the lawyer added. Lance and Lizzy stared at him, stunned. “Unbeknown to you, Lizzy, your parents set up an investment fund when you were a year old. Twenty years later it has grown into a substantial sum; almost two thousand dollars.”

“That is enough to rebuild your ranch,” Lizzy whispered, overcome by their good fortune. “Our ranch, Lizzy,” Lance corrected her.

EPILOGUE



Some things cannot be predicted. As the Bible illustrates, life is not without its challenges. But all things can work together for the glory of God, Lizzy reflected.

Lizzy and Lance stood hand in hand, with Clara alongside them, as they admired the new ranch house. It had taken nine months to build their new home. They were so thankful.

“This is to be our home forever, Lizzy,” Lance said, his heart filled with indescribable joy.

Lizzy looked at Clara and she nodded her head as if confirming that now was the right time.

“Lance, I have something to say,” Lizzy began, there was tension in her voice. But Clara smiled at her which made her relax a little.

“What is it Lizzy?” Lance asked.

She shifted from foot to foot, “I am with child.”

Delighted, Lance lifted his wife in the air and then he kissed her. “You could not make me happier if you tried.”

THE WIDOW'S FATE



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



Tammy only had to hear the front door slam to know that her father was in one of his moods. That was how she and her mother referred to it when drink drowned out all the happiness from his life. She flinched even as the door creaked as if sighing with relief that it had survived the assault.

She didn't dare look over her shoulder, knowing that when her father reeked of rum and his feet dragged on the wooden floor, a simple glance was likely to set him off. It wasn't that Tony Anderson was a bad person, it was just a matter of getting mixed up with the wrong crowd.

Ever since Tammy could remember, her father had worked in one of the sugar factories close to the harbor. But as of late, the factory at which her father worked no longer just worked the sugar that was imported from the sugar islands in the Caribbean. New direction meant the opening of a distillery to distill the byproduct of sugar, molasses, into rum.

Her parents had sat her down a few years ago to explain that this would mean great things for their family. With the factory turning to distilling, it would mean more wages and a better life for them. But what her parents hadn't mentioned was that rum was a seductress that didn't easily let her victims go.

Tammy had stopped counting the number of times she had prayed that

her father would quit and find another job. Because with the increase in wages and the distillery opening at the factory, her father's weakness for alcohol had been revealed.

Some might admire the aroma of rum, but Tammy detested it.

For her, it was the aroma her father carried like cologne when he returned from work. It was the source of his constant anger and the hollowness in his eyes. Rum was the reason he hardly ate anymore and it was also the reason that they hardly felt the increase in wages. The owner of the distillery had been clever enough to give the men a choice, extra earnings in cash or rum.

It wasn't hard to guess which option her father had chosen.

"Where's my dinner?" her father demanded, shuffling in a stumble to the dinner table.

Tammy's heart was racing in her chest as she drew a calming breath. "It's almost ready, Pa. I'm just waiting on the potatoes."

"You call 'yerself a woman? You can't even have dinner on the table when it's time for supper," her father slurred, slamming his fist on the table.

"Tony, you've had a long day. Why don't you lie down for a little while and I'll help Tammy to get your dinner on the table?" Tammy's mother offered quietly as she moved to her father's side.

This was another occurrence that had become more and more frequent over the last few years. Her mother trying to shield her from her father's wrath.

"I don't need a lie down; I need proper women who know how to care for a man!" Tony cursed under his breath. "I spend all day at the distillery and you two sit here doin' nothing. Then I come home and you want to treat me like a child. Enough!"

It happened so fast; Tammy didn't even see his hand strike out. She just saw her mother flinch before she rushed to their bedroom. Tammy didn't hesitate, she rushed after her mother to see if she was alright, hating her father for what he had become.

She found her mother in tears on the bed. “Ma?”

“Tammy, it’s nothing. He’s just tired, he’s not thinking. He’s in one of his moods again,” her mother began making the usual excuses.

Three or four years ago those excuses might have worked, but Tammy was older now. She also wasn’t blind. She let out a heavy sigh. “Ma, he’s not in a mood and he didn’t have a bad day. He’s drunk. You and I both know where those extra wages are going, and we both know why he’s always late. He’s not gonna change, Ma. It’s time we... I think we should leave,” Tammy said confidently although her knees were quivering at the thought of running away.

Her mother’s eyes shot up and met Tammy’s. “How dare you suggest such a thing. He’s your pa. He’s the one that puts the food in your belly and the clothes on your back. A woman doesn’t criticize Tamara! It’s time you learned that. A woman supports her husband and father. That’s the way it is.”

Tammy took a step back, shocked that her mother could defend his actions with such ferocity. “But, Ma, he hurts us. That isn’t the way it should be...”

“How do you know how it should be? It’s the way it is. You hear me, now go finish dinner before you anger him even more,” her mother said sternly.

Tammy headed back to the kitchen only to find her father asleep on his arms at the table. His snores filled the kitchen and although it was disturbing, at least he wasn’t looking for trouble. As she finished dinner, she found herself praying once more for God’s help. Like so many times before, Tammy prayed for guidance, for deliverance from the man she called her pa, and for a future without conflict, abuse, or hard words.

Her mother finally joined her in the kitchen and helped Tammy to plate the dinner. It was a meager dinner of potatoes, ham left over from the night before, and pumpkin that Tammy had managed to buy with the money she had earned from sewing the neighbor’s dock uniform.

At exactly seven o'clock, Tammy glanced out the window when said neighbor arrived home. Some nights, not every night, but sometimes the other man would come with. She couldn't remember his name but he had smiled and greeted her a few times in the past.

He was as tall as a tree with arms as broad as branches. His eyes were ice-blue and his smile seemed kind. Tammy didn't know him very well but whenever she spotted him through the window her heart skipped a beat. Once, a few months ago, he had asked her to go for a walk with him but Tammy had quickly declined because at that moment her father had arrived home. The last thing Tammy wanted was for the handsome man to meet her father.

Although she was eighteen years old, she had yet to begin courting. There had been a few men who had paid interest to her in the past, but Tammy always turned them away. Not because she didn't want a husband and a family, but simply because she knew once they met her father they would run for the hills.

Right then, he turned and looked right at her. Her cheeks flushed with pleasure before she quickly looked away. He looked even more handsome tonight than he had the last time.

"Tony, dinner is ready," her mother said, touching her father's shoulder.

Tammy set the plates on the table and took her seat. She glanced cautiously at her father to see if his short nap had eased his bad mood. His eyes were drawn as he began poking around the plate with his fork.

"What is this?"

Tammy swallowed past the fear before she spoke. When her father asked that, it was only a moment before he would lose his patience. "It's potatoes, pumpkin, and yesterday's ham."

Her father tossed his plate against the wall, sending the food flying before he stood up and stalked toward Tammy. "How many times did I tell you that I don't eat pumpkin? You cooked it just to spite me, didn't you?"

Tammy tried to shove her chair back but it fell and Tammy fell back onto it, her breath knocked out. Just as she tried to catch her breath, she saw her father towering over her, anger and hate in his eyes. “You’ll pay for thinking you can mock me.”

“I wasn’t mocking you...” Tammy began to plead when suddenly the door opened and the handsome man she had just spotted through the window stepped inside.

“What’s going on in here?” his voice boomed through their small apartment.

Tammy didn’t even know her eyes had widened as her father turned to the man with his fists raised. “None of your business, that’s what.”

The man glanced at Tammy before checking her mother to spot the bruise on her cheek. “I’m sorry, sir, but I beg to differ. There’s a girl lying winded on the floor and a woman standing in your kitchen with a bruised cheek. I’d say it’s my business since I can’t just walk away knowing you’ll continue to do what you were just about to do.”

“You’re lookin’ for trouble, boy. Git!” Tony’s voice boomed once more.

The man stayed in place with a brief shake of his head. “Ma’am, Miss? Would you like to come with me?”

Tammy felt a flicker of hope spark in her heart for the first time in years when her mother’s voice broke through quietly. “We’re fine right here, thank you. I think it’s best if you leave now.”

He shook his head before he turned to Tammy who was still lying on the floor. For a moment their eyes met and Tammy couldn’t help but feel as if this was God’s way of answering her prayers when he walked towards her. He offered her his hand and helped her to her feet before searching her gaze.

“If she won’t leave, doesn’t mean you don’t have to. I’ll make sure no harm comes to you and you never hafta’ come back here again.” He glanced at Tony before meeting her gaze again. “You never hafta’ see him again. All you have to do is say yes.”

Tammy hesitated for a moment, wondering if she would be surrendering herself to a worse fate. But something in the man's eyes spoke of kindness and goodness. She felt certain that she could trust him and although that wasn't much to go on, it was a better option than staying.

"Yes. Ma?" Her mother gasped even as her father began to curse. With the tall stranger by her side, Tammy ignored him and spoke to her mother again. "Ma, please. You have to come with me. You can't go on like this."

"Tammy, you don't even know this man. Don't be ridiculous. Besides, your father just had a long day," her mother defended him again.

Tammy glanced at her father and sighed. "He's had a long day every day for the last four years. I can't stay, Ma, I can't."

Her mother began to cry and her father began to shout, but all Tammy could hear was the stranger's voice as he spoke quietly. "I promise you'll be safe. It's not right what he's doing and if she wants to stay that's her choice, but it's time you made your own."

Tammy nodded. She couldn't recall exactly what happened next, but she knew the stranger had his hand around her shoulder and was leading her out the door. She had nothing but her memories and the clothes on her back and knew that she would never see her parents again.

But with his arm around her shoulders, Tammy had never felt more protected or cared for.

It just felt right.

CHAPTER 1



The sun shone through the clouds, its beams falling on the casket. For a moment it brought a smile to Tammy's face. Wayne would've liked to know that the sun was shining and that he would be sent off on a sunny morning, she thought as the clouds parted even more.

Although it was a beautiful morning in Boston, Tammy's heart ached knowing she was all alone in the world. For the last seven years, Wayne White had been everything to her. She wiped away a tear as she thought about the day he had saved her from her father. That day would forever remain in her memories, although the memories that followed them were only sweet.

Wayne had swiftly introduced himself after they had left the tenement apartments before he explained that he would take her home to live with him and his mother. In Wayne's mother, Tammy had found a friend and a mother figure. Within days she had felt welcomed and safe.

Tammy still couldn't remember if she had fallen in love with Wayne through the windows of their tenement apartment, or on the night he appeared to rescue her, or because of the kind and generous way with which he welcomed her into his life. But needless to say, six months later they married and were more in love than ever before.

They had lived an enchanted life, although they weren't wealthy by any

means. His wages as a dock worker were more than enough to give them everything they needed. He was a hard worker and was promoted only a year into their marriage to shift manager, a well-earned position.

Wayne's mother had taken her under her wing and helped Tammy to hone her needlework skills sufficiently for Tammy to be competent enough to find a position in a factory as a seamstress. The wages were meager compared to Wayne's, but Tammy enjoyed the company and the challenges brought by the new garments to be sewn.

The breeze changed, making her wavy hair dance on her back. Tammy tucked her hair behind her ear and noticed that most of the funeral goers had left. She was standing all alone beside her husband's grave. She brushed away another tear before she allowed herself to think back on the wonderful seven years she had shared with Wayne before his death.

They had been married for almost three years when she learned she was with child. Tammy would never forget the happiness on her husband's face when she told him. Wayne had ecstatically expressed his hopes to have a little girl. And on the day of Lily's birth, it had been love at first sight. He had been the most wonderful father, although his fatherhood had been short-lived.

The physicians couldn't tell them exactly why or what had happened, but only seven days after her birth, Lily had taken ill with a fever. Regardless of their efforts to break the horrendous fever, they had lost Lily when she was only days old. For some couples, the death of a child might mean the end of a marriage, but for Wayne and Tammy, it had only brought them closer.

Losing Lily had made them appreciate life and each other even more.

Lily's passing affected Tammy in ways she never could have imagined. She had nightmares, even to this day, about her daughter. Every time, she would lose Lily all over again. When the nightmares came, only Wayne knew how to soothe her.

Now Wayne was gone.

Before his mother's passing, she had managed to console Lily as well. Tammy's heart ached at the thought of her mother-in-law. Although she had been of advanced years, Tammy hadn't thought she would succumb so quickly to Scarlet Fever. It had taken her in its clutches and God had called her home only a few days later.

That had been barely six months ago.

Tammy was now all alone. She had lost Wayne and his mother and although she still thought about her own parents now and then, she knew she was no longer welcome in their home. Just a year after her wedding she had gone to see her mother, to encourage her to leave the apartment and to move in with her and Wayne. Her mother had made it clear that she no longer had a daughter and that she never wanted to see Tammy again.

Tammy vowed that day never to bother her mother again.

She glanced at the casket and felt a heaviness settle on her shoulder. It had been an accident, the men from the shipping company had said, but Tammy still couldn't help but wonder if enough precautions had been taken to prevent it.

Wayne had been a shift manager; he wasn't supposed to be loading and offloading crates. And yet when the cable snapped, he had been right there in harm's way. The shipping company had given her an envelope of money to compensate for her loss, but how could they ever allocate an amount in lieu of her husband's life?

She hadn't used it; she hadn't even opened it, to be honest. Because what would she spend it on? She didn't have a family and her wages were enough to cover her meals.

But there was the rent, she reminded herself. The heating bill when winter came, she thought with a sigh. She couldn't keep living in their home on her wages and even if she used the money in the envelope, what would she do when it was finished?

"Tammy, come. I know it's hard, but we're going to be late," a female

voice said as a hand gently rested on her shoulder.

Tammy drew in a deep breath and glanced at her husband's grave one last time. She turned and smiled sadly at her friend and co-worker. It might be her husband's funeral, but she couldn't afford to lose more wages. She walked away from the cemetery with a heavy heart, realizing she had nothing left in the world.

She tried to console herself that she had been rescued and loved by a wonderful man, but even that felt hollow knowing that he was gone. The beautiful life she had dreamed of for them had evaporated the moment the men from the shipping company had knocked on her door. She was now left without even Lily to remind her of the man she had loved so very much.

In their place, she had three graves in a cemetery and an empty home.

Tears slipped over her cheek as she walked back to the factory. She had her shift, she promised herself when she arrived.

For now, all she could do was take life one shift at a time and pray that God had plans for her life. Plans that didn't include spending the rest of her life alone and living on the memories of the past.

CHAPTER 2



Tammy closed the door behind her and for a moment thought of her last night at her parents' house. She had been thinking of them frequently since Wayne had passed away. Not because she missed them or wished to reconnect, but because she realized just how grateful she was that Wayne had rescued her when he did.

They might not have been blessed with the life they had dreamed of, and they might have suffered the horrible loss of a child, but at least they had seven years of true love. The kind that Tammy already doubted she would ever find again.

A cold chill traveled up her spine as she set her things down. It was unreasonably cold inside the small house that now belonged to her. To rephrase, she thought, the house to which the mortgage now belonged to her. She hadn't even known about the mortgage until Wayne had passed away. For some reason, she had thought it to be a rental.

With all the costs mounting since the funeral and her insistence on saving the money the shipping company had given her, Tammy was hardly making ends meet. She had gone without the heating, knowing that it was useless to keep the house heated while she was at work anyway. She used that money instead to contribute to the mortgage payments. The funeral undertaker wasn't yet paid in full and then there were all the other unexpected expenses

following the funeral.

Although Tammy was still working at the factory, her wages weren't enough to cover all her expenses. She had taken to only buying meat twice a week and could feel the resulting deficiency in the way her dresses draped loosely over her body. For extra money, she had sent out word that she was available to take in sewing in her free time. She was most fortunate that his had born fruit.

Every evening when she arrived home, just like tonight, she couldn't rest her body after a long shift at the factory. She had a pile of sewing waiting for her. Once she had brewed herself a pot of tea, Tammy headed to the pile and began with the item at the top. It was a dock worker's overall, much like the one Wayne used to wear. Tears burned her eyes but she bit them back, knowing that she didn't have the time to mourn for Wayne, needing to put her time to making certain that she was in a position to feed herself.

She worked with focus and care for the next few hours. When she stabbed herself with the needle for the fifth time, Tammy knew it was time to go to bed. Her eyes were heavy and her body was tired. She set the sewing aside and went to the pile of newspapers that she had brought home from the factory to fuel a fire in her fireplace, hoping the embers would last until morning to ward off the spring chill.

Once she had placed a few logs in the fireplace, she began tearing pieces of newspaper and crumpling them into balls before tucking them between the logs. When she reached for the next paper her eyes furrowed, the text bleary through her tired eyes.

The Matrimonial Times - where willing husbands find good wives.

Tammy was on the verge of accepting that she might be hallucinating thanks to weariness when she continued on to read the first advertisement. She had never seen such a thing before and couldn't help but be curious as to who at the factory could possibly have read such a paper.

Before she realized it, her tiredness had disappeared and she was no

longer aware of the cold. She was enthralled with the advertisements placed by men, introducing themselves and their reasons for seeking a wife. It was unlike anything Tammy had ever read before. All the more curious was the fact that all the men who were advertising for wives lived in the West. Everywhere from Colorado to California, even Texas.

Tammy couldn't help but wonder about the type of woman who would answer an advertisement placed by a stranger clean across the country. They hailed from various backgrounds and different upbringings and, more importantly, they did not know each other at all. She tried to imagine whether she would be able to write to a complete stranger and laughed out loud knowing that it was a ridiculous thought.

As she turned to the last page, she caught sight of the image of a couple in the right-hand corner with a headline that had her begin to read the article.

LOVE FOUND ON THE RANGE

WHEN APRIL HARRINGTON lost her mother, she was left all alone and with insurmountable debt. For more than a year April scraped by with less than-average wages, cutting down on not only her heating and food but on any unnecessary costs.

April turned to the Matrimonial Times as a last resort, in a bid not to find love but a safe haven from the cruelty of poverty. She began corresponding with a horse rancher in California, Walter Abernathy, not believing that anything would come from their letters but false hope.

When Walter proposed April found herself eager to accept, not only because of the safety and comfort that Walter could offer her but because she had developed a deep-seated affection for the stranger and his words.

Now, one year later, Walter and April have celebrated their first

anniversary. When corresponding, the happily wed couple stated that neither of them expected to find love. Walter was simply seeking companionship on his large ranch and April a safe haven. What they found however was true love and the couple are proud to announce that they will be expecting their first-born child in the fall.

April and Walter's story is one of many that give others hope.

If you can't find love where you are, isn't it time you looked further?

Isn't it time you looked in the Matrimonial Times?

TAMMY CLOSED the paper and headed to bed. Lying in bed, though, April and Walter's story of love remained with her. She didn't expect to ever find love again, but could she become so desperate that she would seek a partner in life in the West? She fell asleep promising herself that she would find a way to make ends meet, but her dreams took another turn.

In her dreams, she was climbing onto a train platform in a dusty small town. She felt fear coil in her belly, wondering if she had done the right thing. But the moment she saw him walking towards her, everything fell into place. He had green eyes and dusty blond hair, his complexion tanned and leathery from the sun. All her doubts evaporated as Tammy realized she had finally found a second chance at love.

It was the most restful sleep Tammy had enjoyed since standing beside her husband's grave.

CHAPTER 3



As spring started to change into summer and new leaves burst forth with life on the trees, Tammy could recognize the changes in herself as well. As she walked home from the factory, she couldn't help but wonder how she would describe herself if she were a tree.

Her hope sank into her shoes when she realized that she felt like a tree without leaves, water, or sunlight. A tree that was digging its roots into the earth, trying to hang on for dear life but barely managing to survive.

Over the last few weeks, she had taken in more private sewing jobs in a desperate attempt to make ends meet. Nonetheless, when the end of March was upon her and she had to pay the mortgage, she barely had enough money over for food. The house was too expensive and Tammy was beginning to realize that just like she had to let go of Wayne, she was going to have to let go of the house sooner or later.

She had to pay the mortgage again in a week and it loomed over her like the dark cloud suffocating the tree inside her. Last night she had finally given in and reached for the envelope that the shipping company had given her after Wayne's death. Tammy hadn't been sure what to expect, but she hadn't expected only four weeks' worth of wages.

A sigh escaped her as she touched the money pouch in her pocket. She had enough to pay the mortgage the next week but then the race for the next

month's mortgage would kick off all over again. Tammy considered trying to pick up more shifts at the factory but when she had asked, her shift manager had made it clear that if she took shifts over weekends, she would be taking work away from other women. Tammy hadn't pushed further.

A soft drizzle began to fall although the sun still shone through the clouds. Tammy glanced ahead and saw the small grocer on the corner and rushed in that direction. As soon as she was through the door, she let out a sigh of relief. It wasn't that she didn't like the rain, but more a matter of being concerned about how she would dry her clothes without heating.

"Need anythin', miss?" a toothless man asked from behind the counter.

Tammy turned and saw him closing a newspaper, waiting for her reply.

The name of the newspaper caught her eye and a frown creased her brow. "Is that the latest edition?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just delivered today," the man said pointing to a shelf of several freshly printed copies of the Matrimonial Times.

Over the last six weeks, Tammy had been praying for God to send her a sign. She glanced out at the rain and thought of the envelope and the mortgage before she picked up a copy and walked to the store owner. "Just this, please."

The man's brows rose but Tammy didn't pay him any attention. She remembered April's story and it hit her that her situation wasn't much different. She was all alone in the world without any hope for the future and soon she would be penniless as well. Tammy handed the man the money and, filled with new hope, she rushed into the rain and set off at a brisk pace the rest of the way home.

Once she had dried off and set a pot of tea on the wood stove, Tammy glanced at the newspaper that lay on the table. She couldn't imagine saying vows to another man after having lost Wayne such a short time ago, but if God had sent her a sign then perhaps she just needed to take a look.

As she began to read through the advertisements, she realized that most of

the men advertising in the paper weren't necessarily looking for love. Some were looking for companionship, others searching for a mother for their children, and some simply needed someone to help them grow their homestead and build a life in the West.

Tammy promised herself that just because she was considering becoming a mail-order bride didn't mean she was going to give her heart away. She could try and find a new life without minimizing Wayne's memory or the love they had shared. For the first time, Tammy began to understand why so many women married so soon after losing their husbands. There reasons lay ultimately in the need for safety and security.

Although she didn't want to see herself as a weakling, Tammy had to be honest with herself and admit that she couldn't promise that for herself.

She turned the page and an advertisement in the top right-hand corner immediately caught her eye. She read it twice before hope began to bloom in her chest.

THE MERCHANTISER NEEDS a wife

MR. KARL GERBER is a store owner and successful merchandiser in Texas. After focusing on growing his business and securing a place for himself in the local economy, Karl is ready to focus on the future. He describes himself as honest and steadfast; a kind man with a sharp sense of humor. He is looking for a wife who will understand the long hours expected of a merchandiser and will be willing to help when needed. Someone kind, someone thoughtful and gentle. Someone who will appreciate the smaller things in life. Although he isn't wealthy by any means he can offer his wife a beautifully quaint home and can provide for her. He dreams of having children and leaving his store to them one day. If you think that you are the right woman to share Karl's

dreams of growing the business and a family, then don't hesitate to correspond today!

TAMMY WASN'T sure why Karl's advertisement appealed to her but something about it made her reach for a pen and paper. His advertisement wasn't dissimilar from most of the other advertisements, but the reassurance of a secure future with a hardworking man sounded exactly like what Tammy had been praying for.

She tapped the pen against the page a few times wondering how she was going to start a letter to a man she didn't know, a man she hoped would have her as his wife. Her thoughts went to Wayne. What would he have said? Would he have approved?

Tammy felt a calmness envelop her as a smile curved her mouth. Wayne always said that when God hands you an opportunity, you'd be a fool not to take it. This was her opportunity and Tammy had to believe in her heart that Wayne would approve.

DEAR KARL,

I HOPE you don't find me too presumptuous for addressing you by your first name, but Mr. Gerber just feels a little too formal, given the nature of this letter.

I want to assure you that I have never done anything like this in the past and that I'll understand completely if I do not hear from you. I saw your advertisement and can't say exactly why but something about it appealed to me.

Perhaps it's loneliness, a fear of being alone, or perhaps it's because I

lost my husband not too long ago. Ever since I walked away from his grave, life and living have been hard. Harder than usual. At first, I thought I'd manage, but existence becomes unbelievably precarious with only one income. I'm not telling you this in hopes of your sympathy, but merely so that you understand my reasons for checking through the paper in the first place.

I loved my husband dearly, but I am young and can't imagine struggling through the rest of my life alone. I know that he would have wanted me to love again, to have children, and to secure a future filled with laughter. Although it feels a little like betrayal, I hope for the same.

I am gentle, kind, hardworking, and satisfied with little. I don't need trinkets or fancy clothes, only a good pot of tea and a fire crackling in the hearth during winter. At the moment there is little time for tea or fires, but one day I hope to have the time to enjoy them again.

When I read your advertisement, I couldn't help but be impressed that you are a merchandiser. I can't imagine how clever and hardworking one must be to build a business from nothing. Personally, I'm a seamstress. Currently, I sew in a factory during the day and I take in private sewing work in the evening as needed, which provides me with an extra income.

I'm not sure if you'll write back, and please don't feel pressured if you can't imagine a future with me. But if you do, I look forward to hearing from you.

KINDEST REGARDS,

Tammy

TAMMY FOLDED the letter and placed it in an envelope. For a moment she considered mailing it in the morning. Then she realized that if she had the chance to reconsider, she might never mail it at all. She grabbed her coat and

the envelope and, under the cover of the night, she walked to the post office. She slipped it under the door with enough money to cover the postage and then she headed home.

That night when she climbed into bed, Tammy left the whole matter in the hands of God. Whether or not the letter reached Karl Gerber, as well as whether or not he would write back were now up to God. She had taken a leap of faith and now she had to have faith in God's plan for her life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



Wrapped in three blankets, wearing her coat to bed, Tammy finally reached for the letter that had arrived earlier that day. Her fingers were so cold they could hardly handle the letter to get it open, her breath coming in white puffs as she tried to ignore the freezing weather.

If she had thought eight months ago that her life couldn't get any worse, she had been wrong. She had managed to scrape by and reach Christmas without losing the house, only to learn on Christmas Eve that the factory was closing down. And with it her means to earn an income.

For the last week she had tried to figure out what she was going to do for money, since it didn't matter how many sewing jobs she took in, she couldn't manage to make ends meet. Her wood stove was as cold as the air outside, being that she was unable to afford wood. She had been unable to afford gas since before summer and now her only source of heat in the cold Boston winter was her bed and her blankets.

The money she had kept tucked away until April was spent, leaving her with more anxiety than ever before. Come January's end, Tammy had no way to pay the mortgage. She drew in a deep breath and glanced around by the dim light of a candle. She only had a month left in the home she had shared with Wayne then she would be homeless.

Tammy pushed the horrible thought away and reached for Karl's letter.

Although she had never met Karl Gerber before, their correspondence over the last eight months had become the highlight of her life. She looked forward to reading about the quaint Texas town in which he lived, and all the customers that frequented his store. She couldn't say that she was falling in love, but she felt some sort of affection for the man who wrote lengthy letters and expressed concern for her well-being in every one of them.

They had never spoken of marriage or their dreams for the future after those very first letters, but Tammy wouldn't lose hope. Instead, with every letter that arrived, she hoped that Karl would finally express his affection for her, giving her a little more courage to hang on a little longer.

MY DEAREST TAMMY

I HOPE you have been well since my last letter. I know you mentioned that you would be spending Christmas on your own, but please know that I thought of you the whole day.

Although it's winter, we've had lovely weather these last few weeks. Some days I even managed to open the store without wearing a coat. I can only imagine how cold it must be in Boston, especially after you mentioned the snowfall in your last letter.

I write this letter having only celebrated Christmas yesterday, knowing that there is something I need to ask you. For the last eight months, we've both been cautious with our feelings and our hopes, but I think the time for caution has passed.

Tammy, I would be honored if you would agree to come to Texas and be my wife. I know we haven't met but from our correspondence, I can only imagine us getting along just fine. It pains my heart to read how hard you work and how you suffer beneath the weight of the mortgage without any

hope of support.

I want to care for you and I want to protect you from the cruelty this world has to offer. I know that you might be hesitant to open your heart to love again, as am I after losing my fiancée. But in my heart, I know that with time we might find our affection for each other grow into love. The love that will bring us a family and carry us into a blessed future.

I've enclosed in this letter enough money for your train fare as well as essentials, with enough to spare if you need it along the way. I know this might come as a shock to you, but I'm eagerly looking forward to your arrival. Don't take time to consider, Tammy, rather send me a wire informing me of the date on which I should expect your arrival.

I promise to cherish, care, protect and provide for you.

FONDEST REGARDS,

Karl

TAMMY HADN'T REALIZED that tears were streaming down her face until she finished reading the letter. She hadn't lied to Karl about her past or her marriage to Wayne. She had expected this was the reason behind his hesitation to express his feelings. To know that he cared and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her was very uplifting.

Although it was late at night, Tammy shoved back the blankets and climbed out of bed. She went in search of the large steam trunk which she retrieved from the corner of the spare bedroom. Everything that she could sell, she had sold over the last few months to make ends meet, so there wasn't much left in the house.

As the clock struck twelve, Tammy began to pack. The train journey south would take at least a few days, she could sleep then, she reasoned.

Right now, it was time for her to pack up her life and her memories. When the sun peeked over the horizon, she would say goodbye to her life with Wayne and her time in Boston and head to the train station. Before night fell, she would be on her way to Karl and a life free of Boston's treacherously cold weather and the poverty she had suffered since Wayne's death.

With a skip in her step, she began to pack, thanking God for His mercy and kindness the entire time. She was about to start a new chapter and although she wasn't sure what that chapter would bring, she knew it would be better than the one on which she was finally turning the page.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



“Oh my, Michael, would you look at that! It must be one of them famous Pullman trains we read about back home.”

Tammy turned to the passengers on the other side of the aisle, intrigued by the conversation. She followed their gazes and couldn't stop her eyes from widening at what had to be the ultimate lap of luxury.

“Yes, yes. It is. It's a shame we're not going to Omaha, I might have just taken you on a Pullman train instead,” the man said with humor in his voice.

The woman playfully patted his arm. “Don't be daft! I heard a ticket in one of the palace cars cost about ten times what we paid for our ticket.”

“But then we would've had a dining cart and a sleeper cabin, and we would even have been able to relax in the lounge,” the man countered with a patient smile.

“Instead we're going to sit here, feel our rears go numb over the next couple of days, and nap on each other's shoulders as if we were apes in the jungle.” The woman let out a heavy sigh. “I really hope Sanderson is all you said it would be.”

Tammy's ears were now fully honed in on the conversation on the other side of the aisle. They might be in New York and the sights outside the cabin window might be intriguing, but the conversation beside her intrigued her much more.

She had boarded the train the morning before, and shortly afterwards, the man and the woman beside her had boarded as well. They seemed like a nice middle-aged couple and it warmed Tammy's heart to see how the man always made sure that his wife was comfortable.

"It is, and without a pastor, Janet. You'll take great care to remember that. You married a man of the clergy and that means, we go where God needs us." The man smiled gently.

"I know. But I was just getting used to Boston." She let out a quiet sigh. "I must that I am looking forward to the warmer weather. It's been downright chilly here these last few months."

"Excuse me?" Tammy said leaning into the aisle. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but it's hard not to." Tammy glanced at the small aisle that separated them and the rows of passengers in front of and behind them. "Are you going to Sanderson in Texas?"

The man glanced at his wife before he nodded. "That's right, yes."

"Michael is going to be the new pastor. He received his posting a few days ago. Seems as if the old pastor suffered a terrible fever before he passed," the woman explained eagerly before she leaned over her husband. "I'm Janet Finley and this is my husband, Michael."

Tammy accepted the friendly introduction with a smile. "I'm Tammy White. I'm heading to Sanderson myself."

"Well, isn't that wonderful. At least I know I'll have a friend by the time we get there." Janet laughed. "That's the only thing about Michael's profession, we tend to move more than is normal."

"This is the last time," Michael said evenly before he turned to Tammy. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Tammy. What my wife meant was that over the last few years, I've always done missionary work, temporary postings and such. Sanderson is my first permanent posting." He reached for his wife's hand and smiled. "It's where we'll build a home and raise our family."

Tammy's heart warmed at the love that was clear to see in their eyes. She

remembered how wonderful it felt to look at someone and feel accepted, cherished, and loved all at the same time. “You must be excited then.”

“Oh, of course, it’s just a long ride before we get there.” Janet sighed shifting in her seat again in an attempt to make herself more comfortable.

“How about you, Miss White, what is your business in Sanderson? It is not often that a woman travels cross-country by herself. Are your parents there?” Michael asked kindly.

Tammy couldn’t help but laugh. Although she was twenty-five years old, people often mistook her for a teenager. Her laughter quickly faded when she realized that she had to tell these respectable people her reason for heading to Texas alone. They would invariably find out when the train left them all together in the same town.

“I uhm.... I’m going to Sanderson to marry the merchandiser.”

“Is that right? That means my first order of business will be a wedding then, how pleasant,” Michael said getting up. “I’m going to stretch my legs while you two ladies get better acquainted.”

Janet smiled indulgently when he left. “Michael has a hard time when he can’t move about freely. He’s always moving about, whether he’s giving a sermon or drinking a cup of tea on the porch. So tell me about your soon-to-be-husband.”

Tammy looked from side to side to make sure no one was listening before she slipped across the aisle and took a seat beside Janet. “Actually, I haven’t met him just yet.”

“What?” Janet asked with open shock.

Tammy nodded before she continued to explain about the Matrimonial Times and their correspondence. After a while she noticed Michael return and take her seat, allowing her and Janet to continue talking. By the time she had explained everything from the day Wayne rescued her from her parents right down to climbing on the train, Janet had tenderly wrapped both her hands over Tammy’s.

“You’re a brave girl, Tammy, braver than any I think I’ve ever met. And you’re right, God has plans for our future and I hope that you’re blessed, loved, and happy in Sanderson.”

Tammy smiled hopefully. “I hope so. Since boarding the train I’ve been wondering if Karl Gerber is who he portrayed in the letters. What if he’s an old man actually just looking for a slave, someone to work for him without needing to be paid?” She chuckled shaking her head. “My imagination’s running rampant, I’m afraid.”

“Perhaps he is but, my dear, unless he’s mean, I still think it’s a better opportunity for you than staying in Boston. Going through an entire winter without heat or a fire in the hearth, I can’t even imagine how hard it must’ve been.

“It was hard.... at times.” Tammy admitted quietly. “With Michael being a pastor and all...I was afraid you wouldn’t approve.”

Janet laughed and glanced across the aisle at her husband. “The Bible tells us not to judge but to love our neighbors. Besides, I’m hardly one to talk. When Michael asked my parents for my hand, they refused, saying that he would never be able to provide for me. *We ran away together.*”

This time it was Tammy who laughed. Looking at the respectable couple she would never have imagined Janet doing something so rebellious. “It looks like you don’t regret it?”

“Not at all. Michael is mine and I am his. I’m sure you felt the same way with Wayne. Without Michael... I’m afraid I wouldn’t know what to do at all. In time I hope you find that same love connection with your merchandiser,” Janet added.

Tammy nodded. “I hope so too.”

They talked for almost another two hours before Tammy and Michael traded places again. Tammy now looked even more forward to living in Sanderson. Not only would she not be cold, she already had a friend in Janet.

CHAPTER 6



“*I* know they said that Sanderson was a small town, I didn’t realize that meant a dozen houses and a thoroughfare!” Pastor Michael exclaimed as they disembarked from the train.

Tammy stood beside the pastor and his wife and glanced around the small town. There wasn’t a single person in sight and the ticket office was barely more than a small hut. The platform was brand new with the hope of all the business the railway would bring to Sanderson, but right now Tammy didn’t feel hope at all.

She had sent a wire to Karl to inform him of her expected time of arrival but he did not appear to be there to meet her. It seemed they were at the edge of town as the first buildings only began a few hundred yards away. Even glancing down the thoroughfare, not a single soul was to be seen.

It was as if the train had stopped in a ghost town.

Tammy jolted when the train’s whistled by way of announcing its departure. They turned to see that the conductor had left their bags at the edge of the platform while the train was slowly making its way out of the town that consisted of nothing but dust and abandoned streets.

“Do you know where we should go?” Janet asked with some concern as she turned to her husband.

The pastor shrugged before he pointed to a church tower at the end of the

thoroughfare. "I'd say the church is a good place to start."

"This doesn't feel right," Tammy said almost to herself. "It's as if the town was built and then simply abandoned."

"Is someone coming to meet you, Miss White?" the pastor asked.

Although they had become well acquainted over the last couple of days, he still insisted on calling her Miss White, so in turn, Tammy insisted on calling him Pastor Michael.

"Yes. Karl Gerber, he said he would be on the platform to meet me," Tammy said, shaking her head. From the train platform, she couldn't even see a merchandising store. An eerie feeling ran down her spine as she turned to Janet with fear in her heart. "Something's wrong."

Janet shook her head with a hopeful smile, the faith that only a pastor's wife could have shining her eyes. "I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding. We'll wait with you, won't we, Michael?"

Michael nodded. "Of course, although I think we might have a better chance of finding people if we head towards town."

"What about our luggage?" Tammy asked glancing at her steam trunk and carpet bag. It was nothing compared to the suitcases, hat cases, and trunks in the Finley's possession.

"I'm sure they'll be just dandy if we leave them right where they are. Besides, who's going to snatch them?" the pastor asked with a shrug.

Tammy nodded and followed Michael and Janet off the platform and in the direction of the dirt road that led into town. She had seen most of the country over the last few days but she had never in all her life seen quite so much dust. It was as if it was roused with every step and she could almost taste it on her tongue.

When they reached the first building, Michael stepped closer and peered inside, announcing before long that it looked like a barbershop. Every building they happened upon right down to even the Sheriff's office was empty. The further they wandered into the ghost town, the more Tammy

became anxious that her coming here had been a mistake. A mistake that was now too far in to rectify.

“When will the train be coming through Sanderson again?” Tammy asked, voicing her fears.

“Oh hush, you’re going to live right here in Sanderson. We’ll find out where everyone is soon enough,” Janet said playfully.

Tammy wished she had Janet’s faith at that moment, whereas all she could think of was where she was going to spend the night and what she was going to eat. Her worry was that, even if the train did return, she would not have enough money to buy a ticket to return to Boston.

“The church is barely a year old,” Michael said with admiration as they came upon it to view it in full. “They built it along with the train platform. Apparently the town accepted the railway coming through Sanderson in exchange for a church.”

“It’s lovely, Michael.” Janet smiled at her husband and reached for his hand.

“The Merchandise store!” Tammy cried out and rushed across the street to the general store that was owned by Karl Gerber. She opened the door and took a look around, hoping to lay eyes on her betrothed for the first time. To her dismay, however, just like the rest of town, there was nothing inside but silence and dust. “He’s not here.”

“Michael, I think Tammy’s right, something is wrong? Where are all the people?” Janet asked voicing doubt for the very first time.

“God won’t lead us here only to abandon us, Janet. Come on, let’s keep going,” Michael said firmly but Tammy could hear he was beginning to doubt his own words as well.

Tammy glanced back at the merchandise store and the house beside it. It was a lovely building and although the town wasn’t large, she could imagine herself being very happy there. That was provided she could ever find Karl Gerber.

A sigh escaped her as they kept on walking with nothing but the church steeple to guide them. They passed a seamstress, a dress shop, a diner, and even the mayor's office, and still there was no sign of a single person.

Tammy couldn't help but remember something in the bible about the plague, and for a moment wondered if a plague had taken all the lives in this town. She shook her head, willing her imagination to stop. Hysteria wasn't going to be of any help now.

Michael was right, they just had to keep looking.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



“*T*here!” Michael called out as they crossed a side street. He pointed down the street even as he sighed with relief. “They must be there.”

Tammy and Janet followed his gaze and saw movement in front of what looked like the surgery. There was no sign of any sort, just a cross painted against the side of the house. Eager to confirm the town was inhabited after all, the trio of new arrivals rushed in the direction of the movement at a hastened pace.

“I think it’s the surgery, or at least I hope that is what the cross indicates,” Janet said as they approached.

Two men were standing outside with no one else anywhere to be seen. Tammy followed Janet and Michael, hoping that Michael’s new position as the pastor would ensure that the townsfolk would be welcoming.

They stopped a few yards short and Michael cleared his throat. “Good afternoon. I wonder if you could perhaps help?”

The men turned and Tammy’s breath caught. She didn’t even notice the second man because the first man was the spitting image of the man she had dreamed about that night back in Boston. He wore a wide-brim hat that shielded his face against the sun, but Tammy felt sure that she recognized him.

His eyes were green, almost the color of a pond in spring. His hair was a dusty blond and she couldn't help but wonder if it would glitter like gold if the sun caught it. Tanned skin made his complexion even more appealing in the late afternoon light. Tammy frowned, feeling light-headed as the man turned to Michael. "Howdy, ain't seen you round these parts before. How can we be of assistance?"

The man glanced around as if searching for their wagon or horses.

As if reading his mind, Michael answered. "We just arrived on the afternoon train. I am Pastor Michael Finley and this here is my wife Janet. We were told we'd be welcomed by the mayor on our arrival."

"Oh shoot, Peter probably forgot all 'bout your arrival as a result of the Town Naming celebrations," the man said shaking his head before he chuckled. "Not ours, as you can see. A town about a few miles West is celebrating its first Town Naming parade. As you can see, almost all of the people that call this town home have left to celebrate with them." He held out his hand to Michael. "I'm Jake Stoddart, the town doctor. Welcome to Sanderson."

"That explains why there is no one in town," Janet said with a relieved smile.

"Yes, yes, it does. Just me and ole Jimmy that stayed behind. This here is Jimmy Parker, blacksmith, stable owner, who is generally not fond of crowds," Jake held his hand to one side of his mouth as if telling a secret, "or fireworks."

"Aw doc, you didn't need to go and tell the new pastor 'bout my fears," Jimmy admonished the doctor with a shake of his head.

"I think I know where you folks will be stayin'. If you give me a moment, I'll take you there," Jake said kindly. "Jimmy, would you mind takin' a wagon and fetchin' the pastor and his family's luggage from the platform?"

"Sure thing, doc," Jimmy said before he turned on his heel and walked away, in the direction the trio had just come.

For the duration of the conversation, Tammy hadn't said a single word. She had held back trying to wonder why she dreamed of the town doctor. She tried to remember the dream and the more she thought about it, the more she was certain that Jake was the man in her dreams.

It didn't make any sense at all.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Doctor Stoddart, this here is Tammy White," Michael introduced her.

"Please, it's Jake or doc, don't bother with the Stoddart, no one else does," Jake said to Michael before turning to Tammy. "Gooday, Miss White."

Tammy smiled nervously. "Good day, doctor. Although we traveled together, I'm not with the pastor and his wife. Karl Gerber was supposed to meet me on the platform on my arrival. Did he go to the Town Naming celebration as well?" Tammy asked hopefully.

The doctor paled noticeably and his brows drew together. "Karl Gerber, who owns the merchandise store?"

"Yes?" Tammy nodded hesitantly.

"I... I'm so sorry, Miss, but I don't know how to tell you this, so I'll just come right out and say it. This mornin' while he was loadin' up some supplies for the men to take to the celebration... his horse got spooked..." Jake sighed heavily and glanced at Michael and Janet before returning his gaze to Tammy. "He was severely injured, Miss White."

Tammy's breath came in shallow pants at the shock of his revelation. She had just come all this way to marry a man who was now severely ill. She gathered her courage and took a deep breath. "I don't mind taking care of him. I'm soon he'll recover soon under your medical care."

"I'm not sure I'm explaining this correctly," the doctor said softly, stepping closer to Tammy. "He was run over by a wagon heavily laden with merchandise. He has a broken leg, extensive internal bruising of his abdomen and I'm afraid I suspect a collapsed lung as well. I'm doing all I can, but..."

I'm afraid I don't think he'll make it through the night.”

Tammy listened to his words and imagined the injuries and all that came to mind was a broken man. Another funeral, another loss...

Her vision started to blur at the corners, darkness clouding out the light as she felt her mind begin to spin. It might have been the fact that she hadn't eaten, the heat, or simply the shock of learning of Karl's fate. A million thoughts ran through her mind, concern for Karl's injuries at the forefront, but at the back of her mind all she could think of was that she had just traveled thousands of miles to be widowed even before she could be wed.

Before she could ask to see Karl, she felt her consciousness fade into darkness. It was as if she was falling and falling without being control until her world was enveloped in black.

CHAPTER 8



“Oh my gosh, is she, all right?” Janet’s voice sounded far off in the distance, too far for Tammy to comprehend fully.

She heard the men mutter but she couldn’t find the strength to open her eyes. She felt as if she was suspended in air, with a warm cloud to rest against.

“Tammy, can you hear me?” the doctor’s voice asked quietly, the proximity close.

Tammy’s eyes fluttered open only to find Jake’s face only inches from hers. “I What happened?”

“You fainted,” Janet said rushing closer. “One minute you were fine and the next second... Luckily doc here is quick on his feet. Caught you before you could hit the ground.”

Only then did Tammy realize she was in the doctor’s arms. Her face flushed red. “How foolish of me. You can put me down now...” Tammy said glancing at him.

Gently Jake set her back on her feet, but not without keeping a hand on her upper arm. “There, are you steady on your feet?” He searched her eyes, making sure she was alright. “Just breathe, breathe through it.”

Tammy nodded and took a few shallow breaths before Jake smiled kindly. “Deep slow breaths. How are you feeling now? Better?”

“I think so...” Tammy said drawing in a deep breath before she remembered the words that were spoken before she fainted. “Karl?” Tammy shook her head. “You said his injuries are severe?”

Jake nodded with an apology in his eyes. “I’ve done everything I could but the injuries.... Sometimes the only thing you can do is to make a patient comfortable for the inevitable end. I’m so sorry, I wish I could’ve done more.”

Tammy nodded. “It was an accident, it’s not your fault.”

“No, it ain’t my fault but as the town doc I wish I could do more,” Jake admitted.

Tammy understood. “Can you take me to him please?”

“Of course,” Jake said glancing at the Finleys. “He’s in the surgery.”

Tammy allowed herself to be led into the surgery. It smelled like medicine and coffee. There were books stacked all over along with a few medical instruments she didn’t recognize. Jake led her through what seemed to be the front room into a side room off the back. There were two beds against one wall, and on the one bed lay a man that was clearly in a lot of pain.

Although he didn’t make a sound, she could see it in his drawn and pale face. He had a sheet covering him and blood already seeping through, creating dark red stains.

Tammy ignored the stains and moved closer. “Karl?”

“I’ve given him Laudanum for the pain... to ease it but it’s not working as well as I would’ve hoped,” Jake explained as he let go of Tammy’s arm. “I think he can hear you.”

Tammy wasn’t feeling faint now as she rushed towards the bed and reached for the bruised and bloodied hand that lay at Karl’s side. His breaths were coming in rasps, his chest heaving with the effort. Tammy didn’t have to see the injuries to know that this man was fighting for his life. She said a quick prayer for strength as she searched his face. He looked like a kind man,

like the man he said he would be.

“Karl? It’s Tammy,” Tammy said quietly biting back the tears.

He was handsome and something about his face made him appear kind. Tammy couldn’t help but wish she had met him before the accident.

He groaned before his eyes fluttered open. “Tammy? You came... you actually came.”

“Of course I came. I told you I would. It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you.” Tammy’s voice was breaking with emotion as she wondered at the type of life they might have shared.

“Pleasure is all mine,” Karl greeted weakly before he coughed. Tammy quickly reached for her handkerchief and offered it. He covered his mouth but when he pulled his hand back, the handkerchief was spotted with blood.

He drew in a breath, but she could see the desperation in his eyes. There was nothing left for him in this world. He was fighting to hold on, but it was clear his body was failing him. He offered her a weak smile; she could tell how hard it was through the pain.

His eyes fluttered closed and she felt him squeeze her hand as if apologizing for his condition. Tammy wished she had come sooner. She wished things were different, but most of all she prayed that a miracle would heal Karl and allow them the life they had spoken of in their letters.

Beside her, she heard Jake’s voice as he quietly spoke. “It won’t be long now...”

Tammy wanted to shout at him for not having faith, but she knew it would be foolish. Karl was suffering and not even the Laudanum that Jake had administered could ease the pain. He was broken and deserved to be set free from the pain.

She didn’t move. Instead, she held onto his hand and began to speak. Her voice was soft as if she was afraid of startling or exciting him. “The first time you wrote to me, I was sure certain it would be the last time. Your letters... they were the only thing that gave me hope over these last months. You told

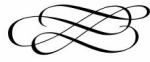
me so much about Sanderson and the store, that I could imagine them in my mind's eye. You described them exactly as they are." Tammy quickly brushed a tear from her cheek. Not because she had a deep emotional connection with the man fighting for his life on the bed, but because she was human.

"You were my hope, Karl. The life you spoke of for our future was my dream too. I'm so happy I made it in time to meet you... I will never forget you..."

When Karl's breath escaped in a ragged puff, Tammy didn't need a doctor to tell her that he was gone. She felt his hand go limp in hers even as his chest stilled. She didn't let go. She sat by his side and prayed that God would guide him safely to the gates of heaven. After a while, she felt Jake rest his hand on her shoulder.

"He's gone."

CHAPTER 9



Tammy stood up and felt her head spin. She needed fresh air. She needed to get away from the smell of medicine and blood. She moved through the surgery without waiting for Jake to lead her until she stood outside on the street.

Furiously, she brushed away the tears that were streaming down her face, and she fought for composure. She sank onto her haunches, wondering what she was going to do now. She had no money left and even if she did go back to Boston, she had no place to live and she had no job.

Her situation in Sanderson had just turned into the very nightmare from which she had fled.

“Are you all right?” Jake asked as he joined her outside.

Tammy nodded and sniffed back the tears. “Don’t really have a choice now, do I?”

“Karl mentioned he had a mail-order bride coming. I thought he was kidding,” Jake said almost to himself.

Tammy looked up at him with a narrowed expression. “I’m here, ain’t I?”

“Yeah, of course. Look, I can’t just leave you out here on the street. The pastor and the wife said I should take you to them after...”

Tammy wanted to argue, but she really had no choice. She only knew two people in this town and right now she needed a friend. She straightened and

met Jake's gaze. "Yes, I think I'll go there. Could you tell me where it is?"

Jake glanced back at the surgery before meeting her gaze. "I'll walk with you."

Tammy knew he had to.... deal with Karl, so she simply shook her head. "I'm sure I'll find it if you point me in the right direction."

A short while later Tammy knocked on the door of a quaint wooden cabin. It had a porch that would allow one to sit and watch the sunset and large windows to let in the light. She had barely knocked when Janet opened the door. Her eyes were widened with sympathy when she said, "Oh you poor dear, come in. I've got tea on the wood stove."

Following Janet into the house, Tammy couldn't help but be surprised at how quickly the pastor and his wife had settled in. They had tea on the stove along with some sort of stew. The pastor was sitting on a couch with the bible and a notebook close by. Although there were no curtains or personal items displayed, Tammy could already feel that this was their home. It offered the same type of calm and peace that Michael and Janet exuded.

Tammy took a seat at the kitchen table and let out a heavy sigh. "He's passed."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Tammy, I know how much you looked forward to meeting him," Janet sympathized as she placed a cup of tea before Tammy. "Bless the mayor, we found fresh meat and a few pantry items already in place for our arrival. I've got a stew going if you'd like to stay."

Michael joined them at that moment. "Of course she's going to stay."

Tammy sighed. "It's not like I have anywhere else to go. I still have to pray that the boarding house will let me work for a room for the night."

"Nonsense," Janet said firmly. "You'll stay here. Right, Michael?"

"I don't want to impose. You're being too kind already," Tammy was quick to reject the offer.

"We have two bedrooms and it makes no sense for you to struggle for a room if there is one right here for you," Janet insisted.

“Not just for the night but until you’re back on your feet,” Michael added. “From what I understand, without Karl, you don’t really have a place to stay or a means to provide for yourself. We’ll be happy to help you.”

Tammy wanted to refuse their kindness. These were her friends and she didn’t want to accept their charity, but did she really have a choice? She thought for a moment before she finally agreed. “Thank you, I truly appreciate your hospitality. But I won’t be staying for free. I’d like to do the housework in return for my room and board. I’ll be happy to help with cleaning the church after services as well.”

Janet laughed. “She’s not an easy one to help, now, is she, Michael?”

Michael chuckled. “No, she isn’t. It won’t be necessary, but if it will make you feel better, that would be wonderful.”

Tammy nodded. “I insist.”

“Then it’s settled. Come, let me show you to your room. There are blankets and sheets in one of our trunks, you can help me unpack them later,” Janet said as she led Tammy to the spare bedroom.

Tammy stepped inside and couldn’t help but feel grateful for the sun shining through the window and basking the room in light. “It’s a beautiful room.”

“They both are,” Janet agreed. “Sanderson might look like a ghost town at the moment, but it already feels like home.”

The word home caught Tammy off guard. She turned to Janet with tears in her eyes. “I was supposed to have a home, a husband, and a new life when I arrived... What am I going to do, Janet?”

“You poor dear,” Janet said embracing Tammy. “We’ll pray. Remember that God has a plan for your life, although it doesn’t always feel that way.”

Tammy stepped back and smiled through her tears. “He sure has a way of leading me around the bush, I just wish He would reveal the plan to me.”

“In His time,” Janet said with a gentle smile. “All good things come in His time.”

“I wish I had your faith,” Tammy admitted. “I used to... until Wayne... it just feels like I’ve been running into walls ever since, stumbling over my own feet.”

“Then perhaps it’s time you stopped running. Just like you’re already thinking about how you’re going to find another place to stay. Michael and I would love to have you, so take the time to recover from all your running and be patient. God won’t let His children be forgotten. Just like He brought Michael and me here to speak his gospel in this town, He brought you here for a reason. Besides, I wouldn’t have had a friend in town were it not for you.”

Tammy smiled hoping that Janet was right. She was already thinking of a way to find other accommodations, but perhaps it was time to stop running. Time to stop thinking about her future. It was time for her to be patient and to accept that God did have a plan, even if it didn’t feel like it right now.

“You know, Janet, you’re right. God brought us together so that I would have a friend when Karl passed as well. He does have a plan. I won’t try to find other accommodations, but I will do my best to help around the house.”

“Wonderful. I’ll ask Michael to send word for your luggage. Why don’t you come and have another cup of tea?” Janet smiled.

Tammy paused and searched Janet’s gaze. “Why are you being so nice to me? I’m not your problem.”

Janet shook her head. “Of course you’re not my problem and that’s the very reason we’d like to help you. Come on, the tea is getting cold.”

Tammy followed Janet into the small kitchen and took a seat at the table. This time she didn’t pray for a way out, but she prayed for God to bless the Finleys.

CHAPTER 10



Tammy pulled the black shawl over her shoulders as she looked out the window. It might be winter but in Sanderson there wasn't a single snowflake. Instead only dust and a cold wind that could slice right through you.

"Tammy, are you ready? Michael is getting the wagon," Janet said after briefly knocking on the door.

Tammy drew in a deep breath. Would she ever be ready to stand beside the grave of another man? Although she didn't have the feelings for Karl that she had for Wayne, she did have the dreams of a future that she had to say goodbye to today, along with the man she had traveled here to be with.

"I'm coming," Tammy said grabbing her satchel. She stepped out and saw the sympathy in Janet's eyes. Janet understood that Tammy wasn't quite prepared to handle the funeral.

"I'll be right there with you," Janet said slipping her hand through Tammy's elbow.

They walked outside just as Michael brought the wagon that the town had gifted him around the corner. Tammy glanced at Janet with a questioning look. "Is Michael all right? I'm sure he didn't think he's first act as pastor of Sanderson was going to be to lead a funeral."

"Michael is just fine. This is what he does, it's a privilege for him to

speak a blessing over someone that is now at the side of the Lord,” Janet said before she smiled at Tammy.

A short while later they arrived at the small cemetery at the other edge of the town. There were a few crosses planted in the earth, giving Tammy a clear idea of how many people had drawn their last breaths in Sanderson.

“Mrs. Finley, Miss White,” Jake greeted them as they climbed out of the buggy.

Tammy turned to him with a smile. “It’s just Tammy, please.”

“In that case, it’s just Jake,” he said with a friendly smile before his eyes narrowed. “I’m sorry for your loss. I only realized yesterday how I never offered my condolences.”

Tammy nodded gratefully. The day before, with everyone back from the naming ceremony of the neighboring town, numerous people had stopped by the new pastorage to introduce themselves and at the same time to offer Tammy their condolences. She couldn’t help but feel like a fraud. She had never married Karl Gerber and although they had corresponded with each other for more than eight months, she had only known him for a few minutes.

She followed Janet to the grave that a few of Karl’s friends had dug the day before. Beside the grave was the wagon that held the coffin. The sight of it brought back so many memories of Wayne’s funeral. She swallowed past the lump in her throat before she took her place at the grave.

If she had to count, Tammy would’ve guessed the whole town had turned out to see Karl laid to rest. What had seemed like a ghost town on the day of their arrival, was clearly a growing town with a growing population. Children, some as young as only a few months old, and others venturing into the years before adulthood, stood with their parents.

Every now and then she would notice their curious glances in her direction, but Tammy didn’t mind. She understood their curiosity. *Who was this woman Karl Gerber had asked to marry him without even meeting her?*

For the first time, Tammy saw Michael in his position as pastor. His

words were kind and gently ebbed and flowed to hold the community's attention. Although he had never known Karl personally, he spoke with such kindness about him. He talked about the wonders of heaven and how Karl was now free of pain and worldly sins.

By the time the men lowered the coffin into the ground, Tammy was grateful it was almost over. Emotions were swimming in her mind, making her feel slightly lightheaded and the last thing she wanted was to faint in full view of the whole town.

Michael said his last blessing before the gathering of the community broke apart to go their separate ways. Tammy stayed where she stood for a moment, offering her own prayers for Karl. When she turned to meet Michael and Janet at their wagon, she saw a man talking to them. She headed in their direction, assuming him to be just another member of the community eager to meet the new pastor.

"Tammy, there you are. Mr. Scott asked if he might follow us home. He says there are things he needs to discuss with you," Janet explained even as she made the introductions.

"Of course," Tammy said, wondering what the sophisticated man could possibly have to discuss with her.

The trip back to their home felt longer than before, possibly because Tammy could feel Mr. Scott's eyes on her back the entire time.

When they arrived, Janet quickly set about putting on a pot of tea while Michael and Mr. Scott sat in the front room making small talk. Tammy didn't say a word knowing that Mr. Scott would say what he needed to say when he was ready.

Janet returned with a tray of tea and a smile. "Here we are."

Once everyone had a cup of tea, Mr. Scott turned to Tammy. "I've learned not to listen to the town gossip, so I just want to confirm that you are Tamara White of Boston, Massachusetts?"

"Yes, I am," Tammy said carefully. "I'm sorry, what is this about?"

“I’ll explain in a moment. Do you perhaps have the letters that Mr. Gerber wrote to you? I won’t read them or keep them; I just need to see his signature,” Mr. Scott asked.

Tammy felt a little unsure behind this man wanting access to her letters, but she went to fetch them. She had tied them together with string which she carefully untied before she handed him a single letter.

“I see, there it is. Karl Gerber.” Mr. Scott smiled brightly and pulled a sheet of paper out of his jacket. “Mr. Gerber was nothing if not prepared, Miss White. He came to me the day before his accident to draw up a new will. He wanted to make sure that his affairs were in order before the wedding.”

He handed the piece of paper to Tammy and she frowned as she unfolded it. She read it quietly, wondering if her eyes were imagining things before she turned to Mr. Scott. “Is this legal? Is this valid?”

Mr. Scott nodded. “Yup, as legal as any other document that comes through my office. Harvard Law graduate.”

“Tammy, what does it say?” Janet asked, clearly not as patient as her husband to find out about the contents of Karl’s will as it pertained to Tamara White of Boston, Massachusetts.

“It... I...” Tammy was at a loss for words as she read the letter again.

“It says that Mr. Gerber’s will states that Miss White inherits the mercantile store, the adjacent home, all existing stock, and the money in his accounts at the bank. I won’t say Miss White is a wealthy woman, but she does have a running business concern and a home.”

Tammy felt a smile curve her mouth. “I own the mercantile store... and a home?” Her brows quickly furrowed. “Mortgage?” she quickly asked. She’d been down this road before.

“No mortgage. Mr. Gerber always insisted on buying using cash instead of credit. He built the store over a period of two years to its current size. Adding on as was needed and as he had the funds to do so. He was one of the

first men to settle in Sanderson.”

“Tammy, this is wonderful,” Janet said clapping her hands.

Tammy couldn't stop the smile broaden on her face. “It is, it truly is.” She held the will against her chest before she smiled up at the roof. “Thank you, Karl.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



Tammy had just finished drying the breakfast dishes when there was a knock on the door. Janet and Michael had gone to church to take a look at what was available and what he would need for sermons from the house.

She set down the drying cloth and headed to the door, knowing it was just another eager member of the congregation calling around to meet Michael. She would simply tell them to head over to the church and then she would finish packing before dragging her things down Main Street to her new home.

“Jake?” Tammy greeted with surprise as she opened the door. “Are you looking for Michael, I mean pastor Michael?”

Since she had agreed to live with them, Michael had insisted she address him by his first name.

“Nope, I found exactly who I was looking for,” Jake said with a smile, his green eyes sparkling in the morning light.

Tammy's heart skipped a beat as a hesitant smile curved the corners of her mouth. “And why would that be?”

“I thought you might need some help getting your things down to the mercantile?” Jake explained. At Tammy's surprised look, he chuckled. “It's a small town – word travels fast.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “I should have thought. Actually, I'm finished

packing, I was just finishing up with the dishes before I planned to drag my things down the thoroughfare.”

Jake laughed. “No need for dragging. I’ll wait out here until you’re done and then I’ll help.”

Tammy was charmed by his kindness. “I am done actually. I’ll go fetch the steam trunk for you, the carpet bag I can handle by myself.”

“I’ll come in to get it myself. Mabel is very excited to meet you. Mr. Scott stopped by the mercantile yesterday to reassure her that she’s still employed. Oh, that might have been a little presumptuous of him, isn’t it up to you if she’s still employed?” Jake rambled as he picked up the steam trunk and carried it outside as if it weighed nothing at all.

“Uhm Jake... who is Mabel?” Tammy asked with clear confusion as she followed him down the porch and onto the dirt road of the thoroughfare.

His laughter floated on the breeze. “She’s the shop assistant at the mercantile. She’s been working for Karl since he opened the store.”

“Of course she’s employed then. I’m going to need someone to show me how everything works.” Tammy stopped for a moment and shook her head. “Jake, how am I going to manage a store? I’ve never managed anything in my life?”

Jake turned to her with a confident smile. “According to the gossip, you’ve buried a husband, traveled across the country only to bury Karl... I’d say you’ve managed quite well. You’ll be fine.”

His confidence in her made her feel hopeful that he was right. They were quiet for the rest of the way. When they reached the mercantile store, Tammy stopped and looked at the building. It was well kept and larger than she remembered. The house adjacent to it looked very similar to the one in which the Finleys lived. Her heart swelled in her chest. This wasn’t just a house and a shop; it was her future and she finally had her very own home, no strings attached.

A tear spilled over her cheek. “I’ll be forever grateful, Karl.”

Jake only smiled as if he knew now wasn't the time for questions. He waited until Tammy was ready before he led the way to the house. As soon as Tammy stepped into her home for the first time, the scent of lavender made her smile.

"He ordered it especially for your arrival," Jake explained setting down the trunk. "He was very excited to meet you."

Although the lavender flowers had dried, Tammy knew they would hold their scent for a while yet. She also knew that for as long as she lived, she would remember the scent of lavender as the aroma of freedom.

"Oh, hello!" a small voice said from the door. When Tammy turned to see who had spoken, she was surprised to find that the speaker was not so small. Without introduction, she knew the woman with the sturdy frame, round face, and more grey than black hair would be Mabel.

"Hello. You must be Mabel. I'm Tammy White," Tammy introduced herself, moving towards her.

Mabel's face flushed with pleasure. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Karl couldn't stop talking about you over the last few weeks. I know you would've brought him only happiness."

"Thank you, Mabel, that's a very kind thing to say." Tammy smiled gratefully. Mabel didn't hold judgment in her gaze but instead something close to admiration. "I can come and settle in later, why don't you show me the mercantile store."

"Of course, of course. I'm sure you're eager to see your new business. I just want to thank you for keeping me on, I wasn't sure if you would," Mabel admitted quietly.

Tammy laughed. "Why wouldn't I? I know nothing about the store and apparently you've been Karl's trusted helper since the very beginning."

"Well, you have been meeting the right people, that's for sure," Mabel said, smiling at Jake.

"I've gotta get back to the surgery, but you're in good hands with Mabel."

Jake smiled at Tammy.

“Thank you for your trouble, Jake,” Tammy said.

Jake left the two women alone and Mabel began to chuckle. “Jake, is it? We all call him doc.”

“Oh, I... is it wrong?” Tammy asked not wanting to make a bad impression on the town folk.

“Not at all,” Mabel assured her. “He’s a good man and it’s nice to see him befriending you. Spends most of his time at the surgery. He and Karl used to be good friends.”

Tammy nodded. “I see.” She felt a little awkward about the conversation since she felt that Mabel was urging her to get better acquainted with Jake when she had only buried Karl the day before. She glanced out the window at Jake’s frame growing smaller as he walked further away. She wondered if in time they could actually get better acquainted.

She hadn’t married Karl, but although they hadn’t shared a life, they had made a commitment. Right now her only commitment should be to the mercantile store.

CHAPTER 12



“Seems like you were born to be a shop owner,” Jake said glancing over his shoulder at the numerous people in the store.

Tammy blushed and shook her head. “It’s Mabel, she’s really been a sweetheart. I don’t think there is a thing she doesn’t know. Every time I wonder which supplier to send an order to, she’s right there helping me with the correct details from whom to order.”

“That’s Mabel for you. She settled in town shortly after Karl and I. Arrived in town parched and sunburnt after walking for days. Her husband passed away on the Oregon trail and she kept heading south until she found a wagon willing to give her a ride. The wagon was robbed by highway men but Mabel managed to escape. That’s when she found Sanderson, and she’s been here ever since.”

“A chip off the old block then,” Tammy said with admiration in her voice as she watched Mabel help a customer to measure out flour. “Is that all for you today?”

Jake glanced down at the sugar, boiled sweets, and chocolates that had only just arrived in the store the day before. “Not a healthy diet, I know.” He chuckled self-consciously. “One day perhaps I might find a wife who will be willing to cook for me.”

Their eyes met and not for the first time Tammy wondered why the air

seemed to grow thick. Over the last two months, she had settled into Sanderson and into her role as its store owner. The people were friendly and welcoming, and the church services led by Michael were rejuvenating. But every time she saw Jake, she felt as if she was thrown a little off balance. Tammy wasn't sure if it was because of the dream that kept coming to mind, or what the reason could be. But in a strange way, she enjoyed the feeling.

"Perhaps," Tammy said with a shy smile as she totaled his purchases.

Jake gave her the money and winked at her. "Good luck, it seems everyone is going to spend their weekly wages in one day."

Tammy laughed. "It's like this every Friday. Mabel and I have started keeping the store open later to give everyone a chance to stop by after getting their wages."

"The railroad company has truly brought a lot of work to Sanderson." Jake smiled. "Good afternoon to you, Tammy."

"To you too," Tammy said before Jake turned and left the shop.

More people arrived and Tammy all too soon became too busy to even think about Jake or the unlikely friendship that had blossomed between them. Mabel was moving between the shoppers, helping them to find what they needed, while Tammy rang up item after item.

It was a good day for the store, better than most, she thought. She reached for the next customer's purchases and began adding up the total. When she looked up to tell the customer what he owed, it was to find that she was looking right down a barrel of fun.

"You don't say nuttin' now or your friend back there gets hurt," the man snarled with an evil grin.

Tammy's eyes flew to the back of the store where another man was holding Mabel at gunpoint.

"Please don't hurt her, I'll do anything, just tell me what to do," Tammy said feeling more afraid than she had ever felt in her life.

"So eager to please," the gunman said, tilting his head. The way in which

he looked at her made Tammy extremely uncomfortable. “I’m thinking I want more than what I came for.”

“What do you want?” Tammy asked in a hushed whisper. Customers were still moving about the store, completely oblivious to the fact that they were involved in a robbery.

“Money, honey,” the man laughed, his voice raspy. “All the cash you got.”

Tammy opened the cash register and with shaking hands pulled out all the money before tossing it onto the counter for him to take.

“I might look dumb, but I ain’t stupid. The money in your safe as well.” He used his gun to point to the safe that was at Tammy’s feet.

Her breath caught, wishing she had gone to the bank that morning. She always banked the takings on Saturdays but now... he would take her entire week’s income. The hesitation was clearly evident on her face. Suddenly a shot was fired and Tammy jumped.

“All right, I’ll get it. I’ll get it!”

The customers streamed out of the shop in panic. Tammy looked over at the back of the store to see that Mabel was still unharmed. Relief washed over her. No amount of money was worth a life, she reasoned as she fell to her knees and began to work the combination on the safe. When the metal clinked, she turned the knob and opened the heavy door. She used one of the bags on the floor and began stuffing her week’s earnings into the bag.

In the back of the safe was a gun.

Her eyes kept returning to the gun, wondering if she would have the courage to use it. At the last moment, she reached for it and hid it under her cardigan as she stood up with the bag of money.

“Yee-haw! We’ve cleaned them out, let’s get out of here,” the man cried out to his partner.

Before Tammy knew what was happening, shots began to ring through the air. Both robbers were shooting wildly, aiming at nothing in particular.

Between shots, the one cried out, “You never saw us, but if anyone asks, we’re the Brothers.”

Only then did Tammy see Mabel lying on the floor, clutching her leg. A dark stain spread on the wooden floor. Tammy had never thought she would ever be angry enough to fire a weapon but without a second thought, she pulled out the revolver and aimed at the man holding the bag of money.

“Leave now, or your partner will be leaving alone. You got your money, so go on, git!”

The man began to laugh making it clear he didn’t think that she would have the courage to pull the trigger. Tammy closed her eyes and pulled the trigger, the loud explosion of the gun causing her to drop it to the floor.

“She’s crazier than a donkey in heat!” one of the gunmen cried out before he and his fellow bandit rushed out of the store.

Tammy glanced at the gun on the floor and knew she would think about it later, but right now she needed to get to Mabel. Tammy rushed towards the back of the store and Mabel.

“Mabel?” Tammy asked, falling to her knees. “Are you all right?”

Mabel’s face was pale with pain. “He got me, thought he missed until I felt the sting.”

Tammy didn’t hesitate, she pulled Mabel’s skirt up to see the gunshot wound on Mabel’s leg. She ripped a piece of her own skirt and quickly tied a tourniquet above the wound. She wasn’t sure if what she was doing was right, but the volume of blood pooling around Mabel caused Tammy to realize that she needed to stop the bleeding.

“Ouch!” Mabel cried out as Tammy tightened it.

“I know it hurts, Mabel; I’ll go fetch Jake,” Tammy said pushing herself up from the floor. She was about to run out of the store when Jake ran in.

“Tammy? Are you hurt? Where were you shot?” Jake asked, wasting no time in giving her a quick once over with his eyes.

Tammy shook her head. “I’m fine, I’m fine. It’s Mabel. They got her in

the leg. I tried to stop the bleeding...”

Jake nodded even as he noticed Mabel in the back. He raced to kneel beside her. “How bad is the pain, Mabel?”

“Pretty bad,” Mabel said with a weak smile. “It burns, never thought it would burn.”

“It’s your nerve endings that are exposed,” Jake said as he began to work on the wound. He asked Tammy to hand him items from his bag and she did as she was told. But the blood wouldn’t stop coming. He removed a piece of shrapnel with forceps and held it up. “I don’t think there’s more but the bleeding won’t stop. Do you have gunpowder?”

Tammy nodded and rushed to the shelf where the gunpowder was kept. She returned moments later and was visibly confused when Jake began sprinkling a little into the wound.

“Oh boy,” Mabel said, her eyes widening.

Jake handed her a piece of wood from his bag before pulling out a match. “Bite on this, Mabel.”

Mabel did as she was told, but Tammy still wasn’t sure what was going on. “Jake, what...”

Before she could finish, he lit the gunpowder and small flames danced on Mabel’s leg for a moment. The scent of burnt meat and gunpowder filled the air.

“Why did you do that?” Tammy asked, horrified.

Mabel gasped for breath as she took the piece of wood out from between her teeth. “It cauterizes the wound. Quickest way.”

“Mabel is right. If we had a fire close by, I would’ve used a blade instead. See, the bleeding has stopped,” Jake said cleaning the wound again.

To her surprise, there was indeed no more blood oozing from the wound. “Thank heavens. Thank you, Jake, if you hadn’t come.”

“Don’t thank me, you did well, Tammy. Putting a tourniquet above the wound was the best thing you could do,” Jake said as he began bandaging

Mabel's leg. "Where did you learn that?"

"I didn't... I just..." Tammy shrugged.

"Well you've got a natural feel for helping people, it doesn't surprise me that you would think of that." Jake stood up and Tammy walked him to the door. "How much did they get away with? Someone said you shot at them?"

Tammy laughed nervously, adrenalin still rushing through her veins. "My whole week's income. And yes, I did shoot, although it was more to scare them off than to kill any one of them."

"Well it worked, they raced out of town in a cloud of dust. The sheriff and a few men set off after them." Jake searched her gaze before he tenderly brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Mabel will be fine, Tammy. How are you doing?"

"A little shaken I suppose," Tammy admitted.

Jake smiled at her and it felt again as if there were unsaid words between them. For a few moments, their eyes held.

"The sheriff will want a statement when he returns. Why don't you help Mabel home? I'd like her off that leg for a few days at least."

"Will do, doc," Tammy said with a smile.

Jake frowned. "I think that's the first time you called me doc; it sounds wrong somehow."

Tammy shrugged. "It does, goodbye, Jake."

Tammy watched him leave and knew that tonight she would be praying for God to bless Jake and to help her figure out what was unsaid between her and him.

CHAPTER 13



“*I* feel like such a fool.” Tammy laughed self-consciously as she hid her face with her hands.

“It happens to all of us,” Jake said as he gently inspected her foot. “If you wanted to move furniture around, why didn’t you just ask for help?”

Tammy shrugged. “I’m trying to be independent, if you haven’t noticed.”

Jake held her foot in his hands and smiled up at her with a doubtful look. “Being independent doesn’t mean you can’t ask for help. Last month when I ripped my surgery coat with the scalpel, you offered to sew it for me. Does that mean I’m not independent?”

Tammy laughed remembering the incident. Jake hadn’t even realized he had ripped his coat until he came into the store at four o’clock with a large gaping tear on one side. “That was different, I used to be a seamstress.”

When she and Jake bantered like they were now, she wondered if Mabel wasn’t perhaps right. More than once, Mabel had said that Jake only used to come into the store once or twice a week, whereas now he was in there almost daily.

Should she read something into that like Mabel was, or were they simply just friends?

Jake frowned. “So because I wasn’t a furniture mover before, I can’t help you?”

“That’s not... ouch!” Tammy cried out when he applied pressure to one of the smaller bones in her foot.

“Yup, looks like a tiny fracture, Miss Independent.” This time when he looked at her it was with mischief and teasing in his eyes.

Tammy shook her head. “That’s horrible!”

Jake sighed heavily in agreement. “We’ll have to stabilize it and you’ll have to stay off it for at least four months. It will need to be raised for most of the day and unfortunately, I don’t have any pain medication at the moment. I’m still waiting for a delivery.”

Tammy’s eyes widened with horror. “Jake, but what about the store, the orders? I can’t be on my back for four months!”

Jake shrugged. “Take this as a life lesson, Tammy. Stop trying to be independent when it isn’t necessary or fate will render you completely dependent.”

Tammy sigh. “Oh shoot, did I really have to move that dresser? It was perfectly fine where it was, now I can’t even move it back.”

Jake stood up with a shake of his head. “I would’ve offered to move it for you, but I don’t want to offend you.”

“So what happens now?” Tammy asked looking at her bruised foot. It didn’t look that bad, but Jake was the doctor and she trusted his opinion.

“Now? Now you get up and go back to your shop and holler if you need help moving something,” Jake said with a cocky grin.

“But my foot....” Tammy trailed off wondering if he was going to do something about the fracture.

“Your foot will be perfectly fine. A small fracture like that usually heals by itself. Just keep a little weight off it for the first few days. I’m going to wrap your foot to make sure it doesn’t swell too much. Other than that, you’re good to go.”

Tammy gasped; her eyes narrowed with playful anger. “You oaf! You had me worrying for no reason at all.”

Jake laughed. "I had to scare you into not moving furniture on your own."

Tammy reached for a cloth beside her and tossed it at him. He grabbed it and smiled at her in a way that made her heart race. "I'll go fetch some bandages."

As soon as Jake disappeared around the corner, she pressed her cool hands to her flushed cheeks. For the first time, she recognized the feeling and the unsaid words. It had happened to her before.

A long time ago when she had first gone to stay with Wayne and his mother. Over time she had fallen for him. At first, it was friendly banter and meaningful looks until neither of them could deny their feelings any longer.

Now Tammy realized she was falling again. This time she was falling for Jake.

Her breath caught at the thought just as Jake came around the corner.

"Actually I do have something for the pain," Jake smiled thinking her gasp was pain related.

Tammy smiled gratefully and quickly looked away. He bandaged her foot and tapped it lightly when he was done. "Come on, up you get. I'll help you back to the store."

Tammy did as she was told. When he slipped an arm around her waist to help her hobble across the road, she felt his touch to be warm. When they reached the mercantile store, Jake made sure she was steady on the porch before he searched her eyes. "I'll be around later to move that dresser back."

Tammy was about to argue when he winked at her and crossed the road. She let out a huge sigh wondering what she was going to do. Here she was running the store of the man she was supposed to marry, only to be falling in love with another.

She smiled wryly up at the sky. "*Lord, you sure have a way of surprising me with the unexpected.*"

She hadn't heard Mabel come out until her voice spoke beside her. "The unexpected is usually the best surprise." Mabel looked at Jake walking away

and smiled knowingly. “Come on, dear, let’s get you inside and off that foot.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



“*H*ere he comes again. Twice a day this week,” Mabel said with a wink before she disappeared into the back of the store.

Tammy glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was almost closing time. It was unlike Jake to come by at this time of the day.

“Hello, Jake.”

Jake stepped through the door with a wide smile. “I see that foot is all healed. Must be my wonderful skills as a doctor.”

Tammy couldn’t help but laugh. “Either that or the way you made me fear for my life with a fake diagnosis.”

Jake shrugged before he leaned on the cash-out counter. “Perhaps. I’ve got a bit of a problem that I need your help with?”

“You do?” Tammy asked, surprised. Jake was a capable and respected man in town and she never thought he’d come to her for help, except if it was sewing related, of course.

“Yes. I’ve been thinkin’ ‘bout that conversation we had about being independent. I have some questions I need you to clear up for me. The diner is servin’ meatloaf so I thought I might spare you a night of cooking and take you there instead?” Jake asked hopefully.

Tammy’s heart skipped a beat even as her mouth curved into a smile. “You’re inviting me to dinner. To clear up the matter, of course?”

Jake smiled with half a shrug. “Yup, something like that.” He turned and searched the store for Mabel, who was out of sight but close enough to be eavesdropping. “Mabel, would you mind locking up?”

Mabel stepped out from behind an aisle with a knowing look. “I wouldn’t mind at all.”

Tammy couldn’t help but chuckle. “Very kind of you.”

Jake waited until Tammy came around the counter before dazzling her with a smile. Although they were both pretending that the evening out was only about having a conversation, they both knew that they were in actual fact going on a date.

Something she never had with Wayne. Or with any other man, for that matter. Her heart was fluttering and her tummy doing summersaults as they walked down the boardwalk to the diner. When they reached the diner, Jake opened the door for her.

Tammy smiled up at him feeling quite privileged to be dining out with the town doctor. She was barely through the door when she realized all eyes in the diner had turned to them.

She felt Jake’s hand rest on the small of her back before he whispered behind her. “Don’t pay them no bother.”

He led her to the closest open table and pulled out a chair for her. Tammy sat down, feeling all the patrons in the diner suddenly talking in hushed voices. She couldn’t seem to calm her racing heart until Jake’s voice penetrated her discomfort.

“Tammy, look at me. We’ve got nothing to hide. It’s better we share dinner here than at our homes. That would only tarnish your reputation.” His voice was quiet and gentle and coaxing.

“I know, it just feels.... I’ve never done this before,” Tammy admitted quietly.

Jake’s laughter floated to her over the table. “You’ve been married and were about to get married again and you’ve never had dinner with a man

before?”

Tammy was about to nod when she began to laugh. “Of course I’ve had dinner with a man before, just not... like this.”

Jake’s hand slipped over the table but he pulled it back just as fast. “Now, holding your hand would raise some eyebrows. So about this independence thing – is it a forever thing, or just for the moment thing?”

Tammy thought for a moment when the server arrived. Both she and Jake ordered the meatloaf with coffee. Once the server left, Tammy let out a sigh. “I think it comes from childhood, to be honest. My father... he wasn’t a very dependable person. Then, when I had Wayne, I never had to worry about anything. After his passing, I realized I knew nothing. I didn’t know about the bills, the cost of living, the taxes... I was drowning for a while... Right at my lowest point, I promised myself I would never drown again.”

She expected Jake to argue but he smiled instead, with understanding in his gaze. “You do know that being in a relationship, or married, doesn’t mean you have to be shielded or kept in the dark.” He took a sip of his coffee before he met her gaze again. “You can be taken care of and still be part of the decision making. That’s the type of relationship I’d like to have one day...”

He let the words trail off leaving the rest unsaid. *With you...*

Tammy hadn’t thought finding love would ever be possible after Karl’s death. With the running of the store and all the responsibilities she now had on her shoulders, she wasn’t sure she would ever have the time. But now... as always, a lot was left unsaid. The mere fact that Jake had invited her out to dinner at least gave her hope that Jake might just have feelings of affection for her as well.

She was afraid to voice her feelings or even to admit them to herself, but perhaps after a few more dinners or a few more conversations she would know if Jake felt the same way. She had been let down by life in the past and didn’t want to suffer that pain again.

Even if Jake did feel the same way she did, did she really want to risk her heart again? She remembered how shattered she had been after Wayne's death and wondered if she would be able to survive such a loss again.

"Tammy? Your food is growing cold," Jake interrupted her thoughts. "I didn't mean to offend or frighten you off."

"No, no, it isn't that at all. I'm just... I guess I'm just tired," Tammy said pushing her food around on her plate.

"The meatloaf is good tonight," Jake said with some pleasure.

Tammy laughed at the change of subject. "You'd know, wouldn't you? You eat here on most nights unless you succumb to your sweet tooth."

Jake smiled. "That's why you shouldn't shop at the same mercantile all the time. They know too much."

Tammy smiled. "There is only the one mercantile in town."

"The best." Jake winked.

For a moment the doubts disappeared and Tammy remembered the dream she'd had in Boston. Could it be that the reason God had brought her to Sanderson had less to do with Karl and more to do with the handsome doctor smiling back at her right now?

CHAPTER 15



Tammy couldn't seem to wipe the grin off her face as she held the small posy of wildflowers. She reached for the note and her heart simply stopped with joy.

JOIN me for a picnic at the creek. It's a quiet day and I'd rather spend it with you than watch the store from my window.

J

"THANK YOU, LUCAS," Tammy said handing the boy who had brought her the flowers a boiled sweet as a reward and a thank you.

Over the last six weeks, she and Jake had shared numerous meals at the diner and had taken a good many walks together as well. Had Tammy not know any better, she would've thought they were courting. But surely when you were being courted, a man made his intentions clear?

Or did he?

She felt so out of her depth with the whole situation that she decided to stop overthinking it and just enjoy every moment she had with Jake. He was right: it was a quiet afternoon. Quiet enough that there wasn't even a single

customer in the store.

She had told Mabel to take the afternoon off since her leg was still giving her trouble whenever she spent too much time on it. Although she didn't deduct it from her wages, Mabel worked only half days most since she'd been shot. Tammy didn't mind at all since she felt partly responsible for Mabel's injury. Mabel was working for her when it happened, after all. Injured while working in the store.

She took the money out of the cash register and was about to put it in the safe when she heard footsteps sounding at the back of the store. Just as she was about to stand up to see who was there, a man came walking towards her.

Tammy felt chills running down her spine as fear clutched her heart with a tight fist. "You?"

The man snarled at her. "Yeah, it's me. Now, why don't you open up that safe, or didn't you learn the first time around?"

Tammy knew stubbornness was going to get her hurt, but she wouldn't be robbed twice by the same robber. "You shot Mabel." Tammy accused him in a low voice. "What did she ever do to you?"

"Collateral damage. Out here in the West, we take what we need. A man builds his own dreams. Now enough talkin'; get the money," he demanded while pointing towards the open safe with his gun.

Tammy considered reaching for the gun again but remembered what had happened the last time. She wasn't sure where Lucas was and if he was still on the boardwalk. She wouldn't risk more collateral damage and she wouldn't allow herself to be walked all over yet again.

"No. You can find a different place on which to build your dreams. Sanderson doesn't want you here," Tammy said in a firm voice, realizing that she had become part of the town and its community.

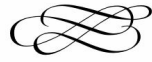
"Is that so? Well, I ain't goin' nowhere without what you've got in that safe." He moved closer and Tammy felt her heart kick into motion as adrenalin rushed through her veins. She stood in front of the safe and jutted

out her chin. “No. I knew you were back there. I’ve already sent for the sheriff; he’ll be here any moment,” she lied through her teeth.

“In that case, enough chit-chat.” His grin spread and before Tammy knew it a splitting pain shot through her skull right before everything went black.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



Jake glanced down at the ring between his fingers and felt excitement race through his body. He knew it was wrong at the time, but from the very moment he laid eyes on Tammy, something seemed to have slipped into place.

At first, he had kept his distance, knowing it wouldn't be appropriate to court a grieving woman, although she and Karl had never been married. But over the last six weeks, since that very first night on which they ate meatloaf together at the diner, Jake had fallen for Tammy with all his heart.

He had thought it might just be an infatuation, but it wasn't. It was her kindness, her generosity, the way her smile lit up a room and more importantly it was the way he felt when he was around her. He felt like he was the best version of himself.

He wanted to be that person for the rest of his life.

He wanted to ask Tammy to spend the rest of hers with him.

Today had been carefully planned. With Mabel's help, he had sent word around town that no one should go to the store that afternoon. He had kept an eye on the store and just as he had hoped, it was deadly quiet.

Earlier that morning he had gone to the creek to pick the wildflowers that had just burst into bloom. Then he had written the note that he asked Lucas to take to Tammy on his behalf. Now, all that was left to do was to put the

picnic basket in the wagon, remember the ring, and wait for Tammy to join him.

With the help of the ladies at the diner, he had managed to pack a seasonal variety of fresh picnic fare including freshly pressed lemonade and an assortment of cheeses. The variety had cost him quite a packet since most of the items had to be delivered from the next town, but it would be worth it.

Tammy was worth it.

After packing the basket, a blanket, and a few more items onto the back of his wagon, he glanced down the road at the mercantile store. The door was still open although Jake hadn't seen anyone go in since the boy who had delivered the flowers and note and then left.

Jake checked his pocket watch and decided that she was probably just closing up and maybe changing into something less formal for their picnic. He waited another five minutes until he couldn't help but feel that something was wrong. She wouldn't have gone to the house without locking up the store first, and the door was still wide open.

He sauntered closer, not wanting to rush her, but concern mounted with every passing second. He was about a hundred yards from the mercantile store when he saw a man run out of the store and to the horse he had tied to a hitching post across the thoroughfare.

He had a bag under one arm and a pistol in his hand.

Fear and adrenalin coursed through Jake as he began to run. All he could think of was Tammy. He didn't have to look twice to know that this man was from out of town. He also didn't have to guess what was in the bag he stuffed into his saddleback before mounting his horse.

As the horse galloped out of town leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, Jake ran into the mercantile store.

"Tammy?" he cried out with worry as he glanced around the empty store. He couldn't see her and she wasn't answering him which caused him all the more concern.

Jake stopped for a moment to catch his breath when he saw her foot sticking out from behind the checkout counter. Within seconds he had moved around the counter and was at her side.

She lay unconscious, cramped into the small space. She had a bruise forming on her head and regardless of him calling her name over and over again, Tammy failed to respond.

The doctor in him pushed his emotions aside as he began to do a quick assessment. He checked her pupils, felt her pulse, and made sure her breathing was normal before he began to lift her. She weighed barely more than a feather, Jake thought as he held her in his arms.

Her head fell back, completely oblivious in her unconscious state. Jake wasn't sure how hard the knock on her head had been, but he prayed that a little smelling salt would wake her once he had her inside the surgery.

He carried her out of the mercantile and across the road, wishing there had been someone within earshot to send after the robber.

“Tammy, please Tammy, you have to hang on,” Jake pleaded as he walked. “Lord, please don't let this be it. Don't take her away from me. She still has so much life to live. There is so much I want to give her, that I want to share with her. Please, Lord, help me to wake her. Help me to care for her and help me to bring her back.” Jake's prayer was desperate as he walked into the surgery and made his way to the recovery room.

He set her gently on the bed and she didn't move.

He rushed into the surgery to find his smelling salts and held them beneath her nose. Usually when he used smelling salts to revive a patient, it barely took a few seconds. But Tammy didn't even flinch.

Jake felt helpless, not knowing what else he could do.

The woman he loved with all his heart lay limp and unconscious before him and for the first time in his profession as a doctor, Jake knew there was nothing to be done except to wait and pray.

CHAPTER 17



Tammy could hear voices in the distance but, as had happened before, the darkness swallowed her before she could open her eyes. Although she wasn't aware of time or place, she had been in and out of consciousness over the last two days.

Janet and Michael had been by to see her several times, saying prayers for her recovery at her bedside. Mabel had come to pay her a visit, begging her to get better because she felt guilty for not being there when the robbers returned.

The town had held a vigil in the church the night before. Praying for Tammy's recovery and for the robber to be brought to justice before he paid another visit to their small, usually peaceful town. Only Tammy wasn't aware of any of this.

It was as if a thick fog had taken over her mind and every time she tried to fight her way through, she found the fog clouding her thoughts and swallowing her within its darkness all the more.

Again she managed to fight her way through and felt a pounding headache had taken residence in her skull. The pain was so bad that it made her eyes flinch, but she couldn't manage to open them just yet. She tried to think beyond her vision and her pain and drew in a deep breath when she heard Jake's voice.

His soothing baritone voice made her breathe easier, knowing that she wasn't alone. The memory of the last few days returned and Tammy remembered the sharp pain to her skull before everything went black.

Had she been shot? Struck? She couldn't remember. All she knew was that she refused to allow the fog to drag her under again. Instead, she focused on Jake's voice until she could understand the words.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.” Jake paused for a moment before he continued with a prayer. “God, please let this be a time for healing, not a time for death. Let this be a time for the celebration of our love and not a time for saying goodbye. I beg of you, Lord, I love this woman with all my heart, please heal her. Please let her come back to me. You gave me the skills to heal the sick, but some matters are in Your hands alone. Only You can heal the injury Tammy has suffered, Lord. Only You, Lord. Please, let me love her, let me marry her, let me spend my life thanking You for bringing her back.”

Tammy felt a tear spill from her eyes. Although the headache was making it hard to concentrate, joy was making her heart swell with love. She had hoped that Jake felt this way but she could never have imagined that he would declare his love for her so flagrantly to the Lord. Only a man who knew his own heart would have the courage to do that.

She tried to open her eyes and although they fluttered at first, she finally managed to keep them open.

Jake was sitting on a chair beside her bed with a bible open in his hands.

Tears were quietly streaming over his cheeks; he didn't even bother to brush them away. Her mouth curved into a smile knowing that she loved him in exactly the same way. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, she wanted to spend her life thanking the Lord for giving her another chance at happiness.

"Jake..." her voice was raspy, her throat dry.

Jake sniffed and turned to her as if he had imagined hearing her and then he gasped and reached for her hand. "Tammy?"

"What verse was that?" Tammy asked sleepily, the pain growing stronger with every waking moment.

"It's *Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*. It brought you back to me, I just know it did. Let me take a look at you," Jake said, quickly falling into the role of physician.

Tammy patiently waited until he was done checking her pupils and her blood pressure. He gently probed the bruise on her head.

"Was I shot?" Tammy asked, hoping this wasn't just a last hurrah.

"No, my love, you weren't shot. You just suffered a terrible blow to the head. You had a concussion. If it's as severe as this one, your body's way of healing is to keep you unconscious so it can focus on healing your brain," Jake explained patiently.

"Clever body then." Tammy smiled weakly. "I enjoyed listening to you."

Jake frowned even as he wrapped her hand in both of his. "What did you hear?"

Tammy blinked slowly, fighting off the sleep. "That you love me..."

"I do, Tammy. I was going to take you to the picnic to tell you just that. I love you with all my heart. I want you to spend the rest of your life with me. I even have a ring, I don't know where it is right now, but please just tell me you feel the same," Jake rambled as if he was afraid that she was going to fall asleep again.

Tammy nodded. "It's nice to hear, especially since I want to spend the rest of my life with you as well." She closed her eyes as the headache

pounded even harder. “I just went to get rid of this headache first.”

“I’m such a fool. I should’ve thought. I’ll go get you something for the pain,” Jake said, moving as he spoke.

He returned with laudanum and offered it to her.

“No, I don’t want to sleep again,” Tammy said weakly.

“Just a little to help with the pain, I promise you’ll wake up,” Jake said confidently. “You have to because I want to marry you.”

Tammy accepted the medication simply because she was desperate for the pain to ease. Before she dozed off, she smiled at Jake with sleepy eyes. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

CHAPTER 18



Tammy stood in front of the mirror and couldn't help but shed a tear of happiness. The last time she had married, her dress had been a simple day dress because she had not been able to afford anything as luxurious as the beautiful wedding dress that Janet had gifted her on this occasion.

This time they wouldn't go to the chapel and get wed in a hurry before her husband had to leave for his shift at the docks. No, they would have a wonderful wedding, with the entire town of Sanderson in attendance.

They were having a reception at the diner and of course meatloaf would be on offer. It was the perfect wedding but most of all Tammy was grateful because it was with the perfect man. After her concussion, he had cared for her until she was back to her normal self. Although she still had headaches now and then, she didn't allow it to interfere with the happiness she felt inside.

Janet and Michael had offered for her to get ready at their home since it was closer to the church. Because Tammy didn't have her father around, the mayor offered to walk her down the aisle. It still amazed her that she had become such an integral part of the small town of Sanderson. She wasn't the newcomer anymore. She was Tammy who owned the mercantile. She was the doctor's fiancée and today she would become the doctor's wife.

Tammy opened the door and stepped out only to hear Janet gasp. “You look even more amazing than I did. Oh, Tammy, what a wonderful day to get married.”

Tammy smiled. “I know, isn’t it?”

It was a hot summer's day and although most everyone was complaining about the heat, Tammy enjoyed every second of it. After living her life in Boston, Tammy hadn't known what it felt like not to be cold in winter. She had become accustomed to the more temperate weather of Texas and she would never miss Boston.

Every now and then she thought of her parents, but not long enough to regret leaving. She had tried to make amends with them but they had made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with her. She kept them in her prayers and often wondered how they were doing, but Tammy couldn't spend her life fearing her father.

No, she wanted to spend her life with a man like Jake. A man who loved her unconditionally. One whom God had brought to her in a dream. A man who was patient, kind, and generous. A man who had once declared his love for her through prayer, directly to God.

“We’d better get going. The mayor is waiting for you out front; everyone is already seated,” Janet said while pulling her gloves over her fingers.

Tammy nodded. “Jake?”

“Is smiling like a fool,” Janet laughed. “Who would’ve thought you’d snag the most eligible man in town?”

“Definitely not me.” Tammy laughed as they walked to the church.

Janet slipped inside to take her seat as Tammy took her place beside the mayor. He gave her a warm smile and then the doors were opened and Tammy walked down the aisle of the church for the first time in her life as the bride. Every eye in the church was on her, but Tammy only had eyes for one person.

The man waiting for her at the end of the aisle. Jake’s hair was neatly

combed, his dress suit brand new and his smile holding the promise of a beautiful life.

She kept walking even as she thanked the Lord in her prayers. There had been so many times in her life that she had doubted the plans He had for her life. So many times she had thought that He had abandoned her. But now she only had to look at the towns folk cheering her on, at her new friends, and at Jake to know that every challenge she had faced in the past was necessary because it was leading her to this very moment in time.

When she reached the front of the church, the mayor took his seat and Michael welcomed her in his role as pastor. She turned and met Jake's gaze, seeing her future in his eyes. She vaguely heard Michael's sermon about love and patience, but all she could think of was all the blessings that the future would hold.

"Do you, Jake, take Tammy to be your wife?" Michael asked, breaking through her thoughts.

Jake took Tammy's hand and offered her a beaming grin. "I sure do."

"And do you, Tammy, take Jake to be your husband?"

Tammy laughed. "With all my heart."

"Then I guess, Jake, it's time for you to kiss your bride." Michael laughed.

The whole community cheered as Jake lightly brushed a kiss over her lips. He didn't pull away, but remained close as he whispered a promise in her ear. "I promise you will never regret today. I'm going to be the best husband."

Tammy smiled. "I know that I won't regret it. I love you, Jake."

He pulled her close for a hug and in that moment, Tammy knew that she had finally found her happily ever after. She had needed to suffer her father's abuse to be rescued by Wayne. She had needed to love Wayne to know that love existed.

She needed to lose Wayne to remember to appreciate it.

Had it not been for Karl, she would never have come to Sanderson and she would never have had the opportunity to start a brand new life.

And she would never have met Jake.

As they walked up the aisle as a married couple, Tammy knew that she would never question the challenges God brought across her path. No. Not ever again. She had faced so many impossible obstacles and been let down by so many people. The very people who should have put her first in their lives. Could it be that God was only laying the groundwork so that she would know for certain when she met the man whom God had intended for her? Could it be that she was meant to start a family here in small-town Texas, blessed in abundance as she had been, through unbelievable trial and circumstance? Could it be that her happily ever after had been at the end of a road that was always predestined for her?

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE



The sun's beams danced on her skin in the early morning light. Tammy knew it was time to get up, but she wanted to stay in bed for just a few moments longer. As she did every morning of her life, she thanked the Lord for the blessings bestowed on her and for her wonderful life before she even fully woke up.

Somewhere in the house she could hear scuffling and noise, but it had become part of everyday life over time. Having three children in five years was no easy feat, but Tammy wouldn't have had it any other way. Jake was a wonderful father and although Tammy often doubted that she was a good mother, like any mother did, she loved her children with all her heart. Even if it meant that she hardly slept anymore.

Olivia, at the age of four, was the light of her father's life. Not only did she resemble him in appearance, but she resembled him in personality as well. Her dolls were always suffering some kind of malady for which she simply had to find a treatment.

As for Wayne whose second name was Karl, named for the men that had led Tammy to Jake, he was a whirlwind of energy and curiosity. Tammy was always either keeping the incorrigible three year old from getting hurt, running off, or trying to get him to sit quietly for more than five minutes at a stretch. She didn't know who he took after, but Tammy loved feeding off his

energy to get her through the day.

Then there was Wendy. At only nine months old, Wendy had a calmness that astonished most of the mothers in town. Wendy hardly ever cried, never fussed when it was time to sleep and simply loved the company of her siblings.

Tammy could still remember a time when she felt as if she had no one in the world. Now she had a beautiful, busy, and demanding family. Although she still owned the mercantile, she had appointed a manager who now lived next to the mercantile store and managed it by day. Tammy wouldn't voice her suspicions but, as of late, it was clear that the store manager, a middle-aged man, had more interest in Mabel than he did in the store.

With the town's population growing by the month, Jake's surgery was busier than ever before. Tammy was not only proud of his dedication to his profession, but for the way he never refused to help anyone in need, even if they couldn't afford his services.

"Ma, come on, get up. We're going on the 'versary picnic," Olivia said, blowing into the room like a whirlwind.

Tammy had barely opened her eyes when Wayne jumped on the bed and started to shake her. "It's 'versary day! It's 'versary day!"

Tammy laughed as she stretched. "It's anniversary. It's the day Pa and I got married. Five years today."

"I remembered," Jake said from the door. In one arm, he held Wendy and in his other a cake with five candles.

It was moments like these that Tammy knew she had the best husband in the world. Jake had a way of making everything special, even if it meant getting a cake from the diner with which to celebrate their love, resplendent with five candles. Her heart overflowed with joy. "Me too."

He handed Wendy to her and once the baby was snuggled on her lap, Jake lit the candles. The older children blew the candles out and Jake met her gaze with a smile. "Make a wish, my love."

Tammy shook her head. “There isn’t a single thing I would want to wish for. Everything I’ve always wanted is right here in this room.”

“No, Ma, you have to make a wish. It’s the rules. Besides, if you don’t, Pa won’t give you your gift!” Olivia protested.

“Livvy, the gift was supposed to be a secret!” Jake reprimanded playfully.

“I’ll make a wish,” Tammy said in order to play along gamely. “I wish that Jake would look under the bed.”

Jake chuckled even as both he and Wayne quickly kneeled beside the bed. He allowed Wayne to pull the box out but he opened it himself. Inside was a brand-new doctor’s coat, with the words Dr. Jake embroidered smartly onto the chest. “Tammy, it’s wonderful. Thank you,” Jake beamed, slipping into the coat.

Tammy smiled. “Not as wonderful as the man who wears it.”

“Pa, give her the gift now,” Olivia insisted once more.

Jake and Tammy laughed that the children were more excited about their anniversary than they were. Jake shrugged and walked out of the room. When he returned a short while later, he let out a disappointed sigh. “I don’t know where it is. Livvy, Wayne, you’d better come help me find it.”

“She had it!” Wayne complained.

Livvy put her hands on her hips with a narrowed look. “You had it last.”

“Children, don’t argue. Come, I’ll help you find it,” Tammy said pushing back the blankets. She stood up with Wendy cradled in her arms and followed Jake and the children into the living room.

She saw it the moment she stepped through the door. “Jake?”

Jake shrugged. “I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout them, but apparently if you want one, that’s the best one on the market. Had it brought all the way from Houston.”

Tammy couldn’t wipe the smile from her face as she gave Wendy to Jake before rushing to her gift. She let her hand glide over the polished wood before turning to her husband. “Jake, this is a White Treadle Sewing

Machine.”

“I know.” Jake smiled. “You once mentioned how you missed working with a sewing machine, I thought you might find it handy with all the clothes you’re making for the children.”

Tammy’s face lit up as she turned to her husband. “I never thought I’d enjoy sewing after working at the factory during my previous life in Boston, but now... Can the ‘versary picnic wait?”

Jake laughed. “Unfortunately not, the basket is packed and the kids are ready. But I promise you that tomorrow you can spend the whole day sewing. In that box are some fabrics that Janet insisted I order as well. There is one condition attached to the sewing machine though...”

“What condition?” Tammy asked with a frown.

“The first thing you sew simply has to be a dress for yourself. You do such a good job of taking care of me and the children but it is way overdue that you do something for yourself.”

Tammy smiled lovingly at her husband. This was just another way of Jake making her feel loved, cherished and appreciated.

And happy.

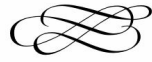
Happily ever after.

THE ORPHAN'S TALE



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



The 1880s in Chicago was a decade of change and burgeoning industry but for Poppy Brown, it was life as normal. She'd just finished another day in her mother and father's haberdashery and was looking forward to a quiet evening of embroidering beside the fire or perhaps playing dolls with her sister.

"Poppy dear, could you cut the last of that red ribbon and leave it behind the counter before you leave? Mrs. Ellis said she's going to collect it tomorrow."

Poppy turned back toward her mother who was leaning over the wooden counter surrounded by offcuts of ribbon and fabric as she tallied up the day's earnings, her brow creased into a frown. Poppy had always thought her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, even at the end of the workday when, like today, her hair was a bit messy and her cheeks a little flushed. It only added to her charm. Poppy didn't think the more high and mighty ladies who came into the shop held a candle to her mother. By the way in which Poppy's father was looking at his wife from across the shop as he put away the model hats, she thought he agreed.

"Of course, Mother. I'll see to it right away."

Five minutes later, Poppy was out on the street, walking around to the back of the shop where a metal flight of stairs led to the family's home on the

second floor of the tenement building. Poppy could hear the quiet thumps and squeals of her siblings as they played with their toys under the watchful eye of their neighbor from down the street, Mrs. Cotterino. The aroma suggested that Mrs. Cotterino had put a stew on to cook for them, as she sometimes did. Poppy could almost taste the savory broth as she opened the door. Though her parents still treated her like a child, she had observed enough at the shop to know that their financial situation was tenuous. Some weeks they were able to afford meat and two or even three varieties of vegetables and bread, while on others, their table held only hard crackers and cheese. It was during those weeks that Mrs. Cotterino, whose husband was a successful merchant, prepared them a stew to keep the family fed.

“Poppy! You’re home!” little Ellie and Jacob cried, jumping up from where they were lying on the floor. They looked at her with such open adoration that Poppy couldn’t resist lifting them both up for a quick hug before turning to Mrs. Cotterino.

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Cotterino. My mother and father should be home soon so I can watch the children now. Is that your famous stew on the stove that I can smell?” Poppy asked, indicating with a motion of her head toward the large steaming pot on the stove over in the corner of the room.

“Yes, it is, Girl, and a good thing too. You need fattening up! The whole Brown family, much too thin. Tell your mama and papa I said hello, yes?” Mrs. Cotterino said as she rose from the wooden chair she’d taken possession of while the children played.

“I will. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, you will, child. Don’t forget to say your prayers this evening. That influenza’s coming and I heard Mr. French down the road has just come down with it.”

Poppy nodded obligingly and closed the door once she was sure that Mrs. Cotterino had made her way safely down the steps and back toward her own dwelling. A few minutes later Poppy’s parents entered the apartment, and

they all sat down at the small table on the far right of the room to sup and chat about their day. It was one in a slew of perfect evenings that had made up Poppy's childhood, but it would also be the last of them. The very next day her parents came down with the dreaded influenza. Two weeks later her father was dead and her mother followed soon after. Poppy, a girl of just fourteen, was left to care for her siblings, to become a parent to them when she still needed a parent herself.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



“A few cents so I can feed my family, Miss?” Poppy asked the highbred woman walking by. Poppy was standing on Jackson Street near the Exhibition Building, hoping to beg enough coin from passers-by to afford to feed Ellie and Jacob that night. They had eaten nothing but oranges and apples over the past three days, which the fruit monger had given her as he’d passed by her parents’ old storefront. He used to know her mother and father and took pity on her and her siblings now that they were poor orphans. He couldn’t spare much but he gave her what he could. It was usually enough to tide them all over until Poppy could beg enough money for a chunk of bread and cheese.

But today was Poppy’s fifth consecutive day of begging while her siblings were tucked away in the tenement apartment in which they only had occupancy for three more days. Not only were they out of food but the rent was nearly due and Poppy was starting to realize that she wouldn’t be able to pay it. She’d already pawned all her mother’s jewelry, the furniture, and most of Ellie and Jacob’s toys, much to their dismay, but she still didn’t have nearly enough to cover the cost of another month of shelter, let alone an evening meal. She’d only received two pennies so far that day, and the sun was beginning to set.

The cold wind slipped through her threadbare clothes and seemed to settle

in her bones as she stood with her hand outstretched, waiting for someone to drop a cold, hard penny in her palm. She didn't have the energy to think about her dead mother and father, and the sallow hue of their skin as she'd nursed them to their deaths. Right now, she had to focus on the family she had left, making sure they didn't fall ill too. As matters now stood, they were more likely to succumb to starvation than influenza.

A cough racked Poppy's chest as she stood, and for a moment she was forced to double over from the onslaught, trying to hack up whatever was in her lungs. When she righted herself, she felt dizzy. The world began to spin in front of her, and suddenly everything went black.

Poppy came to on the street with night having long since fallen. The stars were out, and it was by their light that she made her way back to the tenement, though it took longer than normal because her breathing was labored. She made it up the steps and through the front door before she collapsed again, coughing and gasping for breath.

"Poppy!" Ellie cried, jumping up off the blankets she and Jacob had been curled up in. Poppy couldn't get up. She could barely muster the strength to open her eyes.

For three days Poppy faded in and out of a fever-induced stupor, waking only to cough up what felt like pieces of her lung before she fell back asleep. Ellie and Jacob did their best to care for her, but the seven- and five-year-old knew nothing more than to give her water and feed her the crusts of bread Ellie managed to beg off the baker down the street. The children didn't quite understand death or why their mother and father hadn't come back. But they knew enough to know that if Poppy died, they would be alone, perhaps for a very long time.

When Poppy finally awoke a few days later, it was to a knock on the door. The landlord of the building was standing outside. "Time's up. Either pay the rent or get out."

Poppy looked back into the apartment which was bare of everything but her two siblings, a blanket, and a small tin cup full of water. It was time for them to leave. Poppy gathered their meager belongings into a small canvas bag her mother had used to carry sewing and led her siblings down the steps and away from what had once been their family home.

They wandered the streets all day, looking for a place to stay for the night. When it was nearly dark and the winter wind was becoming all the more biting, Jacob pointed out a church they'd missed on their first meander down the empty street. The church had the name St. Vincent emblazoned in large letters on its front, and the small plaque near the door read "Orphanage for Disadvantaged Youth. All Young Souls Welcome." Poppy supposed that she and her siblings now qualified as disadvantaged and so she knocked on the door.

After a few minutes, the wrinkled, pale face of an old woman appeared in the crack of the open door. "Yes?" she croaked, peering suspiciously at Poppy and her siblings.

"My sister, brother, and I have come ...to ask for your help. We're orphans, you see, and..."

But before Poppy could finish, the woman had swung the door open and gestured for them to proceed inside. "Come in, come in and out of the cold, my dears!"

The old woman introduced herself as Mrs. Julian, the headmistress of the orphanage. She told them that St. Vincent's was always taking new admissions, and went on to give them a tour, showing them the beds in which they would sleep, the dining hall where they would eat, and the schoolroom in which they would learn their letters and numbers. Poppy had only ever been taught by her mother and was excited at the possibility of proper schooling.

They had arrived just as dinner was served, so Mrs. Julian told them they could change into the required uniform after they had finished their meal. She

led them back toward the dining room which was now starting to fill with children, all of whom were looking down at the floor. The girls had their hair severely braided in tight braids and the boys' heads were all closely shaved. Poppy looked down at Jacob's head, his beautiful auburn hair visible even in the dim light of the dining room, and nearly shed a tear at the loss of his locks. But that was not nearly all she had to worry about.

None of the children spoke. Not one word was uttered after grace was said and everyone tucked into the bland food that had been sparingly ladled onto each plate. Poppy was astounded by the silence as well as the looks in the children's eyes. They looked at her in fear as if she was an unknown monster who had invaded their home. But she would come to learn in later weeks that they were looking with terror not at her, but for her, for they knew what St. Vincent's Orphanage had in store for her, and it was not religious charity.

CHAPTER 2



“**S**crub harder, girl!” Mrs. Julian yelled at Poppy as she kneeled on the cold tile floor of the kitchen, scrubbing at a non-existent patch of grime. She’d been scrubbing that particular patch of floor for fifteen minutes and still had the entirety of the kitchen left to clean. Mrs. Julian had berated her for distracting her enough to spill the watery milk she’d been using to make the stew for the evening meal, and now Poppy was being forced to clean up the woman’s mess. This was nothing new, however. Since Poppy and her siblings had arrived at St. Vincent four months ago, she’d been subjected to repeated abuse, both verbal and physical, from Mrs. Julian in addition to extra chores and smaller meals as punishment for their “bad behavior.” Of course, to Mrs. Julian, bad behavior could be anything from sneezing incorrectly to mispronouncing seraph during bible study.

If possible, Jacob and Ellie had it even worse. They had always been raised in a particularly caring environment. Their only caretakers, Mrs. Cotterino and her daughter-in-law Maria, both doted on them like the darlings they were. They weren’t used to strict rules and, as a result, transgressed more than most of the orphans their age. The orphanage masters overseen by Mrs. Julian had beaten them a few times before Poppy realized what was happening and requested to be beaten in their stead. A request Mrs. Julian was more than happy to oblige. As a result, Poppy’s back and bottom

were covered in switch marks, her hands were raw from so many lashes with the ruler, and her right ear was severely wounded from being clocked.

However, as one year in the orphanage turned into two and then three, Poppy was beginning to accept this as her fate. She was a poor, parentless teenager. If or when she, Ellie, and Jacob did manage to leave the orphanage, their fate would not change. Without the support of their parents, they were destined for a life of poverty and sadness. No family, no money, and only each other for support. Or so she thought.

Because while Poppy and her siblings toiled away, the uncle they never knew about was looking for them. David Brown was their father's older brother. He and Edward had fallen out long before the children were born, over a fight about their mother, Sara. David had met Sara out at the market one day while buying a newspaper as a young man and had immediately fallen in love with her. He'd gone home to tell Edward that he'd found the woman he was going to marry. But when he walked into the parlor of their home in Chicago, it was to find Sara seated across from Edward. She was the beautiful, shy girl Edward had been telling David he was planning to court. There were so many women named Sara in Chicago that David hadn't made the connection. He begged Edward not to marry her, lying and saying that she was no good for him. The day following Edward and Sara's wedding, David left Chicago, heartbroken and angry with his brother. He and Edward never again spoke, for the rest of Edward's life.

It took many months for news of Edward's death to reach David who was living in Gloucestershire, England. He had sent word to the old family solicitor in Chicago, inquiring as to David's whereabouts. He wanted to return home to America in the knowledge that upon his return, he could finally make amends with his brother. But after reading the reply from his solicitor, David was dumbstruck. His brother, dead? And Sara too? The loss overwhelmed him until he read the final lines of the letter and realized that he had two nieces and a nephew. David realized that while he couldn't make up

for the terrible manner in which he had treated Edward and, by extension, Sara, he could take care of their children.

But when David wrote back to his solicitor asking after his brother's children, he was to learn that no one had any idea where the Brown children had been living since their parents' deaths. David made a decision. He would journey to America and find them himself to give them the life they deserved. While in England he had made more money than he could possibly spend, and it only seemed right to use it to take care of and spoil his brother's children. It was the least he could do.

Sadly, settling his affairs in England took months, as did the journey to America. By the time David set sail on the Atlantic Ocean, Poppy and her siblings had been living in the orphanage for four years. They were shells of their former selves, terrified of stepping out of line and receiving the harsh beatings that had become Mrs. Julian's specialty the older she grew. She seemed to gain strength and energy from physically punishing children, and Poppy knew they needed to escape the orphanage to avoid being the target of Mrs. Julian's attack when she eventually became overzealous and truly hurt her sister or brother.

Thankfully, her eighteenth birthday was fast approaching, at which time she would be forced to leave the orphanage because she was no longer a child. The problem, however, was that she couldn't take Ellie and Jacob with her. Though Mrs. Julian had told Poppy when she first arrived that children at the orphanage were free to leave at any time, this was a patent falsehood. St. Vincent's was a workhouse, ostensibly run to keep the church that housed it in working order. The fact of the matter, however, was that Mrs. Julian had turned it into a profitable little operation. The younger children scrubbed the floors, made the beds, and peeled the potatoes while the older ones, the ones with the bigger hands, handled the laundry that was dropped at the church's doorstep from sunup to sundown six days a week. Poppy's hands, once delicate and beautiful, were now raw and red from time spent in the hot,

astrigent soapy water. She knew that when she left, Ellie, who was now eleven, would be forced to take her place, and Poppy just couldn't bear the idea of her sweet young sister's hands being scalded day in and day out. It wasn't fair. No child, no matter their standing, should have to work like this. Poppy had to find a way to remove them to a place of safety, somewhere Mrs. Julian would never find them because she would never let Ellie and Jacob leave. They were too good at working and far too obedient to let go.

Thankfully, Poppy was not completely alone. Just before her seventeenth birthday, a young nun had joined the staff at St. Vincent's, a nun by the name of Sister Miller. Petite, with wise blue eyes and a soft voice, Sister Miller gave the children of the orphanage the love and kindness they so desperately needed and deserved. Whenever Mrs. Julian and her band of orphanage masters had their backs turned, Sister Miller would slip the children the candy she smuggled in from the market, brush the dirt from their eyes and give their hands a loving squeeze. Though the children still kept their eyes glued to the floor and their mouths shut when Mrs. Julian was around, when Sister Miller passed by, they were able to, for the briefest of moments, become true children, delighting in jokes, salivating at treats and skipping down the hallway hand-in-hand with her. She had changed St. Vincent's for the better, and Poppy was sad to leave her.

"But you must leave, Poppy, before your birthday. You are all Ellie and Jacob have in the world, and you need to protect them. You know what Mrs. Julian does to children once their older siblings have gone," Sister Miller whispered to Poppy as they worked in the laundry one day. The constant whooshing of the soapy water in the huge vats in which their hands were now submerged helped to mask their voices from the orphanage master off to the side of the room.

Poppy nodded. She did indeed know just what Mrs. Julian was capable of. She'd heard the screams in the middle of the night from poor Jack Addams and Milly Fortescue, whose older siblings had left the orphanage the

year before. She didn't want to think about the cause of their torment, but she knew that whatever it was, she couldn't subject Ellie and Jacob to it.

"I know. You're right, Sister, but I don't know what to do. Even if we did escape, where would we go? We have no family and no connections—we'd be back out on the streets again, and winter will be here soon. I can't risk it." Poppy scrubbed at a nightgown for a few moments while she pondered, but then an idea struck her. She turned to Sister Miller. "I know! We can escape together! You're always saying how you wish you could leave this place; let's journey out into cold, dark Chicago together. There must be a benevolent convent that will take us in. After all, you'd be one of their sisters. They can't turn you away."

Sister Miller looked at Poppy with the deepest sadness in her eyes, "Oh Poppy, you know how much I wish I could leave, but I can't. I'm the only source of kindness and goodwill these children have. I can't leave them to Mrs. Julian and her cronies. I just can't. But I do have an idea of what you could do."

While Poppy was sad that leaving the orphanage would also mean leaving her only friend, she leaned in and listened closely to what Sister Miller had to say. "There was a young nun in the convent where I was ordained by the name of Sister Hart. Her friend applied to be a mail-order bride out West, to escape their abusive father. I believe she found the advertisement for a bride in a newspaper. Mrs. Julian wants me to go to the market tomorrow to get potatoes and fish, and I could try to smuggle just such a newspaper in my cassock. We could look through for advertisements for brides out that way. If you went out West, Mrs. Julian wouldn't be able to find you or your siblings."

While the idea of marrying a man she'd never met didn't sit well with Poppy, the idea of being so far away that Mrs. Julian couldn't possibly find her and hurt her or her siblings did. And besides, as the adult in the family, the only adult, she had to make sacrifices for the care and safety of Ellie and

Jacob.

“Okay. Let’s try it.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



*I*t took over two months for Poppy and Sister Miller to find a seemingly suitable mail-order bride advertisement. Sister Miller had snuck a great many different newspapers in for Poppy to look through, burning them immediately after in the small grate in her room to avoid Mrs. Julian finding them. Sister Miller wasn't supposed to read anything but the Bible while under St. Vincent's roof. She risked expulsion from her position if contraband reading material was discovered among her possessions, so she truly was risking her career to help her friend. It was nonetheless a risk she felt was worth taking to see Poppy and her siblings to safety. Maybe she couldn't help every child escape St. Vincent's, but helping two would allow her to rest a little easier at night.

On a cold, windy October day, while out at the market buying apples, Sister Miller finally found a newspaper that she suspected offered what she believed to be the perfect advertisement.

She showed it to Poppy, who agreed. "It almost looks too good to be true!" But Poppy answered the advertisement anyway. After all, she only had another month and a half until her birthday. Time was of the essence.

The advertisement was posted by a rancher in Texas who was a widower and went by the name of Mason Brodie. He answered Poppy's first letter promptly, assuring her that he had never in his life thought he'd be looking

for a bride in the newspaper. He explained that following the death of his wife, Elizabeth, he knew he needed help to run his ranch and household.

Poppy and Mason began a regular correspondence. Poppy's first letter warned him to please sign his letters not as himself but as Sister Agnus from Our Lady of Worship, Texas. Sister Miller lied to Mrs. Julian by saying that her sister had found the lord and was now a nun in Texas. Mrs. Julian believed her because Sister Miller was good and kind and usually honest, so she thought nothing of it when the nun began receiving letters from the convent in Texas.

These letters helped Poppy get to know the kind-hearted man that was Mason Brodie. Mason told Poppy about his late wife. Mason had met Elizabeth at a town dance in his native Texas. He'd thought she was the most beautiful woman in the room, while at first she thought him arrogant and aloof. He had spent over a year proving to her otherwise until they were finally wed. Elizabeth had been warm and kind, good at storytelling, and a genius with a sewing needle. She and Mason had passed the cold desert nights by the fire, Mason reading to her from one of the few books in his treasured collection while Elizabeth mended his shirts and darned his socks. But with Elizabeth gone, Mason was overwhelmed. She had cooked and cleaned for him, and without her, Mason didn't know how to manage the ranch duties along with the housekeeping.

Poppy told Mason how excited she was about the possibility of moving out West. She had never been out of Chicago and looked forward to seeing more of the world. Poppy had grown up with her mother and father's stories of their travels; of when they first met, working in Boston at the same haberdashery. They'd courted for a few weeks before marrying, and had visited New York for their honeymoon. Poppy's mother told her that Boston was steeped in history, with every street corner the sight of some important event from the American Revolution. Poppy's father drew her a map of New York, pointing out the bakery he and her mother had frequented while there,

tasting delectable *speculaas* cookies and *apfeltaart* dripping in butter and crisp sugared apples. Those cities sounded like such wonderful, exciting places.

And even if she couldn't visit those cities, Poppy was ready to leave Chicago. Though it had been her only home, the last few years had tainted her view of the city. It would always be the place where her parents had died, the place where she and her siblings had spent some of the most miserable years in imagination. Perhaps one day she would come back and visit, and the city would feel new and exciting to her again, stripped of the sadness that seemed to weigh down its streets and doorsteps. But for now, Poppy was ready to leave and take her siblings with her.

Although Poppy's reasons for becoming a mail-order bride were in part to save her siblings, she didn't tell Mason about Ellie and Jacob. Sister Miller had warned that any mention of them might scare Mason with the prospect of too many mouths to feed and too many new people in his care, while he really only sought one wife.

"It's best to woo him first, and then introduce the idea. That way he already loves you and it's easier for him to love the idea of two children."

The mention of love confused Poppy, though. The only love between two adults she'd ever seen was the love her parents had shared, and that had been born of years of marriage and close partnership from running the haberdashery business. How could Mason possibly love her without meeting her, without seeing her, without really knowing her?

CHAPTER 4



While Poppy was contemplating the reality behind her relationship with Mason, Mason was navigating his delicate and often-tempestuous relationship with his former father-in-law. He and Eliot Turner had gotten along so well when they first met, even before Elizabeth took a liking to him. Eliot had considered Mason a stable, smart, capable man, and the perfect mate for Elizabeth. He'd encouraged the union and had in fact been one of the deciding factors in Elizabeth accepting Mason's courtship and his eventual proposal of marriage.

"He'll take care of you, Lizzy. Good men like him are hard to find," he had told his daughter. Oh, how he would come to regret that statement.

Now, more than a year after the death of his beloved wife, Mason's relationship with Eliot had deteriorated completely. Eliot hated him, perhaps more so because there was so little about Mason to hate. After taking over the Turner ranch from Eliot, Mason had made it profitable after years of failed crops, ranch hands leaving, and the constant raising of cattle unsuitable for sale. The Turner family was nearing destitution before Mason married Elizabeth and turned the Turner ranch from a profit sinkhole into a solid investment.

Eliot had gifted part ownership of the ranch to Mason a year after their marriage, as a reward for turning the biggest annual profit in more than a

decade. Mason was a good and fair ranch co-owner. He was organized and from an agricultural family that knew the ins and outs of the dry Texas land on which the Turner cattle ranch sat. With Mason at the helm, Eliot had been able to take a step back from the business and focus on his family for the first time in over fifteen years. Elizabeth had two younger sisters and an older brother who had a young child of his own. Eliot was finally able to visit with his family for more than a few hours every day. He read with his daughters, played with his grandson, and finally got used to the silence of his house. His wife had died more than a decade before when Elizabeth was a young girl, and rather than wallowing in his grief, Eliot had thrown himself into his work, neglecting his family in the process. But thanks to Mason and his exceptional management of the ranch, Eliot finally had the chance to grieve for his wife, accept her loss, and learn to live without her.

All that had changed after Elizabeth's death. Eliot blamed Mason for Elizabeth's passing. After all, if the brutish, oversized Mason hadn't impregnated Elizabeth with Rosie, who was difficult from the moment she'd begun to grow in her mother's belly, Lizzy would still be alive, and Eliot wouldn't have had to deal with the loss of yet another beloved woman. Mason was the reason he couldn't sleep at night, the reason he heard his daughter's voice in the quiet dark of early dawn. He needed to go, and Eliot knew just how to make sure he left Turner ranch and never came back.

"I'm going to sell it right out from under his nose. And then I'm finally going to escape this place, find somewhere new where none of my women have died and my business isn't being run by a thief," Eliot told his son, Thomas, one night over dinner in early November.

"Father, Mason is no thief," Thomas countered, feeling the exasperation familiar to all encounters with his father begin to seep into his face.

Eliot scoffed, "He stole my Elizabeth, he's stealing my business. He's a thief, I tell you!"

Thomas tried to reason with his father, which was no small feat, "You

gave him Elizabeth's hand willingly, and none of us were to know she would die in that way, in childbirth. It was no one's fault. The midwife even said so, don't you remember?"

Eliot ignored his son, staring into the glass of whiskey in front of him on the kitchen table of his large ranch house. He was muttering to himself, vicious slander about Mason, no doubt.

Thomas tried one more time to reason with him, "Father, you can't leave. I understand why you're upset with Mason, but what about little Rosie? She's your flesh and blood, and all we have left of Lizzy. Isn't she worth cherishing, worth staying for? She's your granddaughter. Isn't she worth working things out with Mason? After all, if you sell the ranch, you sell her livelihood. How will Mason feed her, clothe her, school her, if you take away his only source of income?" Thomas asked though he knew these questions fell on deaf ears. His father had grown spiteful and bitter in the year since his Lizzy's death. Thomas was glad that he and his remaining sisters had moved off the ranch to a neighboring town. They only visited once a month, and that was more than enough to see that his father was becoming a truly vindictive man.

Eliot's vindictive streak was indeed clear when he finally answered his son after many more gulps of cheap whiskey. "I have no granddaughter. All I have is a hole in my heart left by Lizzy's death. The only way that hole is gonna be fixed is if I get my revenge on the man who killed her."

Thomas shook his head sadly, fearing that his father was truly lost to dark, devilish ways devoid of the Christian charity he had been so intent on teaching his children.

While Mason was unaware of his father-in-law's plan to sell the ranch out from under him, he knew he had to somehow mend his relationship with Eliot. But he didn't know how, and his attention was already far too split between the ranch, Rosie, and the woman to whom he wrote so regularly. He

was short of the energy required to mend broken fences with the Turner family.

Mason focused instead on his need for a wife. He knew Rosie needed a woman's touch whenever she cried at night and nothing he did or said could calm her. He never imagined when he posted the advertisement for a mail-order bride in *The Chicago Tribune* that he would find a warm, caring, intelligent prospect such as Poppy Brown. Poppy was exactly what he was looking for. She was smart, a good seamstress, loved children, and seemed unafraid of the hard work required of a rancher's wife. Mason knew he could get along with her and they could live together without drama or difficulty.

Of course, he'd never be able to show Poppy the love he had shown Elizabeth. Elizabeth had been the love of his life, his soul mate, and her death had made him realize that love would not strike twice for him. He'd expended all his love on Lizzy, and he had none left for anyone but Rosie because she was a part of Lizzy. Mason only wanted a companion to help him with Rosie and the ranch, and Poppy seemed eminently suited to the task.

After two months of correspondence, Mason knew that Poppy was in fact the woman he had been looking for. He wanted to bring her to the ranch and help her settle into her new life, but he knew he shouldn't do so without sharing his plans with Eliot. After all, the ranch was still rightfully Eliot's, and Mason felt a duty as his partner and former son-in-law to inform him of his intentions to take on a new wife. As much as Mason wanted to be honest with Eliot, he knew that bringing a new woman onto the ranch would only remind Eliot of Elizabeth's death and the hand he thought Mason had played in it. Mason desperately needed a woman in his life, but he didn't need any more strife with the Turners.

Mason deliberated for days on what to do. He prayed, he paced, he even spoke his thoughts to Rosie, who simply gurgled in response, a playful smile on her face. Finally, he decided that he would only tell Eliot when it became

necessary to do so. After all, Eliot rarely visited Mason's house on the ranch. In fact, he hadn't been there since Rosie's birth, refusing to see the child he believed had caused the death of his favorite daughter – with Mason's help. Mason might be able to get away with having Poppy on the ranch for a year or more without Eliot ever cottoning on to her presence.

But this was not Mason's only deception related to his prospective marriage to Poppy. He had decided not to write to Poppy about Rosie. He worried that any knowledge of an infant child would drive Poppy away. Moving across the country to the unknown and still-wild West was quite enough for a girl of her age to contend with. Mason worried that if he told her she would be traveling to him not only as a wife but also as a new mother, she would back out of their arrangement entirely. It was better for her to find out only upon her arrival. Surely once she met Rosie and fell in love with her, the idea of motherhood would sit better.

With the decision made, Mason took the next step in the process and officially asked Poppy to marry him. He was relieved when he received her response: "Yes!" written in her trademark script. He arranged the marriage and sent her the money she would need to take the train to Texas, telling her that he would meet her at the train station at four o'clock in the afternoon on the train was due in. He began to ready the house, trying to make it as warm and welcoming as possible to a new girl from a strange, faraway city.

CHAPTER 5



Poppy counted out the dollars Mason had sent enclosed in yet another letter addressed to Sister Miller. The fare he had sent would only cover her passage, but Sister Miller had been slipping her the odd coin over the last few months, and she'd managed to save just enough to cover the train fares for Ellie and Jacob, too. Poppy couldn't believe it. As she looked down at the crisp paper dollars in her hand, she realized she was finally able to escape St. Vincent's with Ellie and Jacob by her side. A new life awaited them far away from the tragedies they'd experienced in the cold, dreary city of Chicago.

There was however still the matter of actually leaving the orphanage, which Poppy knew wouldn't be easy.

"I don't know how we're going to manage it," she whispered to Sister Miller while peeling potatoes for supper one night just a week before her birthday. "Mrs. Julian's office is right near the entrance to the church, and you know she has the hearing of a young rabbit. How are we going to make it past her chambers without waking her?"

Thankfully, Sister Miller had been ruminating on just that quandary for the past several days, and she had a plan, "The back door! The kitchen maid often leaves it open at night so that she can sneak out to meet the newspaper boy down the street. We'll sneak you three out that way, and Mrs. Julian will

be none the wiser. You'll be on your way to Texas before she even notices your absence."

Poppy looked over the mound of potato peelings before her and smiled at her friend. She would be sad to leave Sister Miller who had shown her so much kindness, love, and friendship over the last few months. Poppy only hoped she could find someone as good once she reached Texas. Hopefully, their new hometown would have other women her age with whom she could be friends.

Tuesday evening came quickly, and before Poppy knew it, it was time to escape. She'd gathered the few meager possessions she and her siblings had amassed during their time at St. Vincent's and packed them in three small bags that she had stashed under her bed. They'd all faked colds that day, so Mrs. Julian had allowed them to sleep in the infirmary to decrease the risk of infecting the other children. It was therefore easy for Poppy to quickly dress her siblings and tie their little sacks onto their backs. Jacob was swaying with sleepiness as Poppy secured his belt and tied his scuffed, thin shoes, and Ellie looked around nervously as if she feared Mrs. Julian would jump out from behind the cart of medical supplies beside her.

Poppy kneeled in front of her siblings, "I know this seems frightening, but we're on our way to a new place for new adventures. We get to ride on a train and see the Great Plains and cows and all sorts of other fun things the West has to offer. But in order to get there, we must be quiet. We cannot make a sound as we go towards the kitchen, do you understand?" she asked, looking expectantly into her siblings' eyes.

Jacob and Ellie nodded gravely. Poppy hadn't told them that she was getting married; rather, she had told them they were going to stay with a long-lost family friend in Texas, a friend with whom she had only recently made contact. She was not entirely sure how she would eventually explain that she was going to be someone's wife, but at the moment, that was the

least of her worries. The greatest was that Mrs. Julian would find them and try to snatch Ellie and Jacob away so as not to lose three workers in one night. Poppy's birthday was not for another two days, and she knew through Sister Miller that Mrs. Julian had not yet arranged for her replacement. The head orphanage mistress would therefore be livid when she woke to realize that three of her best and most diligent workers had escaped in the night.

Poppy couldn't allow herself to get scared, not now. She had to focus on getting them all out of the church grounds to safety. The train station was not far away, and they could spend the night huddled for warmth in the station shelter, awaiting their 9 o'clock train the next morning. The train that would take them to safety.

Sister Miller knocked softly on the infirmary door, signaling that it was time for them to go. Poppy placed a soft kiss on the forehead of each of her siblings, then laced her fingers with theirs and walked toward the door.

"Ready?" she asked. They nodded.

Sister Miller opened the door just as they reached it. "Everything is ready. Come with me."

Poppy, Ellie, and Jacob followed Sister Miller down the steps from the infirmary, making sure to make as little noise as possible as their feet landed on the cold marble.

From the staircase, they turned right, down the dim hallway that led to the kitchen. The maid had, as predicted, left the door open, and a cold breeze seeped in through the door which was propped open with a small rock. Sister Miller turned back to them when they had reached the door, and gave them a small package wrapped in cloth.

"Bread and cheese, for the train journey."

Poppy took the package and set it aside so that she could hug her friend. She saw Sister Miller wipe a tear from her eye before pulling away.

"Be safe. I'll pray that everything goes well," Sister Miller whispered before kissing Poppy on the cheek.

After Ellie and Jacob had given Sister Miller a quick hug, she shoed them all through the door, worrying that Mrs. Julian would somehow hear them and investigate noises in the kitchen so late at night.

Sister Miller's worst fears were confirmed when, just as Jacob followed his sisters out the door, Mrs. Julian ran into the room. "Stop! Stop this very instant! Stop, I say!" she yelled at Jacob who was standing dumbstruck in the kitchen doorway.

"Go, Jacob. Run!" Sister Miller said, but it was too late. Mrs. Julian had grabbed Jacob's arm and was twisting it. Jacob cried out in pain, and the noise alerted Poppy and Ellie, who realized what was going on and rushed back to help him.

"Get off him!" Poppy yelled, reaching to pry Mrs. Julian's fingers from where they were clamped around Jacob's small arm.

"No! I will not have you escaping your home after everything I've done for you three! Ungrateful little wretches," Mrs. Julian yelled.

POPPY, Ellie, and Sister Miller were so focused on helping Jacob that they did not see Mrs. Julian reach for the knife on the counter behind her. It was too late by the time they realized her intentions, and the three girls watched in horror as Mrs. Julian brought the butt of the knife down onto poor Jacob's head. Blood immediately poured from the wound and Jacob lost the strength in his legs, slowly falling to the floor.

Poppy looked down in horror at her poor brother. Ellie and Sister Miller rushed to help him, lifting him and trying to blot the blood with the edge of Sister Miller's cassock. But while Poppy wanted to help her brother, she wanted revenge more.

"How dare you!" she cried as she lunged at Mrs. Julian who was standing in shock over Jacob. Poppy knocked the old woman to the floor. Mrs. Julian hit her head on the side of the table behind her and fell to the kitchen floor

with a great crash. Her eyes closed, and her limbs fell limp and Poppy knew what she had done. She had killed her—that much was clear since she could not see her chest rising and falling with breath, and the blood was slowly seeping from the gash on her head.

Poppy looked around, hopeless and appalled and not knowing what to do. She made eye contact with Sister Miller who had stood up from her kneeling position beside Jacob.

“It’s all right,” Sister Miller whispered to her as she walked toward her friend. “You didn’t mean it. You were doing what you had to do to keep your family safe. It’s not your fault, Poppy.”

Poppy nodded slowly. She couldn’t believe she had just killed Mrs. Julian. Yes, the woman had been inexcusably cruel to every child in her care in the orphanage, but Poppy still couldn’t quite believe that the woman who had caused her so much pain and suffering was dead, and because of her.

Sister Miller gathered Poppy into a hug and whispered in her ear, “Don’t blame yourself, Poppy. Mrs. Julian would have killed Jacob if you hadn’t stopped her. You did the right thing. It was an accident that you killed her, but you did the right thing. Now, go. Take the long way to the train station and calm yourself. You need to be strong for Jacob and Ellie now, do you understand?”

Poppy nodded again and squeezed her friend tightly, letting a few tears drop from her lashes before she pulled back. Poppy avoided looking in the direction of Mrs. Julian’s body as she lifted Jacob off the ground and held him in her arms. He seemed to be unconscious, and his dead weight was heavy in Poppy’s arms, but she couldn’t risk him walking and possibly exacerbating his injury. She’d settle him in her arms when they got to the train station and hopefully a few hours’ sleep would help him. It had to. Poppy didn’t know any other way to heal him. They had neither the time nor the money to go to a hospital, not when they had a train to catch.

“Now, run, and be safe. I’ll keep you in my prayers, my darlings,” Sister

Miller said as Poppy helped Ellie stand and ushered her out the kitchen door. Poppy turned around for one last glance at her friend, the only one she'd ever had. She gave Sister Miller a sad smile as she stepped out the door and laced her fingers in Ellie's small ones. It was time for them to leave St. Vincent's.

Sister Miller watched them walk down the alley that led to the street and crossed herself, praying to God that they would get to Texas safe and sound. It was what they deserved, a new life in a new place without the horrible pain that had followed them like a shadow these past few years. Once she saw them step onto the street and turn left toward the train station, Sister Miller turned to face the body of her former employer. Now that her friends were gone, it was time to decide what to do with Mrs. Julian. At least the children in the orphanage would now be safe from her wrath. That was something to be thankful for on this terrible, terrible night.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6



Poppy's arms were nearly numbed by the time they reached the train station, and she relished the opportunity to finally put Jacob down. She and Ellie settled close together under the shelter of the train station, providing each other with as much warmth as they could, with Jacob stretched out on her lap so that she could properly inspect his wound.

It was even worse than she had feared. A large, deep bloody gash split the top of Jacob's skull, and his breathing was slow and uneven. Poppy wrapped him in her arms and asked Ellie to pray with her, pray to God that Jacob survived the train journey.

The three vulnerable siblings passed a long, cold night under the shelter of the train station. Finally, long after the sun had risen in the sky, the train arrived. Poppy was standing with Ellie beside her and Jacob in her arms, the tickets gripped tightly in her hand as the carriages approached the station. Poppy had never seen a train up close before and marveled at the steam-powered beast. It seemed to go on for miles, carriage after carriage passing by them as the train slowed to a stop and passengers began alighting.

"All aboard the 9:00 train to Houston, Texas!" the conductor called, and Poppy grabbed Ellie's hand and shuffled forward. Poppy showed him her ticket and paid for Ellie and Jacob's with the loose change she'd kept in one of the envelopes that had held Mason's letters. The conductor gave her two

ticket stubs and directed her to a carriage just down the line from where she and her siblings were standing. Poppy hurried toward the carriage, eager to get them all settled in their seats and to see about getting Jacob the water he needed both for hydration and to clean his wound.

The train seats were made of soft fabric in a faded red color. Poppy sat down and moaned quietly, relishing the first comfortable seat she'd experienced in her life. Her parents' apartment offered only rickety wooden chairs, and the benches at the orphanage were of cold wood. This was the first time she'd sat down without feeling her tailbone hit wood. Despite spending four years at the orphanage where she was ostensibly well fed, Poppy had barely gained weight as she'd grown. She knew from brief glimpses of her reflection in ponds and the small mirror in the girls' bathroom in the orphanage that she was thin and malnourished. She hoped Mason wouldn't dislike her for it. Her mother had been curvy and buxom, and Poppy hoped that with good food and rest, she'd grow into having a fuller, more womanly figure that was more pleasing to the male eye.

As the train departed, Poppy asked an attendant passing by whether she might have a glass of water. "Dining car," the attendant barked at her. Poppy asked Ellie to watch over Jacob while she went in search of a drink.

Poppy had never been on any manner of transportation, having only ever traversed Chicago on her own two feet, and so she wasn't used to the gentle rocking motion of the train. She nearly fell into the lap of more than one passenger and garnered quite a few sour looks as she made her way through the carriages. She knew she was close to the dining car when the scent of freshly baked bread and food frying hit her senses.

Opening the door, she was met with a flurry of people. Servers in fancy clothing with aprons tied around their waists flitted from one booth to the next depositing water, coffee, and what looked to be freshly baked rolls.

Poppy cautiously approached a server on the far side of the dining cart who was filling water glasses from a large glass jug. "Pardon me, sir, but

could I trouble you for water? My siblings and I are quite parched.”

The young man looked up at Poppy with a scowl on his face which disappeared when he got a better look at her. Poppy wondered how pathetic she must look dressed in the horrible starched dress Mrs. Julian made all the girls wear. Her shoe had a large hole in the toe and her hair was haphazardly plaited down her back. She was quite certain she looked near collapsing, she was so tired.

“Of course, miss. Here you go,” he said, and he handed her four water glasses. Poppy realized she hadn’t specified how many she wanted, but the extra water would allow her to clean Jacob’s wound. “Thank you,” she said, giving the server her best and brightest smile before she made her way carefully back down the carriage, clamping the four glasses in her two hands.

Poppy spilled some of the water on herself as she wound her way back to her siblings, but the glasses were still mostly full by the time she reached their seats.

Ellie was asleep, her head leaning against the window and jostling slightly with the movement of the train. Jacob was curled up in her lap, the wound on his head turning a nasty color. They looked so peaceful that Poppy was loathed to wake them, but she needed to attend to Jacob.

“Jacob,” she whispered, gently shaking the little boy’s shoulder. Jacob slowly blinked his eyes open and looked around in confusion before slowly sitting up.

“My head is sore,” he whispered as Poppy helped lift him into her lap. Ellie rustled around in her sleep, placing her hands where Jacob’s head had just been and curling back up against the padded seat at her shoulder.

“I know it does, my dear, but I’m going to make it better. I’m going to make you all better, don’t you worry,” Poppy said. She took the cloth from around the bread and cheese and dipped it in the glass of water Poppy was now holding steady between her legs.

She began washing the dried blood from Jacob’s cut. He didn’t seem to

notice what she was doing; he was content to lie with his head resting on her thigh as she slowly and carefully wiped at the cut.

It was still bleeding more than Poppy would have liked but Poppy pressed the cloth to Jacob's head and applied pressure, hoping to stem the blood flow. She sat with Jacob's head in her hands, gazing across at the sleeping Ellie for so long that she eventually fell asleep too, her head lolling against her chest before finally coming to rest on the soft fabric of the train seat behind her.

The Brown siblings spent hours in those exact positions, napping soundly as the train made its way southwest, passing by fields of wheat tipped with frost. As the day passed, the sky grew greyer until finally, just before sundown, snowflakes began to fall, landing softly on the ledge of the train window. The children slept the whole day through, unaware of the trouble that was yet to come.

CHAPTER 7



“*P*oppy. Poppy!” Ellie whispered to her sister, gently shaking her shoulders to wake her. Ellie had awoken to the soft rays of early dawn light streaming in through the window next to her. She looked across from her to see Poppy fast asleep with Jacob’s head in her lap. Jacob looked pale and wan, and Ellie was worried about his head wound. She knew enough about injuries from her beatings at St. Vincent’s to know that the wound needed more cleaning.

Poppy woke slowly. She immediately sat up when she opened her eyes and saw the worried look on Ellie’s face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, looking around them and taking in their surroundings. Poppy had been dreaming that she was back at the haberdashery with her parents, helping her mother sew flowers and ribbons onto a large straw hat in the back while her father handled the till up front. She had been telling her mother about her marriage to Mason Brodie when Ellie woke her. Poppy felt confused and sad because she could only see her parents in her dreams now. Four years on and their death still pained her greatly.

“We’ve slept most of a day away. We need to clean Jacob’s wound and eat something,” Ellie said, standing up and brushing the wrinkles from her dress. Though normally heavily starched and stiff, travel and sleep had

caused the fabric to soften and the dress now resembled a crumpled cloth. Since Ellie had nothing else to wear, she did her best to make herself presentable while Poppy gently woke Jacob and began tending his wound.

“How does it look?” Ellie asked, motioning towards the gash on Jacob’s head.

“It’s still bleeding,” Poppy said, her brow crinkled with worry as she dabbed at the blood. Jacob was still asleep and had yet to move so much as a muscle despite Poppy standing up and repositioning him. He’d only woken briefly the day before while Poppy tended to him, and she was worried that he was so readily sleeping without asking for food or water. Jacob was constantly hungry, always thirsty and always craving conversation and games. Seeing him so still and so silent made Poppy suspect that something was gravely wrong.

“Oh Poppy, look at your dress!” Ellie cried, pointing at the skirt of Poppy’s dress. It was covered in a muddy reddish-brown stain, dried blood from Jacob’s head. She would not be able to walk through the train like that. Poppy’s shoulders deflated as she looked at it. Putting aside the cloth she had been using on Jacob, she turned toward Ellie with her hands on her hips.

“I have an idea.”

Poppy left the train compartment ten minutes later wearing Ellie’s dress. Ellie was shorter than her and slightly thinner, so the dress was far shorter and tighter than was proper, but it allowed Poppy to return to the dining car to seek out the man who had taken pity on her the day before, in the hopes that he would be willing to help them again.

Poppy spotted him the moment she opened the carriage door. He looked up as she entered and smiled at her, though she could see his eyebrows raise considerably as he took in her outfit.

“Hello again,” Poppy said as she approached his station at the drinks cart.

“Well hello, miss. What can I do for you?” he asked, studiously avoiding

looking anywhere but her face.

“I’m wondering if you could help me with something. You see, my sister has stained her dress after a mishap with a plum and we have no change of clothes with us. Do you happen to have a tablecloth or napkins you could spare?” she asked.

The man looked at her in sympathy, and Poppy worried that he might send her away to find clothes elsewhere. When he opened his mouth, however, it was to say, “Follow me.”

Poppy followed the young man through a few carriages and into what looked to be the staff quarters. Most of the compartments were empty since the staff was working their various stations on the train, but one compartment had its door ajar and a light on. The man slid the door of this compartment open and gestured for Poppy to go in.

The compartment was small with just enough room for a bed and a small seat on which clothing and toiletries had been carelessly thrown. A young girl of around Poppy’s age was sleeping soundly on the bed. She didn’t wake as Poppy and the man moved deeper into the compartment and the man shut the door.

“That’s my sister, Eliza. She works in the kitchen at night. She’s sixteen,” the man said as he began rifling through the clothing on the seat, drawing out two dresses. They were plain and of grey wool, but looked warm, much warmer than the dress Poppy was wearing at the moment. St. Vincent’s had purposefully forced the orphans to wear thin starched dresses or shirts and short trousers, explaining that only those children who had not sinned deserved warm, comfortable clothing. Since they were all orphans, they must have sinned. “No child is left parentless unless they have sinned so greatly that Our Lord and Heavenly Father has been forced to teach them a lesson,” was Mrs. Julian’s reasoning. Poppy didn’t believe that for a minute and thought that if anything, orphans deserved more warmth and comfort because they lacked parents.

“These should fit you and maybe you can use this,” the man said, handing her a small sewing kit complete with needles and thread of various colors, “to alter the dress for your sister if need be.”

“Wait, you’re...you’re giving these to me? But doesn’t your sister need them?” Poppy asked.

The man shook his head, “My sister and I are lucky to be employed by the train company. They feed us, shelter us, and give us enough money to buy necessities. Clara hated those dresses anyway and was hoping to buy some new ones when we got to Little Rock in a few days. Please, take them. I hope they will keep you warm.”

Poppy found herself tearing up at the man’s kindness, but she took the dresses just the same, along with the sewing kit, and walked behind the man as he led her back toward the passenger compartments.

“Thank you so much,” Poppy said as she stood beside him outside her compartment. “I don’t know how I can repay you.”

The man shook his head, “You don’t have to. I wouldn’t be a very good servant of our Lord if I didn’t help those in need, especially young women like you. Something tells me you’re in a bit of trouble, and I want to do my bit to help you out of whatever danger might be following you.”

Poppy smiled at him and thanked him again. The man bowed slightly in front of her and said, “It’s my pleasure, honestly,” and then walked away. As Poppy opened the door, she realized he hadn’t even told her his name.

CHAPTER 8



Poppy and Ellie were considerably more comfortable in their new dresses, and Ellie's had only needed slight altering to make it wearable. Thankfully, Poppy had been tasked with mending clothes at the orphanage and as such knew how to take in busts, shorten or lengthen dresses and even how to sew taboo designs into the fabric where Mrs. Julian couldn't see them.

Poppy used their old dresses as a pillow and blanket for Jacob, who slept on and off for the next few days. He ate a little cheese and bread and took a few sips of water, but his skin remained pale, and large, purple circles started to grow under his eyes despite all his hours of sleep. Poppy and Ellie grew increasingly worried as they neared the stop at Little Rock with Jacob sleeping soundly across from them. Seated on the soft bench, gazing out the window, they prayed that their little brother would survive his injury. Ellie grew ever more distraught as the days passed with no sign of improvement in his condition. She couldn't imagine losing her little brother.

On the morning before the train stopped at Little Rock, Poppy was with Alan, the man who had gifted them the dresses, getting leftover breakfast rolls, when Ellie noticed Jacob's apparent improvement. His chest had been rising and falling slowly all morning, and color had returned to his cheeks. Ellie hoped it meant he would wake soon, allowing Poppy and her to help

him outside into the fresh air. She would enjoy the opportunity to walk around the train station and perhaps buy some nuts with the few coins they had left. It had been so long since Jacob had taken in more than a few bites of food, and Ellie hoped that the sugary nuts might encourage his appetite.

Ellie returned from the lavatory to check on Jacob only to find him not breathing, his face ashen, and his body limp.

“Jacob!” Ellie cried, shaking him and lightly tapping on his cheeks. His skin was cold to the touch and Ellie couldn’t feel him breathing. After fruitless attempts to wake him, Ellie sat back on the bench, realizing that, despite her and Poppy’s best efforts, Jacob was dead.

Only minutes later Poppy opened the door to the compartment, carrying the bread rolls and jam that Alan had given her on her way out of the dining carriage. She was hiding the treats behind her back, hoping to surprise Ellie with the goodies, when she looked in and saw her sister’s face.

Tears were running down Ellie’s cheeks and her eyes were shut. She looked in terrible emotional pain, and Poppy rushed into the carriage, throwing the food on the seat next to Ellie, kneeling in front of her sister, and grasping her hands. “What’s wrong?” Poppy asked, squeezing Ellie’s hands.

“It’s Jacob. He’s...he’s dead,” Ellie whispered. Poppy sat frozen for a few moments after Ellie spoke. Jacob, dead? Impossible. Yes, he had been badly wounded, but they had been taking good care of him, and he’d looked much better that morning. It was impossible that her bright, excitable little brother, the one always willing to play a game or hear a joke, was gone. It simply wasn’t possible. Poppy couldn’t lose another member of her family.

“But...but I don’t understand. How? Why? What...” Poppy said, but she couldn’t finish. Instead, she sat back, her head hitting the seat where Jacob now lay silently. Poppy’s head fell into her hands, and she began to weep. Ellie followed suit, and anyone passing by their compartment would have heard the deep, wracking sobs of two girls whose lives had once again been ruined by immeasurable tragedy.

Poppy and Ellie remained that way for hours, with Poppy on the floor weeping and Ellie on the bench looking silently at the lifeless form of her brother. When the sound of voices and movement could be heard in the passageways, Poppy realized they must be close to Little Rock. She had to pull herself together. She was the adult, the stand-in parent to Ellie, and she needed to take care of this situation, no matter how gruesome and macabre it was.

“We need to bundle him up and bury him in Little Rock,” Poppy said to Ellie, standing up and turning to her brother. She smoothed his cropped hair and began wrapping him in their recently discarded dresses. Poppy distracted herself from the sight of her dead brother with thoughts of Mason. She was only days away from meeting him and embarking on a new life, and she couldn’t wait for the change of scenery. It would take her mind off everything: the escape from the orphanage, her fear that Mrs. Julian was still after her, and the sadness over Jacob’s death. And hopefully, Mason wouldn’t mind Ellie once he met her. Ellie was such a good girl, so quiet and diligent, and she’d make a good helper around the house and ranch. Surely once Mason saw her usefulness, he would forgive Poppy for not telling him about her.

Ellie took a few minutes to collect herself before standing up to help her sister. They cleaned Jacob up as best as possible and wrapped him in their dresses so his face was shrouded. He was heavy in Poppy’s arms as she lifted him from the seat and began to make her way into the passageway. The conductor called out that they were almost at Little Rock and Ellie looked out the window to see the station platform just ahead. She couldn’t face going with Poppy. Suddenly, she was exhausted. She could feel sleep trying to claim her even as she stood tall in the train compartment. Poppy would have to bury Jacob by herself. Ellie simply couldn’t face saying goodbye to another family member. It was too much.

Poppy noticed her sister swaying where she stood and whispered, “You

rest, Ellie. We're supposed to stop for an hour and a half, so I should have time to find a small plot of land and bury him. Rest and I'll come back when I'm finished. I'm so sorry, Ellie."

Ellie nodded, a tear escaping as she fell back into the same seat she had been planted in for what felt like hours. She curled into herself and wept silently, falling into a fitful sleep as Poppy made her burdensome way down the train's passageway toward the doors, towards Little Rock and Jacob's final resting place.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Poppy was among the first passengers to alight from the train, which meant that few saw her carry the bundle of what was once her brother to the grassy area behind the train platform. A fence separated the train from the field, but it was low and easy for Poppy to climb over, even in her dress. She walked for a while, looking for holes or divots in the ground that might give her a head start on Jacob's grave. A quarter of a mile from the train station, she found a dry creek bed devoid of water. Small, smooth rocks were scattered around it, and Poppy moved these out of the way, placing Jacob in the middle of the creek bed. She took great fistfuls of grass from the surrounding area and piled them on top of Jacob until his whole body was covered.

"Dear Lord, please greet my dear little brother with open arms as he ascends to Heaven. He lived his life an obedient, joyful child, a devout servant to You, and a friend to all. May he rest in peace. Amen," Poppy whispered, choking on the last word as tears began to run down her face. She swallowed back her sobs as she packed a small pile of rocks at the foot of Jacob's makeshift grave. He had always loved playing with blocks, loved constructing, and she thought he would've liked the small rock structure she made for him. It was to be her final good deed for her brother, and this thought drove Poppy into momentary despair.

She allowed herself a few minutes of wracking sobs before she sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes, and stood. She had to be strong for Ellie. It didn't matter if she was hurting inside or if she felt like giving up and staying in this grassy field forever. She needed to walk back to the train, sit down across from her sister and help her through the next few days of their journey because ahead awaited a new life for both of them. A life hopefully full of love and respect or, at the very least, safety.

Poppy walked back toward the train station just as the conductor was calling for all passengers to board for their continued journey to Mapletree Station. Poppy passed Alan as she boarded, and he smiled at her, but she couldn't return his smile. She didn't know when she'd be able to smile again.

Ellie was asleep when Poppy re-entered their compartment, and Poppy sat down across from her on the bench that had been Jacob's bed. She could still smell him, his sweet and powdery little boy smell, but she kept herself from crying, knowing somehow that in the coming days, Ellie would shed enough tears for them both.

For the next three days, Ellie did not speak. She slept or stared out the window, nibbled on the bread that Poppy brought her, and dutifully drank the water Poppy handed her, but she was a ghost of her former self. Poppy let her grieve, knowing it was necessary if her sister was to ever accept her brother's death, but it hurt her heart to see Ellie so forlorn.

Alan and his sister came by a few times to check on Poppy and Ellie. Poppy never explained what had happened to Jacob, but she could see from the pity in Alan's eyes that he and his sister had guessed some tragedy had befallen the little boy. Either Alan or Eliza would sit with them for an hour or two, quietly playing cards with Ellie when she was awake. Alan answered Poppy's questions about whether any of the train staff had mentioned an orphanage mistress in search of three runaways.

"You're safe. There's been no such talk," Alan assured Poppy the day

before they were due to arrive at Mapletree. “I don’t know what trouble befell you before you got on this train, Poppy, but I hope that God brings you good things in Mapletree. You and Ellie deserve it.”

Poppy teared up at Alan’s kindness. She would miss him when they left the train the next day. He and his sister had been so kind to her, Ellie, and Jacob. She had known so few truly kind people since arriving at the orphanage all those years ago, but perhaps there were other people like Sister Miller and Alan in Mapletree. Good, kind people with whom she could get along. Mason seemed like such a person.

Poppy was becoming ever more anxious to meet her betrothed. She imagined him as a tall, thin man with dark hair and a strong jaw, but she looked forward to seeing him in the flesh. She hoped he liked her and Ellie, and that he would welcome them into his home. Poppy worried that Ellie might remain silent and depressed after their arrival at the ranch. Then again, provided Ellie worked hard, Poppy was sure Mason would not mind. And perhaps the sun and fresh air would be good for them. The orphanage was so cold and dank and dark, and Poppy was looking forward to living where she was free to walk around outdoors, dressed warmly with her sister by her side. Being different ages, she and Ellie had rarely been able to spend time together in the orphanage, and Poppy hoped that finally getting to spend quality time with her sister would help heal the myriad of wounds they had both accrued in the past years.

Poppy looked out the window and saw the world rushing by. Alan had told her earlier that they were about twenty minutes out of Mapletree and Poppy was becoming nervous. She felt jittery and stood to pace back and forth across the small free space of the compartment. Twenty minutes until she met the man she was going to spend the rest of her life with. Nervous butterflies filled Poppy’s stomach. When she was little and before her parents had died and she and her siblings had fallen into the greedy hands of Mrs. Julian and the other orphanage masters at St. Vincent’s, Poppy had imagined

her wedding. She'd always wanted to wear light blue, the color her mother had worn at her own wedding. Once upon a time, she'd even imagined wearing the very same dress as her mother, though now that was impossible. She had burned her mother's wedding dress shortly after her death, for fuel for the fire that had kept her and her siblings from freezing to death during the first of those cold and empty weeks.

Perhaps Mason would lend Poppy the money to purchase a bolt of cloth in town to use to make a new dress. That is assuming that Mapletree had a store that sold cloth and other dressmaking accouterments. She and Ellie would need at least one other dress besides the grey woolen ones they were currently wearing, as well as nightclothes and stockings. Poppy could already see the patterns in her mind's eye. They'd finally have warm, comfortable clothes to wear in place of those horrible, scratchy dresses they were forced into at the orphanage.

Poppy looked over at her sister. Ellie was lying on the bench with her eyes open, staring off into space. She needed to get her up and prepared to depart when the train arrived at the station, and she needed to school her sister on how to behave around Mason.

"Ellie? Ellie, why don't you sit up? Come, I'll help you," Poppy said as she stooped down and grasped her sister gently by the shoulders. Ellie was as floppy as a rag doll as Poppy lifted her into a sitting position. Poppy held Ellie's face in her hands for a moment, peering into her sister's eyes until they finally lifted to hers.

"I know I haven't given you many details on why exactly we are headed to Texas in the first place, but it's time you know because we're nearly at our destination. I applied to be a mail-order bride, Ellie. I corresponded with a very nice man named Mason Brodie who owns a ranch near Mapletree, and he's going to marry me in a few weeks. We'll live on his ranch and be a family together, and you and I will finally be comfortable and safe and well fed. Doesn't that sound wonderful?" Poppy asked her sister.

Ellie's brow wrinkled in confusion as she considered what Poppy had said, but then her eyes cleared, and she shrugged.

"Whatever you think is best, Poppy," Ellie whispered. Her voice was raspy from lack of use, but Poppy still thought her sister sounded like an angel after so many days of silence. She hugged her tightly and for a moment the girls clung to each other; Poppy was relieved that her sister had finally spoken and Ellie was monumentally grateful that her sister had sacrificed her own future for the betterment of her and their now-dead brother.

The girls broke away from each other just as the conductor called that they were minutes away from Mapletree. Ellie helped Poppy gather their meager belongings: the cloth in which Sister Miller had wrapped their food, and a bible Eliza had given them shortly after Jacob died. Poppy led the way out of the compartment and toward the staff quarters. She needed to say goodbye to Alan and his sister and thank them for their help over these past few days.

"Poppy!" Alan called, spotting her as he came out of the car that held the kitchen and its crew. "It's nearly your stop, is it not?" he asked.

Poppy nodded, tears springing to her eyes at the idea of saying goodbye to the second friend she'd ever made. Alan walked toward her and took her hand in his.

"Don't cry, dear Poppy. Whatever awaits you once you alight from this train, will be good. I'm sure of it because you and Ellie deserve only goodness."

Alan bowed and kissed Poppy's hand and then turned to Ellie and did the same. They thanked Alan profusely, Ellie even opening her mouth to whisper words of gratitude before leaving the car and heading for an exit.

Ellie took Poppy's hand as the train began to slow while entering the station. Just before they alighted, she squeezed, hoping to bring her sister some small measure of comfort to calm the nerves.

Poppy was the first of the two girls to step down off the train and was so

focused on not falling the few feet that separated the steps from the ground that for a moment she didn't notice the man standing before her. When she straightened herself, Poppy saw him. Mason. It had to be. She knew in her heart that this was the man she'd spent countless hours writing to, the man she'd spent the last few months imagining. It was him in the flesh, and he was more handsome than she could have ever imagined.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



Mason was shocked at the beauty of the young woman standing before him. Poppy's caramel-brown hair was pulled back into a small bun at the nape of her neck, allowing him to appreciate the full beauty of her face. Her eyes were large and heavy-lidded, the green irises shot through with flecks of gold. Her lashes were long and curled like a doll's, her nose small and rounded and her lips pouted and just-bitten pink. He had tried picturing the woman to whom he had written all those letters, but Mason had never had a particularly good imagination.

Being raised in a ranching family meant that he'd learned to be practical early on and had put aside childish fancies far earlier than most boys his age. The most he'd been able to imagine about Poppy was her voice. He had imagined she would have a soft, lilting voice that would soothe Rosie when she cried out. That was after all his reason for sending for Poppy to join them. To care for Rosie and the ranch house. Not Mason. He and Poppy would never have anything other than friendship.

"Poppy?" Mason enquired, his voice hoarse as he stood before the woman he was preparing to marry in just a few weeks. Poppy blushed as she realized who he was.

"Yes. That's me. And you're...you must be Mason. It's so nice to finally meet you," she said in the most beautiful voice Mason had ever heard.

A smaller, younger girl disembarked just behind Poppy and took up position beside her. She looked a little like Poppy although her hair was darker, her eyes lighter and her skin wan as though she hadn't felt the sunlight of her skin in some time.

Poppy turned to the girl next to her. "Mason, this is my sister, Ellie. She traveled with me from Chicago." Her voice wavered as though she was worried about Mason's reaction to her statement. And well she should worry. This was not what Mason had signed up for when he'd proposed marriage.

Poppy was the only woman he was expecting to welcome into his home. He and Rosie had dealt with enough in the last year without having an unexpected stranger moving in with them.

"Your sister? You did not tell me you were bringing your sister. You said nothing about a sister in any of your letters."

POPPY LOOKED SHOCKED as if he had slapped her. He knew he sounded harsh, but he didn't care. This was hard enough for him, finding a woman to replace his dear Elizabeth. Only now this woman whom he was supposed to trust with his life and his child, had lied to him. He didn't like it.

"I'm sorry," Poppy whispered, her fear obvious. Ellie stepped closer to her sister and wrapped her arm around her. Together, they stood in front of Mason, a joined force united against him. Oh well. As long as they cared for Rosie and cooked for him, Mason didn't care. Ellie was just another helping hand, and her silence meant she wouldn't be much trouble to him or anyone else.

Mason didn't respond to Poppy's apology but motioned for the two sisters to follow him. They walked through the train station and out to the dirt road where Mason's horse was waiting.

"I'm assuming you've never ridden a horse before?" he asked the girls. Both girls shook their heads. He sighed and gave them a boost onto his filly,

Mary, before also mounting. It was a tight squeeze on the horse's back, but it was only a short ride back to the ranch. Mason was eager to get home. He'd left Rosie alone, napping in her room. He, Ellie, and Poppy set off at a brisk pace, the familiar dry desert land whipping by them as Mason directed them toward their new home.

"Over there is where I run the cattle," Mason indicated to Poppy and Ellie as they passed the far side of the ranch. "We have about a hundred at the moment but I'm hoping to buy more when I head to the market in a few weeks."

Mason unsaddled his filly and led her to her stall in the barn. He only had one horse for the moment, but he was hoping to get another horse or two at the market. Poppy, and Ellie he supposed, would need a means to get around the land beside their own two feet. Mason was disgruntled at the idea of having to teach two women instead of one how to ride a horse, but he couldn't very well turn Ellie away when she'd traveled all this way with Poppy. Mason would just have to make do.

"If you follow me, I'll show you to where you'll be staying," Mason said, motioning to the small building a few hundred yards to the left of the horse barn. Mason had built it himself when he and Elizabeth were first married, thinking that when Eliot got too old, he could live there and be close to his grandchildren. Of course, that would never happen now, but at least the building would be put to good use. It had a large bedroom with a single bed that the girls could share, as well as a rudimentary kitchen complete with a wood stove and a small table with two chairs.

Seeing the house brought thoughts of Eliot and the secret Mason was keeping from him. He knew he should tell Eliot about Poppy, but he could no longer handle the man's scorn. His heart hurt enough with Elizabeth's loss. Losing the family that had taken him in after their marriage was too much to bear.

Mason held the door open for Poppy and Ellie as they walked up the three steps that led to the porch. The door led to the kitchen which Mason had cleaned and stocked with supplies from the local market. On the table, he'd placed Elizabeth's old vase, now filled with freshly cut daisies. He felt stupid now looking at the flowers, thinking they were a touch too far, but Poppy smiled when she saw them.

"Daisies! My favorite flower!" she exclaimed, and Mason couldn't help the jump his heart gave at her delight.

Poppy and Ellie walked through to the bedroom while Mason waited in the kitchen. He could hear the two muttering to each other, but he couldn't make out their words.

Poppy walked back into the kitchen. "Thank you so much, Mason. This house is wonderful. And thank you for the flowers."

Mason grunted and said, "This is where you'll stay for the foreseeable future. We are to be married in four weeks. I've set the date with the local priest. The wedding will be held at the church down the road. I'll make sure you have time to go to town and get whatever you might need to outfit yourself for the occasion, and Miss Ellie, too."

Mason didn't miss the look of shock on Poppy's face. She must have assumed they were to be married right away, but Mason didn't want the ceremony to happen before Poppy and Rosie were properly acquainted. For her sake as well as his, he needed to take things one step at a time.

Poppy recovered and nodded, smiling at Mason as he walked out of the kitchen and back down the steps.

"I will be bringing meat and corn over for your dinner. You and Ellie will eat here tonight," Mason said over his shoulder as he left. Poppy stood on the porch and watched him leave, her brow furrowing at this strange man to whom she had shackled herself.

CHAPTER 11



“*W*as he... was he so rude in his letters?” Ellie asked Poppy later that night as they lay next to each other in bed.

In a small trunk next to the bed, Poppy had found two white muslin nightgowns with lace detailing. She and Ellie wore them now in bed, though they were covered in a warm woolen blanket to ward off the chill that swept through the house. Poppy had always imagined Texas to be warm, but at that moment it seemed even colder than Chicago in the dead of winter.

“No. In his letters he was kind. Welcoming. Warm, even. It’s almost like he was a different man,” Poppy whispered, her voice breaking as she spoke.

Though she hadn’t expected Mason to welcome her like a long-lost love, she had hoped for some measure of warmth, but the only emotion the man seemed able to show toward her was anger. He was more handsome than she could possibly have imagined, but also so much colder and crueler. She could only hope he would warm to her in time.

“It’s my fault. You didn’t tell him about me and now he hates me, and you by connection. I should leave. I should’ve never come with you. If Jacob and I had stayed in the orphanage, you’d be here, happy, and Jacob would still be alive,” Ellie said, turning away from her sister and beginning to sob into her pillow.

“No! Ellie, you know that’s not true. He’ll come to love you just as I do.

You wait. How could he not? And you know it was time for us to leave. What happened to Jacob was tragic and we'll both regret it until the end of our days, but it wasn't our fault. Mrs. Julian is to blame, and we're far away from her now. We're safe," Poppy said as she curled herself around her sister, quieting her sobs with gentle strokes of her hair and soothing platitudes in her ear. Poppy hoped the words she'd spoken were true. Alan had assured her that no one was asking after her or her siblings on the train, but Poppy couldn't be sure that Mrs. Julian wasn't somehow following them. What if she'd tortured the truth out of Sister Miller? What if she'd found the remnants of the letters in Sister Miller's hearth? Poppy could only pray that her friend was safe from that woman's wrath. She knew it was wrong, but she hoped that she was correct in her assumption that Mrs. Julian was dead.

Poppy and Ellie slept fitfully that night, tossing and turning in the new bed with its clean sheets and warm blankets. It was so different from their beds at the orphanage. Those mattresses had been as hard as rocks, and the single blanket they were allowed did little to ward off the cold. But here in Texas, Poppy and Ellie were wrapped up warmly. Eventually, in the early hours of the morning, they fell into a deep sleep and curled around each other for warmth and comfort until dawn. The weak winter sunlight streamed in through the curtains of their bedroom, waking them on their first day in their new home.

Poppy helped Ellie dress and the girls sat down to a breakfast of bread, having given up the notion of hot coffee brewed on the stove. Mason came by while they were breakfasting to show Poppy how to light the woodstove to keep herself and her sister warm.

"It's quite easy, you'll find. Just takes a few sparks and then it will last all day. I'll bring wood every week, so you never run out. The wind here in the desert can be biting at night and I don't want either of you catching cold."

Poppy thanked Mason and was about to return to her breakfast when she realized he was still standing in the doorway of the house.

“Is there something else?” she asked.

Mason nodded and without making eye contact with her, said, “When you’re finished your meal, walk down to the main house. Ellie, you can stay here. I have something to show you, Poppy.”

Poppy nodded and wished Mason a good morning before turning to her sister. “What could he be showing me? Where I’ll cook and tend to the house? I didn’t think he would want me in the main ranch house until after we were married. Oh, Ellie, I wish I knew how to decipher that man. He’s so confusing. Showing us how to light the fire to keep us warm one minute and gruffly telling me what to do the next. How am I ever supposed to get to know him as a friend, let alone a husband?”

Ellie shook her head silently and went back to eating her bread. Poppy could feel tears pricking her eyes but she quickly wiped them away and took a large gulp of the cool water. When she set her hand back on the table, Ellie reached across and grabbed it, squeezing Poppy’s palm to let her know that no matter what, she was there for her.

After finishing her breakfast and the coffee they had managed to brew, Poppy straightened her dress and hair and walked to the main house. The wind had died down and the sun was out, lending slight warmth to the day as Poppy made her way to the large ranch house. It was three times the size of the house she and Ellie were in, with a large wraparound porch, four windows facing the fields, and a second floor with its own window looking out over the homestead.

Poppy wondered as she mounted the steps to the porch whether Mason had built this house himself. She remembered him writing to her that this ranch had only been his since he had married, but the house was so well taken care of and in such good condition that Poppy couldn’t imagine that it had existed before Mason joined his wife’s family.

Poppy knocked on the heavy wooden front door and waited for Mason to

answer. As she waited, she looked around and spotted a baby's rattle and a small doll on one of the chairs lining the porch. How odd. Did Mason have nieces and nephews who visited often? Why else would he have children's toys on his property?

Poppy didn't have time to continue her contemplation because Mason flung the door open. He was dressed in dark grey wool trousers with a black vest covering a raw cotton shirt. He wore no overcoat and Poppy could make out the muscles beneath his shirt which were straining at the fabric. He must be strong from all the ranch work. Even standing still before her he possessed a kind of raw power and strength that both excited and terrified her.

"Morning," he said gruffly as he held the door for Poppy to enter the house. Mason's house was indeed much bigger than Poppy's, and his front door led into a large sitting room complete with a chair, table, and roaring fire. A ledger was open on the chair with an inkwell pen balanced on top of it. Poppy must have caught him in the middle of doing accounts of some sort.

"Let me give you a tour of the house," Mason said, ushering Poppy further into the room so that he could close the door behind her. Mason walked through the sitting room and into the kitchen. The table was just off the living room and could seat at least six. A vase full of flowers had been placed in the middle of the table and Poppy smiled at them, thinking that perhaps Mason was a man who appreciated the touch of home comforts. Perhaps he had even gathered those flowers himself.

Beyond the table were the cooking facilities, complete with a large coal-burning stove, pegs on the walls holding a variety of pots and pans, and a small grouping of shelves rising from floor level that held what looked like decorative glasses, plates, and vases.

"My wife's," Mason said, pointing to the shelves. Poppy spotted beautifully painted teacups and glass tumblers before Mason directed her toward the stove.

"This is where you'll be cooking. Do you know how to cook?" Mason

asked. Poppy nodded.

“Helping to prepare the meals was one of my duties at the orphanage. I can cook stews, soups, and porridge,” Poppy said. She realized she had no real idea whether the food in Texas was different from that in Chicago. She assumed that working and living on a cattle ranch meant easy access to fresh meat and possibly fresh greens and vegetables from a kitchen garden, but beyond that, she had no idea what Mason’s meals might entail.

“I don’t quite know about the typical meals you would be accustomed to down here though, I’m afraid,” Poppy added, uncertainty in her tone. “I don’t really know anything about Texas other than where it is on a map.”

Mason turned from fiddling with a knob on the stove and looked at her with something resembling pity. “Meat stews and soups, mostly. I source most of the meat myself and there’s a market in town once a week. I’ll take you there and show you what I like to eat.”

Poppy nodded, grateful that he was willing to help her. “That sounds nice. Thank you, Mason,” she said. It was the first time he had heard her speak his name out loud and he looked shocked at the sound as if he hadn’t heard his name spoken in a very long time.

“Let me show you the main bedroom,” Mason said, gesturing for Poppy to follow him to the far side of the house. Poppy was confused as to why she would need to see the bedroom. Surely, he didn’t plan on her sleeping there until they were well acquainted and married?

It was then that Poppy saw the crib and the sweet little cherubic face peaking out from beneath its lace covering. Words that sounded very much like “Da-da!” came from the crib in a high, girlish voice. Could that be...a baby?

Mason walked to the crib and flipped the lace covering up. He gathered the baby girl in his arms and scooped her up to rest on his chest.

“Poppy, meet Rosie. Rosie,” Mason said, turning so his daughter could see Poppy, “meet Poppy, your new mama.”

“You...you have a child?” Poppy whispered. She was shocked. She hadn’t expected to take on the role of a new mother in addition to a wife when she had agreed to marry Mason all those weeks ago. After all, Poppy was only eighteen years old. She was just barely out of childhood herself. And while she had taken care of the other children at the orphanage like they were her own siblings, that didn’t mean she was remotely capable of handling a baby.

Mason wouldn’t meet her eyes, instead choosing to focus on his daughter’s as he explained, “Elizabeth and I had a baby. That’s actually how Elizabeth died, in childbirth. Rosie has been my guiding light this past year, but I can’t take care of her and the ranch all by myself. That is why I applied for a wife. I needed someone to help me tend to Rosie and the household duties so I could focus on the cattle. And she’s no trouble, really. Hardly cries, sleeps through the night, eats her meals, and doesn’t fuss. She’s the easiest baby in the world.”

Rosie squealed as Mason finished, giving her daddy a gap-toothed smile. Mason readjusted his hold on her and finally looked up to meet Poppy’s eyes. “She’s easy to love, Poppy. And... and she needs a woman’s love. I can’t raise her on my own. Please help me.”

“I...I need some time to think. I’ll... come visit me later at the house. I’ll have an answer for you then,” Poppy said, and walked out of the house, leaving Mason and Rosie to watch her depart.

Poppy did not head directly back to the cottage she shared with Ellie. She walked around the fields for a while, exploring the grounds and taking the time to arrange her thoughts. Mason had lied to her. He wanted her to be not just a wife, but a mother. And while Rosie was the sweetest-looking baby Poppy had ever seen, she wasn’t sure she was ready to take this on. So much had happened these past few weeks and she had hardly had the time to process any of it.

Poppy walked around the horse barn and back towards her cottage,

realizing that she couldn't abandon Mason and Rosie, because they were her and Ellie's only chance at safety. They couldn't return to Chicago and risk the wrath of Mrs. Julian, if she had indeed survived Poppy's attack, and they had nowhere else to go. Poppy would just have to make the best of the situation in which she had found herself. She would care for Rosie and learn to like Mason, and in time they would be married and maybe, eventually, the four of them would be a family.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



“*R*osie Posie, how are we this morning? Hm? How are we, my precious girl?” Poppy sang as she helped Rosie from the crib and danced with her into the kitchen. Ellie was at the stove stirring the corn porridge they would have for lunch. Though Ellie seemed livelier than she had upon first setting foot in Mapletree, Poppy was still worried about her. Her face was wan, and she seemed to be losing weight, her dress hanging from her and her collarbone even more pronounced than it had been at the orphanage. Poppy wished that Ellie would talk about Jacob and her feelings, but she hadn’t mentioned their brother since their first night on the ranch. Poppy could only hope that time would heal Ellie’s wounds.

Spending her days cooking and cleaning and looking after Rosie had helped Poppy avoid thinking about Jacob and, by extension, Mrs. Julian. The nights, however, were filled with nightmares and the terror of Mrs. Julian finding Ellie at the ranch and dragging her back to Chicago. Poppy couldn’t let that happen. She knew she should tell Mason that her sister was in danger, but she was afraid to. Mason had been so angry at her when he realized that Poppy had lied to him about Ellie. Although he had done the same about Rosie, he didn’t seem likely to forgive Poppy if it came to pass that she had kept another truth from him. Perhaps in time the nightmares would fade. Mrs. Julian could after all only expend so much time and energy in search of Ellie

before she gave up and found another orphan to take her place. Poppy could only hope. Why was she so much less certain now that Mrs. Julian had not died on the night they escaped from the orphanage? Throughout the train journey, she had never doubted that the evil woman was dead. Why had she then resurrected her in her mind, thoughts, and night terrors now that she and Ellie were safely in Texas?

Rosie giggled in Poppy's arms, and her anxious thoughts fell away as she looked at the beautiful girl in her arms. Rosie really was a miracle. She was the happiest baby Poppy had ever had the pleasure to know, constantly smiling, laughing, and giggling. She loved games and singing and reveled in being read to. Poppy often read to her from the Bible she had found on one of the shelves in the main room. Rosie seemed to like The Book of Mark best, though Poppy always read a few Psalms to her as well, since they were her personal favorites.

"Rosie my posy, let's go see what Ellie is up to!" Poppy sang as she carried the girl into the kitchen. "How's the porridge?" Poppy asked, to which Ellie simply nodded.

CORNMEAL, the main ingredient in the porridge, was new to the girls, but Mason had told them it was a staple here in the southwest. It was hearty and easy to cook and "keeps you full and strong long into the day," according to Mason. He said it was his favorite lunch on days when he had ranch work to handle. The girls had taken to making it for him as a thank-you for taking them in. Ellie didn't seem to like it, barely ever finishing more than half her bowl, but Poppy loved it. She could feel herself growing stronger, gaining weight, and finally filling into the womanly figure she had known was hiding in her all along. She no longer felt the cold rattle in her bones at night and her seat bones no longer dug into the wooden seat of the chairs in her kitchen. For the first time in nearly five years, she was properly fed.

Long before Poppy was planning the escape from the orphanage, her uncle David was looking for them. David crossed the Atlantic in hopes of somehow finding his brother's children, but when he landed in Chicago, no one in the Brown family's old tenement building had any idea what had happened to the children of Edward and Sara.

"I came one day to check on them, and they were gone," Maria Cotorino told David when he knocked on her door. "They were the sweetest children. I hope they were able to find shelter after the landlord evicted them."

David spent days visiting the local shelters, workhouses, and orphanages before finally landing on St. Vincent's doorstep.

"The Brown children? Yes, I know of them," a small, withered old woman told him. She introduced herself as Mrs. Julian.

She looked hard and bitter, and David sincerely hoped that this was not the person who had taken his nieces and nephew into her care.

"No one knows what happened to them, I'm afraid," Mrs. Julian said, scowling as she leaned over her desk. "They simply vanished one day. Poor dears. They were always so eager to explore. We think the cold winter might have claimed them. It's quite common, you know, losing an orphan or two in the winter in that way."

David balked at the idea of the children freezing to death, and he left Mrs. Julian's office feeling even more hopeless. But as he was nearing the entrance to the orphanage, he heard someone whisper out to him to his right. David turned and found the kind, pale face of a nun staring back at him from behind a stone pillar. David approached her and she motioned for him to follow her into the main chapel.

The nun introduced herself as Sister Miller and briefly told David what had become of the Brown children.

"They escaped out West to a place they referred to as Mapletree. It was a few days' train journey from here, and all three children left two weeks ago

in the middle of the night to walk to the station where they had the fare to pay for their passage.”

David breathed a visible sigh of relief knowing that the children had at the very least escaped what, from the brief time he had spent in it, felt like a truly terrible place in which to exist as a child. The orphanage was cold and damp, and every child he passed looked forlorn and far too thin. It did not go unnoticed, either, how every one of the children he did happen upon during his brief time inside the institution, kept their eyes downcast. What would make a child take such measures as to be certain never to venture to so much as dare to make eye contact with him? Knowing his family had escaped such a place to somewhere warmer in the Southwest filled him with joy. That is until Sister Miller explained what had befallen Jacob.

“That woman beat my nephew?” David yelled in consternation but Sister Miller urged him to be quiet.

“I am sure that Poppy and Ellie took good care of him. Sadly, we are used to treating wounds here at St. Vincent’s, sir. Jacob is not the first child to be harmed at the hands of Mrs. Julian. Nor will he be the last, I fear.”

“You must report that woman to the authorities,” David whispered urgently.

Sister Miller nodded. “I have. I walked to the police station the very day following Jacob’s mistreatment, while on my way to the market, and reported to the authorities all that had happened, but they have yet to make an appearance here to question her. I can only surmise that they do not consider an old woman beating a parentless child to be a crime worth pursuing.”

David shook his head, feeling sad for all the children who had resigned their fate to the orphanage. At least they had a kind woman such as Sister Miller looking out for them.

“Are you going to go find Poppy, Ellie, and Jacob?” Sister Miller asked as she saw David out of the chapel and onto the street.

David nodded, “I must. They’re all the family I have in this world. I have

to know that they're safe and well looked after. I won't rest until I do find them. I'll collect my belongings from the hotel and head directly to the train station without further delay to purchase the next available ticket to Mapletree. And I will write to you once I know that they are safe."

"Oh, God bless you, sir," Sister Miller blurted with tears sparkling in her eyes at the idea of Poppy and her siblings finally reuniting with this gentleman and knowing the rewards of being a family again. It had been just the three of them for so long.

"Make sure you ease Poppy's mind about Mrs. Julian. I know she'll be worrying that Mrs. Julian is still looking for them, but please tell her not to fret. Mrs. Julian has found replacements for Ellie and Jacob and other than being upset that the kitchen was bloody and that she was knocked out cold, Mrs. Julian has forgotten the incident. She won't pursue the Brown children, I can assure you of that."

David took Sister Miller's hand in his and shook it, saying, "Thank you, Sister, and God bless you," before putting his hat back on and setting off along the snow-covered Chicago streets.

CHAPTER 13



“Two hundred dollars. It’s yours as soon as you can sell that ranch. I swear it,” Eliot Turner told the solicitor seated at his kitchen table. He hadn’t given up on his plan to sell the ranch out from under Mason. If anything, Eliot’s ire toward Mason had only grown stronger over these last few weeks. The man seemed tireless, constantly tending to the cattle or the ranch or his child. He seemed to have boundless energy, and it served only to make Eliot feel lazier and all the more useless.

“I can have it done in a matter of weeks, Mr. Turner,” the solicitor assured Eliot before gulping down the glass of whiskey before him. He stood and collected his hat and coat from the stand by the front door.

“Just make sure you do. That boy needs to suffer. He deserves it!” Eliot shouted as the door banged shut behind the solicitor.

Eliot remained at the table for another hour, slowly gulping down the whiskey in the bottle before him. Alcohol had become his constant companion since Elizabeth’s death and, over the last few weeks, he had been sober for less than an hour each day. Eliot paid one of Mason’s newer ranch hands to buy him crates of whiskey which he secreted to Eliot in the cart filled with Mason’s provisions.

Yesterday, when the ranch hand delivered the whiskey, Eliot noticed more food than usual in the cart. Bags of ground corn, sugar, wheat, and even

jars of expensive jam filled the cart. Eliot was shocked to see perfumed bath soaps too. Now, why would Mason be buying perfumed soaps, sugar, and jam for himself? Eliot happened to know for a fact that Mason hated sugar, having absolutely no sign of a sweet tooth. He never ate the johnnycakes covered in syrup that Elizabeth used to make for them, saying he preferred corn porridge. Eliot also knew that no self-respecting man bought lady's soap unless it was for the woman in his life.

But Rosie was the only girl in Mason's life, wasn't she?

Eliot sucked the last drop from the bottle and decided that he had to find out just what was going on in that house of Mason's. Something was fishy, and Eliot was going to find out what that might be.

Eliot was stumbling toward the large ranch house when a young girl appeared from inside and walked out onto the porch. She wore a cornflower blue dress with a flower in her hair, and the wind carried a scent off her that Eliot suspected was from the soap he had seen in the cart. In her arms she held baby Rosie, her eyes closed in sleep.

"Oh Rosie Posie, what a sleepy girl you are today!" the girl called in a strange accent. Just who was this, Eliot thought to himself.

"And who might you be?" Eliot called as he reached the bottom of the stairs. Poppy looked up in surprise from staring down into little Rosie's face. Her brow crinkled as she took in Eliot's wrinkled clothing, his wild hair, and the stench that was permeating from him.

"I'm...I'm Poppy Brown. Pleased to meet you, sir. And you are?" Poppy asked in a polite tone.

"I am Eliot Turner and I own this land. What might you be doing on my porch?" he asked. Before Poppy had time to respond, the door behind her opened, and out walked Mason.

"Poppy, go inside," Mason demanded, and Poppy followed his orders without question, rushing through the door as Mason held it open for her.

Mason turned to Eliot and straightened himself, folding his arms across his chest, his brow stern and his lips in a flat, un-amused line. “That’s Poppy. My future wife.”

Mason had thought he’d seen Eliot angry before and assumed that he had seen the man as mad as he could get after the fit he threw when he found out about Elizabeth’s passing, but Mason realized that was nothing in comparison to the swirl of anger surrounding Eliot as he stood before him now.

“WHAT!” Eliot screamed, charging up the porch steps and shoving Mason against the wall with his forearm. Eliot held Mason by the neck, but instead of showing any indication of fear, Mason’s eyes held his in a calm, even stare.

“Eliot, the only way we’re going to solve this is by talking, and it’s getting a little hard to do that with your arm at my throat,” Mason pointed out evenly.

Eliot was however past the point of rationality. He swung at Mason, who caught Eliot’s fist in his and turned. The old man howled in pain and released Mason, allowing the younger man to step back and put some distance between them.

“ELIOT, that is Poppy Brown. She’s eighteen years old and she’s from Chicago. We’re getting married in three weeks. We met through an advertisement in the newspaper. She’s my mail-order bride.”

“Your mail order what?” Eliot said, still bent over as he examined the damage Mason had inflicted on his wrist.

“My mail-order bride. You and I both know I can’t raise Rosie by myself, especially if you’re not willing to so much as visit the babe. I need someone to help me around the ranch house, someone to raise Rosie and cook so that I am freed up to do the important work like keeping track of the cattle and

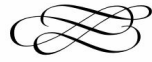
managing the ranch hands. It makes sense, Eliot. It makes good business sense and it will benefit the ranch. Isn't that what's most important to you?"

While Mason was being logical and thinking rationally, Eliot reacted entirely on emotion, devoid of any levelheadedness whatsoever.

He stood up and approached Mason until the two men were standing chest-to-chest and then he whispered menacingly, "Boy, you're going to regret this as much as I regret letting my Elizabeth take that first dance with you. Mark my words, Mason. You will regret this."

Mason watched as Eliot turned and stumbled down the steps, tripping on the last one and almost falling to the ground. Mason moved to help Eliot, but the older man righted himself and stumbled back to his home. Mason only hoped that Eliot's threats were as a result of whiskey. He hoped the old man would wake up the next day regretting his words, because, like it or not, Mason was marrying the woman currently busy in the kitchen preparing his supper. He'd known he would marry her after that first letter she wrote to him, and nothing Eliot could say would change that. Poppy and Ellie were his family now. They were the family he and Rosie had been longing for, and Mason wasn't going to let Eliot Turner and his anger ruin that.

CHAPTER 14



Mason tried to put his altercation with Eliot Turner out of his mind over the ensuing weeks. He had a ranch to tend to as well as a new family and an upcoming wedding. The market was also drawing near, and Mason meant to sell his cattle there which meant that he was spending even less time in the ranch house than normal. A new ranch hand had disappeared, so he was helping the others to organize the cattle into lots for sale. With the market so close, the cattle feeding also needed to be closely monitored to make sure that they were in peak condition for viewing and sale.

MASON SPENT long hours in the winter sun, which was harsh despite the season. He had to fit more work into fewer daylight hours as they neared the end of the year, and Mason often dragged himself to bed at night completely exhausted. Poppy was therefore a godsend, making his meals, cleaning the house, and looking after Rosie, allowing Mason the freedom to focus on his livestock. Coming home to a cooked meal often complete with freshly baked cornbread, made him soften toward the girl. She was an excellent cook and her presence on the ranch made life a little brighter and a little more welcoming. Although Mason had always looked forward to leaving his cattle

after a full day to spend time with Rosie, he had really looked forward to going home over the past weeks since Poppy's arrival. The house that had seemed so empty after Elizabeth's passing now seemed vibrant and full of life again.

Mason could also not help but notice how well Poppy and Rosie got along. Rosie was generally a happy baby who rarely cried or made a fuss, but she had never laughed or squealed much around Mason. Mason had never been around children before he was blessed with Rosie, and he had always assumed he'd learn about fatherhood and what it took to raise a child from his beloved Elizabeth. When she died, he lost not only his partner and the love of his life but also the only person who could show him how to be a father. He had tried his best with Rosie, but he knew he fell short when it came to playing with her. Watching Poppy make his baby girl laugh and squeal warmed his heart. Poppy was naturally maternal and truly seemed to love his daughter, and this in turn made Mason think that maybe, someday, he might feel that way toward Poppy.

"He really is a nice man, Ellie," Poppy told her sister one night a fortnight after their arrival in Mapletree.

She had been sorely disappointed in Mason's gruff and abrasive manner at first, but she was warming to the man. He was strong and silent, but also clearly cared about his daughter, his workers, and his ranch. He was industrious and diligent and keen to provide for his family, which, Poppy supposed, now included herself and Ellie.

POPPY COULDN'T HELP but notice that Mason was really handsome. Working outside had tanned his skin to a deep toffee color which was offset by the natural black of his hair. Although he shaved every morning, by day's end he always had coarse stubble on his face, which made him look rugged and

accentuated the line of his jaw. Poppy had caught herself staring at him more than once of late, and she was slowly beginning to realize that not only did she respect Mason, but she was falling in love with him. Poppy had never been in love, but she had heard about it in whispers at the orphanage enough to know that the jump in her heart whenever she saw Mason and the butterflies in her stomach that erupted whenever he drew near her were telltale signs that she was falling for the man. She could only hope and pray that someday he would feel the same about her.

But as excited as Poppy was about the prospect of falling in love and having that love returned by her soon-to-be husband, Poppy was also worried about her sister. Ellie had continued to be mostly mute and withdrawn, her skin pale and her clothes hanging off her. Poppy had hoped that finally having access to their own food would help them to both gain the weight they needed to stay warm for winter. While Poppy could feel herself rounding out, Ellie seemed to be shrinking. She picked at her plate of food each day and night, pushing the meat stews and soup around her bowl without ever lifting the spoon to her mouth. She tossed and turned in the night beside Poppy, often crying out for Jacob and sobbing in her sleep. Poppy didn't know what to do. She prayed to God that her sister would heal and that their new home would allow her to forget the horrors of their past, but Ellie seemed unable to mend.

Poppy thought spending time outside might do her sister good. One sunny Thursday morning while Mason was taking a lunch break, Poppy suggested that she and Ellie go for a walk.

“Mason, would you mind watching Rosie while Ellie and I explore the ranch on foot?”

Mason nodded and gave Poppy a rare smile, causing a spark to ignite in her chest. His smiles were infrequent, but they were the most beguiling she had ever seen.

Poppy took Ellie's arm in hers and led her out of the house and down the

ranch house steps.

“It’s such a beautiful day, isn’t it? The perfect temperature. It’s so much warmer here than in Chicago,” Poppy prattled as she and Ellie walked to the right of the house toward the fields of cattle grazing.

Ellie muttered “mmhmm” in response but said no more to Poppy. Poppy frowned but persevered. She would get her sister to talk if it took all morning and multiple circles of the ranch land. She had to know what Ellie was thinking.

Poppy allowed them to walk in silence for a few minutes before trying again. “Ellie, will you tell me what’s wrong? You haven’t seemed yourself since we arrived here in Mapletree. I know you must be mourning Jacob, as am I, but you don’t look yourself. You’re barely eating, not speaking, and you toss and turn all night. Won’t you confide in me?”

Ellie stopped walking and unlaced her arm from Poppy’s. She turned to her sister with tears in her eyes. Poppy immediately stepped forward and wrapped her sister in her arms, hugging her close. Rather than comforting Ellie, though, the hug seemed to upset her further. She began sobbing in Poppy’s arms.

“It’s....it’s all too much,” she whispered in between sobs. She clung tighter to Poppy, who stepped back to lead Ellie toward a small wooden bench tucked against one of the slats in the fence.

“Oh Ellie, I’m so sorry. This is such a change for us, isn’t it? We’ve gone from a terrible life at that orphanage to relative comfort, but we’ve lost Jacob along the way. I am so sorry if you’ve felt that I have been pushing you to heal before you’re ready. I just want you to be happy,” Poppy said as she placed an arm around Ellie’s shoulders and hugged her sister against her.

Ellie nodded and rested her head on Poppy’s, and they remained so for an hour, watching the cattle graze and leaning against each other for strength. Poppy realized that there was no timeline for grief. One day Ellie would be able to live with the trauma of their past, but for right now in her own

beautiful head, she was still reliving it, and Poppy had to let her.

Eventually the girls stood up and began to make their way back to the ranch house. Ellie walked up the steps, whispering to Poppy that she was going to take a nap. Poppy nodded but remained outside, needing more time alone. She headed for the horse barn, intending to spend some time brushing Mason's filly. Mary was such a sweet and gentle horse and loved attention. Poppy had seen horses in Chicago, pulling carts and ferrying policemen from one street to the next, but until she arrived in Mapletree she had never actually touched one. She found Mary's hair smooth as silk and her mane soft to the touch. Poppy always felt calmer when she was around Mary.

She was just bending down to retrieve the brush from where she had left it on the floor of Mary's stall when she heard a noise behind her. Straightening herself, Poppy turned to see a strange man walking toward her. The man was stumbling and was obviously drunk. His hair was matted and unwashed. He was dressed smartly, though, in clothes similar to Mason's. Realization washed over Poppy when she recognized him as the man she had seen at the house before – the man Mason had come out to speak to after he had instructed Poppy to take Rosie inside. He had to be Eliot Turner, Elizabeth's father. Mason had only spoken of him to tell the girls to avoid the man at all costs.

“He's a drunk, and a mean one at that. I don't want either of you interacting with him. It won't bring any of us any good,” Mason had told Poppy and Ellie the night they had arrived in Mapletree.

Fear crept up Poppy's spine as she realized that Eliot Turner was blocking her only exit from the barn. The other door was shut and padlocked. Poppy didn't know how to get away from the drunk, terrifying man who was slowly making his way toward her.

“You little harlot!” Eliot yelled as he came to a standstill in front of Poppy. Poppy was clinging to Mary, who was neighing and stamping her hooves in agitation. Perhaps she was also afraid of Eliot.

“You think you can replace my daughter? You’re a poor, impoverished little chit if you think you can hold a candle to my Elizabeth. How dare you!” Eliot yelled, spittle flying from his mouth as he yelled. “How dare you try and take her place? You ain’t nothing compared to her! You hear me, you whore? Nothing!”

Eliot’s hand shot out towards Poppy’s breast so fast that she didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. The man had stepped close enough to her for her to smell the harsh tang of alcohol on his breath. Eliot’s other hand fastened itself on Poppy’s midsection and moved toward her hip, trying to draw her closer to him. Poppy kicked out at Eliot, her boot connecting with his shin. He cried out in pain and retreated a step, giving Poppy enough time to twist out of his grasp and run into an empty horse stall. She searched frantically for a weapon of sorts: a brush, a bucket, anything, but before she knew it Eliot was behind her, grabbing her by the braid and yanking her against him. Just as Eliot moved his hand back to Poppy’s dress and began gathering her skirts, Poppy heard footsteps behind them.

She heard a loud clang and then Eliot was falling away from her, releasing her from his grip. Poppy stumbled forward and turned to find Mason with a large shovel in his hands, looking down at Eliot Turner who was now lying unconscious on the barn floor.

“How dare you! How dare you touch her!” he screamed, kicking at Eliot before turning to Poppy. “Poppy, are you hurt? Did he hurt you?” Mason asked, throwing the shovel to the side and reaching out to Poppy. He reached out as if to touch her, but Poppy flinched, and Mason dropped his hand to his side.

“Are you all right?” he whispered, peering at her.

Poppy nodded, but the truth was that she wasn’t all right. She was shaken and scared and very much wanted to go to her dark bedroom and lie down. Mason must have sensed this because he took another look at Eliot, making sure he was still knocked out, and then he led Poppy to her cottage.

He opened the door for her and lit a fire in the grate of her room to ensure that she would be comfortable. And then he left her although it pained him to do so. He wanted to comfort her, to hug her and hold her and tell her that he would never let anyone hurt her again. Mason watched from the doorway instead as Poppy crawled into bed, and then he shut the door and left her cottage, intent on revenge.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



By the time Mason had returned to the horse barn, Eliot Turner was awake and sitting up against a stall door. He was holding his head in one hand but looked up when he heard Mason's footsteps.

"You bastard! How dare you harm her?" Mason yelled as he entered the barn. He rushed at Eliot, who scampered away on all fours toward the far side of the barn. When he was seated a safe distance from Mason, he spoke, but it was not the speech of a penitent man who realized his wrongdoing. It was the speech of a bitter old man who thought he could do no wrong.

"That little harlot deserved everything she got and more," Eliot said, sneering at Mason. "You two, the baby, and that stupid sister of hers deserve what fate is about to bring you."

"And what exactly is that?" Mason spat back.

Eliot looked him in the eyes and fear began to crawl up Mason's spine. He knew Eliot Turner well enough to know that when the man affixed his eyes on yours, whatever came out of his mouth next was not going to be palatable.

"I'm selling this ranch, boy. I'm selling it for a pretty penny and you and that rotten little makeshift family of yours are going to be out of a house, begging for your supper."

"You can't do that! I know how you feel about me, Eliot, but what about

Rosie? She's your flesh and blood, Elizabeth's flesh and blood," Mason yelled, advancing on Eliot, but Eliot didn't retreat. He held his ground, looking at Mason with a devilish smile on his face.

"Oh yes, I can, boy. I own this ranch, in case you forgot, which means I can sell it whenever I darn well please. You've overstayed your welcome, I'm afraid. Come next week, this ranch will be someone else's problem, as will you, and I will be far, far away, counting my riches. I don't give a hoot about that stupid little baby of yours. She killed my Elizabeth, so she's no family of mine."

Mason seethed with anger. Did Eliot really hate him so much that he would render him homeless? Mason had worked so hard to make the ranch a profitable venture. He couldn't believe that all that hard work would be for nothing and that in a few weeks, he and his new family would be homeless and penniless. He wouldn't let it happen. He wouldn't let Eliot win. He couldn't, now that he had not only Rosie to look after, but Poppy and Ellie as well.

"Eliot, please be reasonable. We need to mend this rift between us. For both our sakes."

Eliot scoffed from where he remained seated a distance from Mason. "The time for that has long since passed, boy. Ain't nothing you can do about it now. In a week that ranch won't be yours anymore. Pack your things and prepare to get off my land, and take those harlots and that insufferable little babe with you."

With that, Eliot began to rise, using the door of the horse stall to steady himself. He limped past Mason, sober but still slow thanks to the blow Mason had dealt to his head earlier. Mason watched him go and had to resist the urge to crumple to the floor. For the second time in his life, he felt truly hopeless. The first time had been after Elizabeth's death when he'd looked at his deceased wife's peaceful face, their newly born daughter in his arms. While that had been truly painful, in some ways this was worse. At least when

Elizabeth died, Mason still had his home, his livelihood. Now, he would have neither. What was he to do?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



Mason trudged back to the ranch house with heavy feet. As he rounded the steps to the porch, he heard Poppy singing to Rosie. Mason loved hearing Poppy sing, especially to his daughter. Her voice was the sweetest thing he'd ever heard and seeing Rosie's reaction never failed to warm his heart. Even now, as Mason walked up the stairs knowing he would have to confess to Poppy about their lot for the future, he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face as he heard Rosie giggling at Poppy's song.

"Mason!" Poppy said as he entered. She handed Rosie off to Ellie who was sitting in the rocking chair by the stove, picking at a bowl of stew.

"Thank you so much for saving me from Eliot. I shudder to think what would have happened if you hadn't been there," she said, gratitude showing along with something undiscernible in her eyes. If Mason wasn't mistaken, it looked quite a lot like love. Did Poppy really love him? He had grown so fond of her over the weeks, and in the quiet, still moments of the night before he nodded off to sleep, he thought he might be journeying toward those very same feelings. But seeing them in Poppy's eyes made his heart swell.

"It's no trouble. I won't let him hurt you or Ellie or Rosie. Don't worry. I'm so sorry he cornered you. Are you all right?" he asked, peering at Poppy.

"I'm fine. A bit shaken up, but fine. How are you? Did he hurt you? I

wish you hadn't gone back out there. Eliot scares me so. How can he be so cruel when you're his family?"

Mason grunted in response and pulled Poppy aside and into his bedroom. He saw the look of surprise on Poppy's face as he closed the bedroom door behind them, but he needed privacy if he was going to explain this to his future wife.

Mason told Poppy what Eliot had said about selling the ranch, and how it would happen the next week, just before they were to be married.

"I would buy him out if I could, but I just don't have the money. I've put almost everything I have into the ranch, into getting new cattle and new ranch hands, and even if I sell everything at the market in two weeks, it will be too late. I'm so sorry, Poppy. I don't know what we're going to do."

Poppy stepped closer to Mason and placed a hand on his cheek. "Don't trouble yourself. We will manage. We will find a way. I have faith, and you should, too."

Mason looked down at the serene, beatific face of Poppy and realized that it was in fact love that he saw in her eyes, and that love was reflected in his own. He couldn't believe he had been so cruel, so harsh to her during her first week in Mapletree, when Poppy was the kindest, warmest, and the most understanding woman he had ever met. He would always have a place in his heart for Elizabeth, but for the first time, Mason felt that his heart could open up to another woman. To Poppy.

Poppy's hand slid from Mason's cheek to the space right over his heart where it was covered by his linen shirt and leather vest, and Mason silently placed his palm on her hand. For a moment, they stood together, feeling his heart beat against their palms, and a silent oath passed between them. An oath of love, friendship, and trust.

"Thank you for protecting me, for taking me and Ellie in and giving us a safe home and a family. We haven't had one in so long, you see," Poppy whispered, and a tear escaped her eye. Mason lifted her hand to his mouth

and placed a gentle kiss on her palm, and then they exited his room together, hand in hand, to rejoin the rest of their makeshift family.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17



The next few mornings saw Poppy taking long walks with Mason around the ranch and surrounding area. Mason showed Poppy where he had planned to one day expand the fencing to accommodate more cattle, and he showed her Elizabeth's grave, which was near the horse barn out back, near a large batch of wild sunflowers. Poppy would pick bunches of the flowers every morning to place on the grave, whispering to Elizabeth that she hoped she had her blessing to enter into the Brodie family. Mason accompanied her to the grave on this occasion but stood back, allowing Poppy and Elizabeth to get to know each other, as it were. He liked to think they would have been friends in life. He liked to think that Elizabeth would be happy that he had found such a wonderful new mother for Rosie.

On these walks, Poppy also finally confessed to Mason all the trauma of her past. Her secrets had been eating away at her, and finally confessing them to her betrothed lifted the heavy weight from her shoulders that had been there from the moment her feet touched the ground in Mapletree. She told him about her parents dying, and about Mrs. Julian's terrible treatment of her and her siblings. She teared up when she remembered Sister Miller and their close friendship, the only friend other than her siblings that Poppy had ever had. When she said this, Mason took her hand and paused, stopping their progression around the ranch. Mason turned to face her, blocking the sun

from her eyes as he did so. He looked at her with compassion.

“I will be your friend if you’ll have me, dear Poppy,” he whispered. Poppy nodded, happier than she could have ever imagined to be marrying a man so handsome and kind.

The next morning, Poppy also told Mason about Jacob’s death. She had rehearsed the story dozens of times in her head, hoping to find a version that didn’t make her seem like the villain. When the time came to tell Mason, however, the whole ugly truth came pouring out. About how she and Ellie were about to walk off when Mrs. Julian caught Jacob, how the woman hit her brother over the head, instantly knocking him out; and worse, how she had hit Mrs. Julian in retaliation and out of anger for harming her brother. Tears of frustration and anger ran down Poppy’s cheeks as she told Mason.

“Some nights I still wake up from a nightmare that she’s found us all the way out here. She was so terrible, Mason. So cruel. To hit Jacob, to harm my beautiful, sweet brother,” and here Poppy’s voice cracked, remembering the creek bed where she had laid Jacob’s body to rest. “How dare she call herself a Christian. No God-loving creature would be so cruel, especially to such a sweet boy. She never cared about us, any of us. She ran that orphanage out of pure spite, telling us it was our fault we were parentless. But it wasn’t true! Oh, Mason!” Poppy dissolved into sobs, growing weak on her feet.

Mason stepped forward and wrapped Poppy in his arms as she cried for the loss of her brother, the loss of her parents, and the loss of her innocence at the hands of St. Vincent’s and its terrible band of administrators and caregivers.

When Poppy’s tears had dried, Mason stepped away and took her hands in his. “No one will ever harm you again, Poppy. Not Eliot, not Mrs. Julian. And if that terrible woman comes to get you, I will protect you. Nothing bad will ever happen to you under my watch. You are safe with me. And what you did to that woman was nothing less than what she deserved,” he said, and Poppy believed him.

Mason was her handsome, strong protector, and she was glad to be marrying him. Poppy finally released her fear that Mrs. Julian was still after her, as well as her guilt over harming the woman. She let those negative emotions be carried off by the strong gust of wind that blew her hair and lifted her skirts as she and Mason made their way back to the house for lunch.

Ellie had cooked the meat stew that Mason liked so much, but when he thanked her, she only ducked her head in response. Since arriving at Mapletree weeks ago, Ellie hadn't spoken a single word to the man, and Mason wanted to know why. Ellie was Poppy's family, and therefore part of his, and he needed to know what to do to make the girl feel at ease around him. He didn't want her to stay silent for the rest of her life. It wasn't good, and it wasn't healthy. He knew something must have caused it, and he needed to find out what that could be.

While on a walk later that week, Mason finally asked Poppy the reason behind Ellie's silence. He told her that had tried his best to get to know her sister, but he didn't want to make her uncomfortable with constant questions and attempts at conversation. The few times he had tried to start a conversation with her, Ellie only seemed to shrink even further into herself. Only Poppy seemed to be able to get her to speak, and even then, only in snippets and whispers. Why was that, he asked.

"She's sad because of Jacob," Poppy said in answer to his questions. "After he died, she stopped speaking. They were closer in age than I was to either of them and often grouped for chores at the orphanage. So they spent more time together than I did with them because I was with the older orphans. Jacob was Ellie's best friend and losing him killed something in her. She used to be so talkative, so chatty, and excited about life, but since his death, since I buried him, she's been so quiet. She is getting better—I think being out here has done her a world of good—but I believe it will take some time before she is back to herself. I don't rightly know how long it will be until she's talking and excited about life again. I hope it will be soon, but I

don't want to pressure her. We've all been through so much."

"You buried Jacob?" Mason asked, shocked that Poppy had not only lost her brother but had performed his burial too. She had been through so much in her short life; it grieved him to hear the trauma she had endured.

Poppy nodded. "Yes, but it was good, I think. I buried him in a creek bed in Little Rock while our train was stopped there. We wrapped him in our old orphanage uniform dresses and Ellie stayed in the compartment while I laid him to rest. Perhaps that is why she hasn't been able to heal. Maybe she never felt able to truly say goodbye to him. But she looked so exhausted when he died that I thought it best if she stayed on the train. She was asleep before I had even carried him through the doorway."

Mason nodded. He decided then and there to create a small burial spot for Jacob, a place the girls could visit to honor their brother. He loved how Poppy placed flowers on Elizabeth's grave every day. Once Mason had created a burial area for Jacob, perhaps she could do the same for him. Ellie would then finally have somewhere to sit and say goodbye to the brother she had loved so much.

Two days later, Mason called the girls from the porch of the ranch house and asked them to walk with Rosie to Elizabeth's grave. The girls looked confused as they walked down the steps but obeyed Mason, following him to the small grassy plot with Rosie asleep in Poppy's arms. Both sisters gasped when they saw what he had done for them. Next to Elizabeth's grave stood a small cross made out of wood. It was laced through with sunflowers and below it was a small wooden plaque with the words "Jacob Brown, May He Rest in Peace" carved into it.

"Oh, Mason!" Poppy cried, turning and hugging her husband-to-be with one arm as she used the other to cradle Rosie. It was the first time they had ever made such close physical contact, and neither could ignore the spark of love and affection it rendered in them. As they stepped away, Mason couldn't

help but notice the blush on Poppy's cheeks.

Meanwhile, Ellie ran to the grave and began quietly crying as she traced Jacob's name with her fingers, caressing the wood with her touch. Mason and Poppy stood back and gave her space as she quietly said goodbye to her beloved sibling. Mason and Poppy returned to the house, allowing Ellie space. When she returned, she walked straight up the steps and into Mason's arms, hugging him and whispering a soft "Thank you" in his ears. Mason was not an emotional man by nature, but he nearly wept with relief at finally hearing the sound of the young girl's voice.

From that day on, Ellie seemed happier and spoke easily with Mason. His kind gesture had broken through her silence and allowed her to finally see him for the man he was—someone who truly wanted her to be a part of his family. That, coupled with finally being able to truly say goodbye to her brother, allowed Ellie to start the slow process of healing from her grief.

Ellie began visiting Jacob and Elizabeth's graves every morning, assuming Poppy's task of laying flowers on the plots and offering up a quiet prayer. She seemed happier and began eating more, gaining weight, and filling out her dress.

When Poppy saw that Ellie's bones were no longer showing through her grey wool gown, it reminded her that they both needed new outfits. Though Mason did not have much money, he had promised Poppy a few bolts of cloth with which to sew dresses and nightgowns for herself, Ellie, and Rosie. One day, after Mason had finished herding the cattle and tending to a heifer with an infected hoof, he took the girls to town on the horse and cart. Rose and Ellie picked out bolts of fabric for dresses. Poppy found a beautiful cornflower blue cotton that would make the perfect wedding dress, as well as beige lace muslin to use for nightgowns. The woman behind the fabric counter offered them a third bolt at a reduced price, and Ellie picked out a rosy pink that would be perfect to make dresses for little Rosie.

Ellie helped to make a pattern and together they spent their evenings

beside the fire, sewing the long-sleeved gown. Rosie lay in the crib beside them, occasionally making cooing noises as the girls quietly chatted. Poppy's heart filled with joy at finally being able to speak freely to her sister as they had when they were younger. They reminisced about their childhood in the tenement, running around their parents' shop after closing time and playing dress-up with the discarded hats and pieces of fabric. At one point, Ellie stopped sewing and turned to look at her sister, the firelight turning her hair a vibrant orange-gold.

“Are you nervous to marry Mason?” she asked.

Poppy turned to her sister, shook her head, and smiled. “No. I was when we first came here, but since I've come to know him, I've realized he's the perfect man for me. I might have met him through the newspaper, but I truly believe that God brought us together. I can't wait to be his wife.”

Ellie leaned back in her chair and smiled, happy that she and her sister had finally found comfort and happiness after so long without either.

CHAPTER 18



*A*s their wedding day approached, Poppy and Mason began planning what they would do when Eliot sold the ranch. They would stay in a tavern in town on the night before their wedding and travel directly to Houston after the ceremony. The journey would take some days and would require sleeping in the cart, but Mason was confident that in doing so, he could save enough money to buy them a good few head of cattle once they reached the city. His distant cousin lived there, and Mason had written to him, asking if he could work his ranch until he could settle elsewhere.

ON THIS MORNING, Mason was checking the entranceway posts to the ranch when he encountered a strange man peering over the fence.

“Pardon me, sir, but does Poppy Brown live here?” the strangely accented man asked. His accent wasn’t quite English but was removed from pure American. The man was older, perhaps in his sixties, with greying brown hair and he wore small, round spectacles. The man’s dress left no doubt about his wealth: his buttons were a gleaming silver, the fabric of his suit jacket was a vibrant blank not yet faded by excessive washing, and his shoes gleamed in the mid-morning sunlight. Mason wondered what such a man was doing on his property, asking after Poppy. Could he be a policeman sent by that

horrible woman from the orphanage to arrest Poppy and Ellie?

“Who’s asking?” Mason answered, standing taller with his arms crossed over his chest in a posture he hoped would be intimidating.

But the man appeared nonplussed, peering up at Mason with a smile on his face. He took off his hat and introduced himself, “I’m their uncle, David Brown. I was related to their father and only found out about his death, as well as their mother’s, after the fact. I’ve been trying to track down the girls and Jacob for years, in the hopes of offering them the familial comforts I assume their life has sorely lacked since their parents’ untimely deaths. I lived in England until very recently, and it’s taken me some time to find the Brown children.”

When Mason did not immediately jump to open the gate for the man, David Brown added, “I mean Poppy, Eleanor, and Jacob no harm. I simply want to meet them. I’ve been trying to find them for years. It was only last week that I was finally able to gain information about the children’s whereabouts.”

“And through whom did you discover their whereabouts?” Mason asked.

“From a friendly nun by the name of Sister Miller. She works at St. Vincent’s, that terrible place where the children lived after their parents died. I only wish I had found them sooner and spared them the time in that cold, dark place. It was horrible,” David Brown said, visibly shuddering as he recalled the orphanage.

At the mention of Sister Miller, Mason’s protective instincts began to relax. Poppy had talked frequently of Sister Miller, whom she described as being her only real friend other than her siblings. If Sister Miller told this man where Poppy and her siblings were headed, then this man must truly mean them no harm. Mason knew that Sister Miller wouldn’t have divulged information to any person she did not trust. If Sister Miller trusted David Brown, then Mason was inclined to as well. A man who earned the trust of a nun must be a good man indeed.

Mason nodded at David and opened the gate to gesture for him to come through. “Then you are welcome here. Come, I’ll introduce you to Poppy and Ellie.” Mason thought it best not to divulge Jacob’s whereabouts straight away. He imagined that David Brown had dealt with enough just getting to Mapletree, without the added stress of finding out that one of his only remaining family members had come to a tragic end. They could tell David later, once he was settled at the table and had spent some time with Poppy and Ellie and had the benefit of a proper meal in his belly.

“Poppy? Ellie?” Mason called as he mounted the steps to the ranch house. He held the door open for David and the men made their way into the main room. Poppy walked out of the bedroom, having just settled Rosie for a nap. When she noticed the man standing next to Mason, her guard immediately went up, and a question appeared in her eyes as she looked at her betrothed. He gave her a small nod that he hoped communicated to her that she had nothing to fear.

Poppy relaxed slightly and turned back to the room whispering to Ellie that they had a visitor. When both girls stood in front of David Brown, they noticed tears welling up in the old man’s eyes.

“Sir, are you all right?” Poppy couldn’t help but ask. David nodded and took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped at his eyes.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. It’s just that you two look so much like your mother,” he said, smiling through his tears.

Poppy and Ellie looked shocked. Who was this man who knew their mother who had died so many years ago? Seeing their confusion, David stepped forward and offered his hand.

“I apologize for my rudeness. I should have introduced myself right away. I’m David Brown, your uncle. I was your father’s brother.”

Poppy stepped forward and rather than shaking the man’s hand, wrapped him in a hug. David looked surprised for a moment but quickly responded,

hugging Poppy close. Ellie stepped forward and joined in the hug, and for a moment the two girls stood with their long-lost uncle, embracing him and finding that he smelled much the same as their father always had: like tobacco and mint. It was a comforting smell that brought with it good memories.

When David broke the hug, he held tightly to the hand of each girl and led them to the table near the stove. Mason took a chair by the fire and watched as David explained how he had come to find them in Mapletree.

Once David had explained how he had returned from England and started the process of finding the children, he seemed to realize that one of the children he had been looking for was missing. “Where is dear Jacob? Is he in the other room? Could I meet him?” he asked Poppy and Ellie.

Ellie’s eyes teared up and a look passed between her and Poppy that told David that he would not like whatever they said next.

He braced himself as Ellie opened her mouth. “Jacob is dead, Uncle.” Ellie went on to tell her uncle the tragic story behind Jacob’s death, including Mrs. Julian’s role in his passing. Small tears formed in David’s eyes as he listened to the story, his sadness due in part to the death of his dear nephew, but also in part to the fact that his poor nieces and nephew had been forced to live with such a cruel woman for so long.

“You girls have suffered so much,” David said when Ellie had finished speaking. He reached across the table and took each girl’s hand and squeezed, hoping he could communicate just how sorry he was for not finding them earlier.

Poppy smiled, but it was a sad smile. Though she was looking forward to marrying Mason, she knew that the journey ahead would be long and arduous, yet another endurance she and Ellie would have to suffer through. It would help to have Mason to guide and protect them, but Poppy was truly tired of constantly having to struggle. She wished life could just be easy.

“Our suffering is not yet over, Uncle,” Poppy said, withdrawing her hand

and placing it in her lap. She told David about Eliot Turner and his plan to sell the ranch out from under Mason, leaving them homeless shortly before their wedding. David, who had looked so sad before, now sat up straighter, his face flushing red as outrage built within him.

“How dare he! How dare this man do that to you girls, to you, Mason?” he raged, turning to look at Mason who was sitting with his eyes cast down. “After everything you’ve been through, for you three and that beautiful child to lose your home. It’s preposterous, horrific. This Eliot Turner sounds like a monster.”

“He is!” Ellie cried. She couldn’t help herself. She had been withholding her hatred of Eliot Turner since the day he had molested Poppy, but now, having finally been given the opportunity to express her feelings about the man, she didn’t hold back. “He’s terrible. He’s ruining our lives! I don’t want to leave!” she said, and then Ellie began to cry. David moved to comfort her, hugging her tight to his chest and letting her tears soak through the expensive fabric of his vest. Poppy began to tear up as well, and Mason gathered her in his arms.

For a time, the men let the women cry, knowing they needed the release. Life had dealt them blow after blow without remorse, and now the girls were tired of the constant misery. They had been so happy these last few weeks at the ranch, and now they would be forced to leave the only place beside their childhood tenement that had ever felt like home. Ellie would have to leave Jacob’s grave behind, and Poppy would have to abandon the crib she had spent so many nights rocking her precious Rosie to sleep in. It just wasn’t fair.

Ellie’s sobs abated, and David handed her the handkerchief from his pocket. He looked up to see Mason whispering words of comfort in Poppy’s ear. Their love for each other was clear, and David was glad that they had found each other. Mason was a quiet, stoic man, but he would make a fine husband for Poppy and a good brother to Ellie. The girls righted themselves

and began to prepare lunch while David sat back in his chair and pondered what he could do to ensure they didn't have to leave the ranch they so clearly loved. A plan was brewing in his mind, one he was certain would have the desired outcome.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



The next morning, David woke early to the first rays of sun shining through the thin curtains and onto the cot that Poppy had prepared for him the previous night. David dressed quickly and made it quietly out the front door, intent on confronting Eliot Turner before the man had a chance to get in his cups. Mason had divulged Eliot's fondness for drink the night before, telling how he often began sipping on whiskey over breakfast. David hoped to catch the man early enough in order to speak to him before the alcohol turned him irrational and angry.

Mason had taken David on a walk around the property late the previous afternoon, pointing out the horse barn, graves, cattle sheds, and the ranch house off in the distance that belonged to his ex-father-in-law.

"He's a mean, tired old man. He never got over Elizabeth, my first wife, dying, and blames me for her death. Well, he blames Rosie and me. Elizabeth died in childbirth," Mason had told him. David commiserated, knowing the personal loss that came with losing the love of one's life.

David now walked with confidence towards Eliot Turner's house, walking up the steps to the porch just after the sun had fully crested over the horizon. He knocked gently on the door and was met with a grunt that sounded something like "be there in a minute," though he couldn't be sure. The voice was very muffled.

After a few minutes, the front door swung open to reveal Eliot Turner, his hair a mess, his clothes wrinkled, and a cup of what David could only hope was coffee in one hand.

“Who the hell are you and what do you want?” Eliot shouted at David.

“My name is David Brown. I’m Poppy and Ellie Brown’s uncle and I’ve come to discuss some business with you.”

Eliot peered at David for a moment before shutting the front door behind him and walking out onto the porch, his feet bare on the faded wood. “Those harlots over at Mason’s house?”

David blanched at the insult, but continued, intent on making Eliot see reason. “They are not harlots, but yes, they do reside with Mason. I hear you have plans to sell their home just before Mason and Poppy are due to marry. Is that correct?”

“Damn right it is! Those whores don’t belong in my Lizzy’s house, and neither does that bastard and his offspring. I’m sick and tired of him pretending to be the owner of this ranch. I built this place from the ground up, I did, and then that hellion comes in and pretends he knows more about my cattle than I do. Well, no more! In a few days, the sale will have gone through with my solicitor and they’ll all be homeless and penniless, which is what they deserve!”

Eliot had stepped closer to David as he spoke, and now the men stood chest to chest. David looked down at Eliot with disgust, appalled that a man could be filled with so much hatred and vitriol. David had hoped to simply reason with him, but it was clear that such a tactic would not work. He would have to use something else, something much more persuasive: money.

“Eliot, I will give you a choice. Either you take me to your solicitor and allow me to review the documents that supposedly make this sale legal, or you can go the easier route and allow me to buy you out of the ranch. I can offer you \$2,000, which should be more than enough to allow you to start your life over somewhere far away from the family you so obviously don’t

want to be associated with.”

Eliot stepped back so suddenly that coffee spilled from his tin mug. “I accept!” he shouted and turned to open the front door which he then slammed closed behind David.

David smiled to himself as he took the long route back to the ranch house. He had amassed more money in England than he could possibly ever spend, and it gave him great pleasure to put it to good use. He had saved Poppy, Ellie, Mason, and Rosie from homelessness, and he planned to gift his share of the ranch to Mason, allowing Mason sole ownership of the Turner Ranch. It was obvious from the tour that Mason had taken him on of the property, that he ran the ranch well. David knew with certainty that, given full ownership, Mason would be able to make more than enough money to support the girls and any children that were conceived of his marriage to Poppy. It warmed his heart to know that he would be helping to ensure the livelihood of the family for the rest of their days.

David walked back into the ranch house to find Ellie at the stove, stirring porridge, and Poppy in the rocking chair with a large lump of blue cloth in her lap. Rosie was asleep in the crib beside her, and Mason was rocking the crib with his foot. They all looked up when David opened the door.

“Where have you been, Uncle?” Ellie asked.

“Ensuring that this house is yours forevermore,” he answered. The girls and Mason looked perplexed.

“What do you mean?” Poppy asked, her hands paused mid-stitch. David briefly explained the outcome of his conversation with Eliot Turner, promising to return to the man’s house the next day with the necessary papers to sign to ensure that on their wedding day, Poppy and Mason had a home to come back to. Poppy jumped up from her chair and rushed to David, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. Ellie did the same, and for the second time in two days, the girls cried, but this time, their tears were not of

sorrow, but of joy. And relief.

“We can stay!” Poppy shouted to Mason as she broke out of her uncle’s embrace. She rushed to her husband-to-be and embraced him, and Mason laughed with joy. Little Rosie began to coo, and Poppy and Mason walked together to the crib where Mason scooped Rosie up in his arms and began rocking her back and forth, whispering “we can stay, we can stay” before looking up to David with clear gratitude in his eyes, “Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea...what this means.”

“Yes, thank you so much, Uncle,” Ellie said, still hugging him tightly. “However will we repay you?”

David shook his head. “There is no need. All these years, I’ve been looking for you girls in the hopes of taking care of you and your brother. Now, I’ve finally been able to. I’ve fulfilled my life’s quest, you might say. I need nothing else to be happy other than to see Poppy and Mason married in two days,” he said, turning to look at the couple as they stood side by side, Rosie now asleep in Mason’s arms, exhausted from all the excitement.

CHAPTER 20



Poppy and Ellie spent the next two days frantically finishing Poppy's wedding dress, spending nearly every waking hour with a needle and thread in their hands. Eliot's solicitor arrived at the ranch house in his stead to prepare the paperwork necessary for the legal transfer of the property, and David was able to orchestrate it so that the property transferred directly to Mason. The finances were conducted, and the solicitor saw to it that all the i's were dotted and the t's crossed. On the morning of the wedding, David saw a large horse and cart carrying Eliot and all his worldly goods to the main road to town, which would hopefully take him far enough away for him never to slander or cause harm to David's nieces.

Before the wedding ceremony, David presented Poppy with a thin pearl necklace he had purchased in town. "Your mother had one just like this when I first met her," he told Poppy as he secured the necklace around her neck. "I wanted you to have one just like it. You look so much like her, my dear."

Poppy thanked him profusely and caressed the pearls gently with her fingers, glad to have something to remind her of her mother.

David had also helped Mason find a suitable ring for Poppy in town. Together they decided on a small gold band with filigree work etched into the gold. It was delicate and simple and, Mason thought, would look beautiful on Poppy's finger. He kept the box in the pocket of his best black coat and

checked throughout the morning that it was still there, fearful that he would forget it back at the ranch house. Mason remembered this anxiety from his wedding to Elizabeth; he had barely slept the night before their wedding, afraid that he would respond incorrectly when it came to the “I do’s,” afraid Elizabeth would realize at the altar that he wasn’t good enough for her. But now, Mason’s anxiety came from the desire to have the wedding over and done with so Poppy could finally be his wife. He knew they were meant to be together, that he would be calm and collected at the altar; he simply wanted her to be his wife as soon as possible.

Poppy was similarly anxious for the deed to be done as she rode in the cart with her family to the church. She had finished her wedding dress the night before and felt beautiful in the blue gown that accentuated her small waist and brought out the color of her eyes. The gown and the pearls brought her closer to her departed mother, and for the first time since before her parents’ death, as Poppy looked around her at her home in Mapletree and her family in the cart beside her, she felt at peace. Yes, Jacob was gone as were her parents, but Poppy had finally found a home with Mason, Ellie, and Rosie. She knew that her uncle David would be returning to England eventually, but she also knew that the bond they shared would never be broken.

Mason helped the girls down from the cart after they had come to a stop in front of the church. Ellie was extra careful of her dress as she stepped down onto the dusty earth. She wore her grey gown enhanced with lace detailing on the collar and cuffs, with ribbon sewn onto the bottom. The dress had been transformed from a drab but comfortable number into an elegant outfit suitable for a wedding. Rosie wore the pink dress that Ellie had sewed for her, with a matching hat that protected her soft head from the winter sun, which was still strong even in December.

Ellie held Rosie in her arms while Mason and Poppy walked toward the front of the church. Her uncle David led her to a seat in the front pew, and the

ceremony began. By the end, everyone, the priest included, was wiping a tear from their eye, so clear was the connection between the bride and groom and their happiness at finally being wed. Poppy had whooped with joy when the priest told her she was officially Mrs. Brodie, and Mason had taken her in his arms and pressed the sweetest, softest kiss to her lips in a show of affection that made it clear how truly he loved her.

After the ceremony, the wedding party continued on the ranch, where all the guests celebrated well into the night. Early in the evening, David turned to Poppy and slipped her a small envelope bearing her name in his characteristic scrawl.

“This is for you, my dear Poppy,” he whispered.

Poppy opened it to find a letter from David’s solicitor informing her that she was to be paid an allowance of \$50 per month for the rest of her adult life.

“Uncle David! This is too much! You’ve already done so much for us,” Poppy whispered. He really was too generous; he had already helped save her home and had told her and Ellie enough stories about their parents to fuel many sessions of reminiscing and remembering for years to come.

“Nonsense, my dear. I want to be sure that no matter what happens, you girls are cared for. Allow an old man to take care of the women in his life.”

Poppy leaned over and kissed David on the cheek before pocketing the envelope in her small reticule. Ellie gave her a questioning look, but Poppy motioned that she would share details of the contents of the envelope later. She could already imagine Ellie’s eyes widening as she looked at the sum of money. Poppy had never held more than a nickel in her hand before. The idea of \$50 being at her disposal each month was unfathomable.

After the guests had left, Ellie wowed the family with a beef stew that surpassed any she had made before. They happily supped in silence, the only noise being Rosie’s excited “mmm’s” whenever Poppy fed her a spoonful of stew. After supper, Poppy and Mason went for a walk, while Ellie napped in

her room. Rosie and David sat by the fire, reading the book he had brought with him from England. It was a collection of English poetry, and reading it reminded him how much he missed the cloudy moors of the country he had called home for so long. It was nearly time to return, and though David would miss his nieces, he knew he needed to leave them to bond and become a true family. Only two more tasks remained for him to accomplish first.

The day after Poppy and Mason's wedding, David took the train back to Chicago. The journey was peaceful and he spent much of it looking out the window at the landscape. He had made sure to ask after a certain Alan and his sister Eliza who were employed by the railway company before securing his ticket, to be certain that at least one of the two would be on board the train he boarded. David sought out Alan at the refreshment carriage not too long before the train was to reach its destination. He explained his association with the family of siblings he had assisted not too long before on their trip westward and handed him an envelope which he explained was their show of gratitude for all the kindness and help he and his sister had shown. When the train arrived in Chicago, David went directly to St. Vincent's orphanage, where he hoped to find Sister Miller still in residence.

To David's delight, Sister Miller opened the door in response to his knock on the old hardwood. "Mr. Brown!" she exclaimed, ushering him in and out of the bitter wind that whipped through the Chicago streets.

"Hello, Sister Miller. I have come with news of Poppy and Ellie!"

Sister Miller led David to the kitchen, where she had been peeling potatoes for that evening's supper. The orphanage was eerily quiet, and David heard none of the sounds of the orphanage mistress's hard shoes clacking against the tile floor that he had noticed on his last visit to St. Vincent's.

"Please, tell me how my dear friends are. I have been praying and praying these last few weeks for their safe arrival in Mapletree."

David sat down across from where Sister Miller stood and relayed the recent happenings with his nieces. He also told Sister Miller of Jacob's death, which elicited a tearful nod from her. "I assumed as much. He was so weak and bleeding so much when they left for the train. I suspected that without proper medical care, he would not survive the journey. How horrible for Poppy to have to bury her own brother without ceremony. And poor Ellie! She and Jacob were thick as thieves during their time here. They were best friends."

"Yes, and it has taken Ellie some time to heal after his death, but she seems much improved. Mason, Poppy's husband, built a small grave for Jacob that Ellie visits regularly, and I think that Rosie, Mason's daughter, has also given Ellie something to focus on."

Sister Miller nodded, "Yes. While it is tragic about Jacob, I am so glad to hear my friends are doing well. They deserve love and a comfortable home. They were sorely lacking in both during their time here, as so many of the children are. I am sure you have realized, Mr. Brown, that St. Vincent's is not a particularly charitable place, despite its origins."

"Yes, and that is precisely why I have come to see you, Sister. I would like you to please educate me on the orphanage. I want to know about its beginnings. I would like to have an in-depth look into the buildings and how the children are housed here. I want to know about the food and the education the children receive."

"Well...." Sister Miller responded with a heavy sigh. "Give me some time to educate myself more fully on the history of St. Vincent's and how it has come to be what you see today. After prayers, I should be ready to tell you all you need to know. I can take you on a tour of the buildings now, if you like."

"Thank you, Sister, I would be most grateful for your time."

WITH THAT, the habited nun and the wealthy gentleman could be seen traipsing purposefully through the cold passageways, halls, and rooms within the ominous hulk of grey that was St. Vincent's.

"It is sadly unfortunate, Mr. Brown, that the likes of Mrs. Julian who have no capacity for love or even a modicum of empathy for the vulnerable children in their care have been allowed to bring to its knees what was at the outset a haven of love and caring," Sister Miller explained.

"Is there a way to right the wrongs imposed so maliciously by the likes of Mrs. Julian? That is the crux of the matter, is it not, Sister? Can the children who have no one and nothing in this world, who rely on the benevolence of others and on a system of social care that has their best interests at heart ever hope to receive the care they so deserve?"

"I am pleased to tell you that Mrs. Julian has indeed resigned. Three days ago, in fact. Her reason for leaving as she cited was the stress she endured as a result of Poppy, Ellie, and Jacob's escape. She said that it was all simply too much for her to bear," Sister Miller told David as they climbed the stone stairs to the boy's dormitories.

"The best news I could ever have hoped to hear!" David could not keep the excited delight from his tone at the news.

Nor could he avoid the depression that blanketed him as he move through the children's dormitories. The lifelessness of the orphanage left him cold and hopeless. He could only imagine the feelings it must have incited within the hearts and minds of those hapless little ones who were forced to call it home. He found himself disillusioned despite holding out hope that the institution might not have been quite as incompetent as he had first suspected. It was Sister Miller who gave him cause to hold out for such hope. He was sure that many more like her must work at the orphanage, loving and caring for the little ones in the manner they deserved. Unfortunately, the malevolence of the bad apples within the administration, such as Mrs. Julian, seemed to outweigh all the good done by the likes of Sister Miller. Try as he

might to find the potential and the good aspects of the orphanage as he walked through it with the sister, it continuously fell short of his expectations.

THOROUGHLY DESPONDENT, David thanked Sister Miller for giving up her time to show him around St. Vincent's. She invited him to come back later that afternoon when she promised to have more of the history of St. Vincent's to share with him. He hoped to get a better understanding of the orphanage and its motives, means, and original intentions from the information he was certain the Sister would impart. He spent the afternoon deep in thought as he waited for the clock to edge to the time he would again see the Sister and hear all she had to tell him.

* * *

SISTER MILLER, meanwhile, was up against not a little opposition from within the bounds of the orphanage as she sought to find out as much as she could about St. Vincent's. Since Miss Julian's sudden and unexpected departure, moods had been high although the general feel of the place was most certainly lighter. It was with much determination that she read through records and asked the older nuns to regale their tales of the orphanage in its beginning years.

WHEN AT LAST Sister Miller sat down with David in the public library in the center of Chicago, she had a great deal to tell. St. Vincent Home for Children had a cholera epidemic to thank for its existence, as well as a fire.

“Before 1832, Chicago was but a village and home to just a small group of families. These families supported one another through whatever forms of

adversity they were unfortunate to have to deal with. So it was that any orphaned children found refuge with neighbors. The South bank of the river that runs through Chicago was empty of buildings of any kind apart from the fort, really. The land here was low. Just a wet prairie that stretched back from Lake Michigan. In 1931, all that made up the settlement were a smattering of buildings and Fort Dearborn. Fort Dearborn was thrown up on the south bank of the Chicago River in 1803 and was just a wooden stockade at the mouth of the river. This was the westernmost outpost of the United States Army, heralding the first real investment on new federal land hereabouts. Among the few buildings that eventually became a settlement as Europeans and European Americans set up home around and about the fort was John Kinzie's fur trading post.

“John Kinzie founded the first Episcopal Church in Chicago and he and his wife were charter members on the board of the Chicago Orphan Asylum in 1849. Mr. and Mrs. John Kinzie had seven children of their own and had taken in their orphaned nieces, nephews, and cousins as well by 1849 when the Chicago Orphan Asylum saw its doors open to the needy. The destitute children who called this community that was to burgeon into Chicago the city probably received care and shelter in much the same way as the Kinzie relatives had back in these times.

“When the dreaded cholera called on Chicago in 1849, it was not the first time it brought with it loss to the region. But this time, Chicago had grown from a small village and arrangements that had been adequate when cholera struck the first time were no longer suitable to provide for the shelter of those young ones orphaned by the disease. This round of cholera was to take more than four thousand of those who called the city home.

“Only two types of child custody existed before the Asylum: indenture to families and commitment to the poorhouse. Children did find good homes through indentures, but the unlucky among them entered into what was tantamount to child serfdom. Unsupervised indenture was pretty much a

gamble, with the child's welfare subject purely to chance. Committing the children to the alternative, which was the poorhouse meant that they rubbed shoulders with the worst of the city's adults within the repressive and miserable environs they were forced to share.

"Immigrants arriving by the shipload had brought the disease to the city. And the disease had brought the city to its knees. Business came to a stand. Families were left parentless. Children took to the streets to earn what little they might to survive by any means they could find. The new county poorhouse was too full to accept new admissions. When parents were taken by cholera, their surviving children had nowhere to go.

"AS IF THAT was not enough, a fire that started in the same year aboard a steamboat at the levee orphaned many children from St. Louis. Diocesan orphanages were crowded. An appeal for help was answered with the building of the new orphanage in 1850 under the auspices of the newly-formed German Saint Vincent Orphan Association. In 1851, it was overseen by five sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Anna Schwerdt was the first orphan to call it home, arriving as she did on the 25th of July that very year. Within two months, about thirty children called St. Vincent's home."

DAVID WAS astounded and he had heard more than enough. He stood up, pushing his seat back, and walked around the small table at which he and the Sister were seated inside the library. From his inner coat pocket, he took an envelope much like the one he had given Poppy on her wedding day and Alan before disembarking on the train.

"Please use this to transform this orphanage into a place of love, laughter, and warmth. The children here need it so desperately, and I think you are just the person to provide for them, Sister."

Sister Miller opened the envelope and the color drained from her face. “Mr. Brown! I could never accept this money! It’s so generous of you, but I simply can’t!”

“You must. From all I have seen, meeting you, and all Poppy and Ellie have told me, you are the person fit to run this home. Use this money to banish those terrible orphanage mistresses and masters and ensure that all the children here are looked after properly. Please, Sister Miller.”

Sister Miller nodded and slipped the envelope into a secret pocket in her cassock. “As you wish, Mr. Brown.”

“Splendid!” David said. “And with that terrible woman, Julian, already gone, you will have one less person to banish.”

Sister Miller smiled at him and accepted his offer to return with her to the orphanage to help her with her chores since he had taken so much of her time. Once they were inside St. Vincent’s, he rolled up his sleeves and grabbed a knife to help her peel the potatoes. He remained at the orphanage all afternoon, helping Sister Miller prepare supper for the orphans and joining them to eat it. The orphanage masters looked on with malice and confusion.

* * *

DAVID RETURNED to Britain but made bi-annual trips to Chicago and Mapletree, during which he would spoil the orphans with books and sweets and spend long summer days helping Mason at the ranch and looking after Rosie.

THREE YEARS LATER, Poppy and Mason welcomed a beautiful baby boy into their home whom they named David Jacob Brown Brodie. Ellie gradually came back to her old self, chattering excitedly about anything and everything. Rosie grew older and Ellie became her eager companion, teaching the girl

how to sew, cook and read while Poppy helped David take his first steps and say his first words. The ranch prospered, allowing Mason to hire more ranch hands, which allowed him to spend more time with his new family. He and Poppy grew more in love with each passing day, and many nights Mason went to bed next to his wife thanking God for the *Chicago Tribune* and its mail-order bride advertisements. Without them, he never would have found Poppy, and he never would have welcomed his beautiful baby boy into the world. He might have only signed up for a bride to take care of his house and child, but in Poppy, Mason had found so much more. He had found the love of his life, a sentiment that Poppy readily shared.

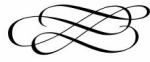
OceanofPDF.com

BLESSINGS FOR THE NEW BRIDE



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



“*M*rs. Harrington, would you like some tea, ma’am?”

Sally Harrington turned with a smile at the sound of her personal maid’s voice. “I’m fine, thank you, Dotty.”

“All right, ma’am, would you like me to air your dress for this evening’s dinner?” Dotty asked, her hands folded in front of her.

Sally appreciated the maid’s attentiveness, but she preferred taking care of certain things herself. Although she had been raised in a wealthy family down south, she had never been expected to sit back and look pretty all day. “I’ll do it, thank you, Dotty. You can take the rest of the day off.”

Dotty’s face beamed at the words. “Thank you, ma’am.” She bowed slightly before leaving Sally alone with her thoughts.

Sally turned back to the window. The window seat in her bedroom was her favorite part of the entire Harrington house, a very large house at that. From here she could look out over the city of Boston. It was where she could dream of her future and be grateful for the enchanted life she lived. It was here where she had cried so many tears after first arriving in Boston.

The marriage to Frederick Harrington had been arranged by her father. Not one to disobey her father’s wishes, Sally had made her way North and abided by his arrangement. Frederick Harrington was from a very wealthy family of bankers. Her mother had assured her the match would not only be

well-heeled but would assure her the enchanted life of a wife of a Boston banker.

Sally couldn't deny that her life was enchanted; she had everything of the best. She merely had to mention a dress was starting to fray before Mrs. Harrington insisted she get new garments made. The Harrington's were part of society after all and it wouldn't do for Frederick's wife to look rumpled.

She had been married to Frederick for two years and although she had nothing to complain about, Sally couldn't help but feel melancholic as she watched the rain patter on the dirt road outside. She was blessed with a wonderful husband, kind in-laws, and a beautiful home, and yet Sally couldn't help but feel as if something was missing.

As of late she couldn't help but think that having a child would fill the space in her heart. She dreamed of becoming a mother and having a little one to shower with love. A little one who would fill her days with affection and warmth. In her heart, she truly believed that Frederick wanted that as well, but she couldn't deny that he had become all the more distant recently.

She knew that his working hours at his father's bank were long and grueling, but it had never seemed to bother him before.

Until a few months ago.

Frederick was returning home later every night and even missed dinner more than a few times. At first, his father managed to discreetly cover for his son's absence, citing how hard he worked at the bank. But Sally had picked up on the lies, especially when Frederick came home reeking of liquor.

It was her responsibility to keep her husband happy and yet Sally no longer seemed to know how to do that. Frederick seemed to avoid her at all cost and hardly ever visited her chambers anymore. Although they had breakfast together on most days, he barely spoke to her over his eggs and ham. It was as if she had become a trophy to be kept in a glass display case.

She wasn't allowed to roam the streets of Boston on her own, as it wouldn't be appropriate. She was rather expected to look flawless and

display perfect manners while spending her days waiting for Frederick to come home.

Being positive of nature, Sally didn't think anything was amiss. She consoled herself by believing that Frederick was just having a hard time at the bank. She knew his father could be as ruthless as he could be kind, and she also knew that Frederick didn't appreciate the pressure his father pushed on him to be the perfect banker.

During the earlier days of their marriage, Frederick often spoke of his years fighting in the civil war. Although he had faced danger every day, she could hear the excitement in his voice as he spoke of his time as a soldier. She knew that he missed that time and couldn't help but wonder if that was why he was so unhappy and distant. The war was over but it seemed Frederick wished it wasn't. The life of a banker didn't bring him the thrills and excitement of war and although he said all the right things and had married the right woman, Sally could see the light slowly fading from his eyes.

She wished she could somehow ignite that light again, but she didn't know how.

With Frederick being more absent with every week that passed, Sally had come to put all her hopes on having a child. Perhaps if Frederick became a father he would spend more time at home; perhaps he would look at her again with love in his eyes and affection in his smile. The rain began to fall a little harder, drumming a steady tip-tap on the roof. A soft sigh escaped her as she checked the time and realized that once again Frederick wouldn't be home for dinner.

Had she not been raised with the manners of a southern debutante she would have asked for her dinner to be sent to her room, but she stood up from the window seat and made her way to her closet instead. She took out a burgundy dress that flattered her pale ivory skin and started to dress and then ran a brush through her hair before heading to the dining room where Mrs.

and Mr. Harrington would be waiting for her.

“Sherry before dinner, Sally?” Mr. Harrington asked at the sight of her.

“Thank you.” Sally smiled although it didn’t reach her eyes.

She caught the look that passed between Mr. and Mrs. Harrington before her mother in law turned to her. “Sally dear, Frederick sent word that he’ll be working late tonight. I’m sure you understand how important his work is to him.”

Sally nodded as she accepted her sherry, although she couldn’t help but wonder why his wife wasn’t as important to him anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



*P*eter Snow kicked the dust off his shoes before he stepped into the office. For the last few years, he had dreamed of this day. The day would become a landowner. Raised in a catholic orphanage in New York before being called to war, Peter had never had a home to call his own.

He had left the orphanage to join in the war and had fought for three years before the war ended. He had experienced gruesome battles, watched his friends die by his side, and had fought for his own life more than once. Many were the night he had looked up at the stars and dreamed of the future in a futile attempt to forget his current situation. On those nights he had dreamed of becoming a landowner. When the homestead act was passed in 1862, Peter had been eager for the war to end but it continued relentlessly for a further three years.

It had taken him another three to decide where he wanted to settle on his own piece of property. Over the last three years he had traveled most of the country. He had spent almost a year in the mid-west, a few months on the west coast and scattered periods in several other towns. Only when he arrived in Fort Vancouver did he know he had finally found the place he wanted to call home.

For the last six months he had been working as a fur-trapper to earn enough money to pay the filing fee for a temporary claim. Today he was

filing that claim. Peter knew that claiming through the Homestead Act involved certain conditions.

He knew the conditions by heart and listed them quietly in his mind as he fell into line behind others filing their claims. The first condition was having to reside on the claimed land continuously for five years. A home had to be built according to specifications, the land had to be farmed, and continuous improvements were stipulated. Peter also knew that since he had served as a Union soldier, time would be shaved off for his time in the civil war. Peter was however unconcerned about having time shaved off the five-year requirement as he had no intention of ever leaving.

Fort Vancouver was now his home and as soon as he had a land grant in his hand, he planned to build himself a house. Perhaps someday in the future, he might find a wife to share it with; perhaps even have the blessings of a few young'uns running around the yard.

As an orphan, Peter valued family above anything. He wanted to build a life for himself, a life filled with laughter, love, and family. He knew his dreams might sound foolish to others but it was a future he prayed for every night.

“Next!” the official called from behind the desk.

The line moved forward and Peter couldn't help but feel anticipation racing through his veins. He was only a few steps from making his claim and starting that life. For a moment he thought of all the men who had lost their lives in the war. So many times he had wondered why he had survived when he had watched fathers, brothers and husbands die in the field. He had no one and nothing and yet for some reason God had spared him. It was something Peter didn't understand.

Once under a cloudless sky, he had revealed this concern to a traveling preacher. The preacher had sighed before offering him a toothless smile. *“We do not understand the way of the Lord, but we have to understand that He has a plan for every single one of us. If you've been spared, thank Him by*

living a good life.”

That was exactly what Peter planned on doing. He waited as the man in front of him filed his claim and he thought about what he wanted to do first. He could've filed earlier if he wanted but he had wanted to save enough money to start working the land the moment he received his grant.

He wasn't flush with cash but he had enough to start building a small cabin and to buy a few chickens, maybe even a cow. The next few months would be busy and hard work, but Peter looked forward to every second of it. Once he had a home and could live off his land, he would start to look for someone to share his life with.

“Next!” the official called out again.

Peter dragged in a deep breath before he took a step towards his future. The future the Lord had spared him for.

“Good day, sir, I'm here to file a claim under the Homestead Act.” The words sounded surreal but Peter didn't let his anxiousness show.

The man nodded. “Do you have a parcel of land in mind?”

Peter nodded. “Yes. Just up the mountain. Here, I've scribbled a map to show you the area.”

The man sighed, clearly not enjoying his job as a civil servant as he accepted Peter's scribbled map. He pulled out a larger map of the area and found the corresponding parcel of land before turning to Peter. “It's available. That will be \$18 for the filing fee, \$2 for the land agent. After five years the final deed will be issued on final payment.”

Peter nodded as he reached into his pocket for his leather pouch. “I also served in the Union army for three years.”

“Two years off the required time then. You can apply for your official land deed after three years.”

Peter smiled as he handed over the money. Three years and the land would be rightfully his, but until then he would make it a home.

CHAPTER 3



Frederick Harrington had enjoyed his time in the Union Army. Not because of the battles or because he was fighting a war for his country, but because his posting allowed him the freedom he had never had at home.

During his five years in the army, he hadn't once held a rifle or seen any action since his posting proved to be peaceful. One that allowed him to spend his nights in the saloon and his days sleeping off the liquor from the nights before.

He didn't have his father to answer to or any expectations to live up to. He didn't have the Harrington name to uphold and he had no responsibilities except for being present and visible in the small town that he held with two other officers.

When he returned to Boston all that had changed. Suddenly he was working in the bank, following in his father's bleak and boring footsteps with an engagement already arranged. At first, he had liked the thought of having a beautiful Southern debutante for a wife but after a few months, Frederick soon learned that his well-mannered wife offered none of the excitement he had known at the saloons during his time in the army.

At first he had simply avoided her but soon he had found himself reverting to his old ways. He would leave the bank as soon as his father left

for the day and seek his pleasures in the dark alleys of Boston. It was in one such alley that he found himself now. Celia had become his favorite and he no longer bothered to spend his time with anyone else. Her sweet smile and decadent touch had captured not only his interest but also his imagination.

His parents knew better than to question where he spent his time; his wife didn't even bother. Giving him all the freedom he needed. He was tired of his life and often wished the war had never ended. With the Harrington name came too many responsibilities he didn't want. Too many expectations he knew he would never live up to.

Frederick let out a soft sigh knowing that sooner or later his family would learn of his infidelity, and when they did his father would tighten the purse strings. But then did he really need his father's money?

He stopped in front of the faded wooden door and knocked three times. He no longer bothered to visit Celia at her place of work, having found her this little room in which he kept her all to himself.

The door was opened within seconds, her curly brown hair tumbling over her shoulders as her bright blue eyes widened with joy.

"Frederick! I didn't expect you tonight."

Frederick's brows creased noticing the red rims around her eyes. "Is something wrong? What happened?"

He stepped inside and quickly closed the door behind him. It wouldn't do for him to be seen in this part of town. Although he preferred spending his time here, he knew his father would chew his ear for it.

"I... uhm... I'm not feeling very well," Celia admitted as she moved to the wood stove, her back to him.

Frederick didn't have to be a mind-reader to know that something was terribly wrong. He moved to her side and gently touched her shoulder. "Celia, what's wrong?"

Frederick found himself startled to realize that he had come to care more for his soiled dove than he had ever cared for his wife. Although Sally was

well-mannered, perfectly dressed, and always said the right thing at the right time she had never excited him as Celia did.

Celia turned to him then, tears softly streaming over her cheeks. “I’m with child, Frederick.”

Frederick took a few steps back, his heart racing at the shock before disgust settled on his face.

Reading him like a book, Celia moved to him. “It’s yours, Frederick, there’s been no one else since you got me this room.”

Relief washed over him as he saw the pain in her expression. For a girl like Celia to be with child was the worst eventuality possible. Frederick’s heart clenched in his chest as he brushed the tears away. For a moment he thought of his place in society, his father’s position at the bank, and his wife. But one look at Celia and he knew that none of that mattered. She had been his mistress for most of his marriage and it didn’t come as a surprise that he loved her, having never connected the word or emotion to his wife.

“Don’t be sad, my little dove,” Frederick murmured pulling her in close as he considered a solution to their problem.

“How can I not be?” Celia said pulling away. “You won’t come to visit once I have a child. You’ll forget about me. I’m ruined, my entire life is ruined.”

To hear her say those words about the child she carried made him feel his heart shatter into a thousand pieces. The idea had formed without a second thought. A smile curved his mouth as he took her hands.

“We’ll run away, Celia. We’ll leave Boston and start a new life somewhere else. I’ll take care of you and the babe.”

“But your wife... your family...” Celia asked, both confused and distraught.

“They don’t matter. Nothing matters but us. If I could, I would’ve divorced Sally a long time ago. My parents would never allow such a thing to happen, so that won’t be an option. We’ll leave under the cover of night and

never look back.”

“You’ll do that for me?” Celia’s eyes widened with surprise.

“This wasn’t the life I would have chosen for myself, Celia, it was chosen for me. Even Sally was chosen for me. I need to go home to take care of a few things, but I’ll be back tonight. After midnight. Be ready and packed.”

Celia’s head bobbed up and down as Frederick moved towards the door. “You’ll come for me, won’t you?”

Frederick smiled as he felt the burdens of his life fall away. Celia wouldn’t expect much from him, unlike his wife and his parents. “Of course I’ll be back. Pack now and make sure to pack light.”

Frederick walked back through the alley at a rushed pace. He had much to do in very little time. First he had to make sure that his parents and his wife were none the wiser. As soon as they were settled for the night he would pack his things, help himself to some of the cash his father kept in the study, and then he’d be off.

By the time he arrived at the beautiful brownstone in the better part of town, Frederick was in the best mood he’d been in since returning from the war. Only a few more hours of pretense, then he would leave Boston, his family, and his stuck up wife and never look back.

He opened the door and stepped inside. “I’m home.”

Sally came out of the drawing-room, a smile already in place. “Hello, darling, how lovely of you to join us for dinner.”

Frederick kept his smile in place while thinking it would be the last dinner he would have to sit through pretending to be the perfect son and husband.

CHAPTER 4



Sally turned as Dotty entered the room. She fondly remembered the days having Dotty as her lady's maid. She hardly had occasion to see Dotty at all nowadays. She couldn't believe how her life had changed over the last month.

If she had ever thought that Mr. and Mrs. Harrington were fond of her, she quickly learned she'd been mistaken. It was exactly a month ago that she had woken up to find the house in an uproar. Frederick had helped himself to all the cash on hand, leaving only a note with little explanation as to his absconsion.

Sally knew the note by heart, she had read it countless times over those first few days.

DEAR MOTHER AND FATHER,

THIS ISN'T the life I wanted to live. This isn't the wife I wanted to marry. Please forgive me for not being the son you hoped for.

TAKE CARE,
Frederick

THAT NOTE HAD BROUGHT tears to her eyes at first but as she read and reread it over and over, it brought her only anger. She had left her life in the south to become his wife. Did he really think that he was the man she envisioned as her husband? She had given up everything to take her vows. She had settled into his life, in his parents' home, abiding by their wishes.

He could have at least apologized to her as well.

No one knew where Frederick was or his reasons for leaving, but everyone had quickly concluded that he was never coming back. Sally had overheard the Harrington's speaking one evening, mentioned how he had taken more than a year's worth of wages in cash from the safe in the study. He wouldn't have taken that much if he planned on returning.

His leaving left Sally without a husband and soon enough also without the enchanted life she had married into. The Harrington's quickly took to blaming her for their son's disappearance. Barely two days after finding the note, Sally had been moved from her room into the servant's quarters. Now instead of having Dotty for a lady's maid, she resided in the room bordering hers.

Sally wasn't sure what was worse: depending on the Harrington's for her livelihood or not knowing what her future held. If she had the option, she would've returned home, but both her parents had succumbed to Scarlet Fever during the previous fall. She was without family, had nowhere to go, and was now dependent on the Harrington's for everything from her meals to her undergarments. It was a terrible feeling, especially knowing they despised her.

More than once she had considered trying to find work but she knew that no one would hire Frederick Harrington's abandoned wife. Not only would it

tarnish their reputation in society, but no one wanted to be associated with her.

She had turned instead to a childhood friend for advice. She had written to Betty about her situation, explaining what had happened. In turn, her friend had duly sympathized. For a few days Sally had considered begging Betty to allow her to stay with her, only to learn that Betty was heading West to be married.

It was as if the entire world had turned against her and she had no one to turn to in her time of need. She was hidden in a backroom in which she spent her days and took her meals. Her future seemed even bleaker than the dank musty walls of the servant's quarters. The only highlight in her life was the letters from Betty.

Like the one Dotty had just handed her. Sally began to open the envelope, surprised at its bulkiness. She extracted the letter, confused at the newspaper clippings that fluttered to the floor at her feet. Curious, she opened the letter first and began to read the words from her friend.

MY DEAREST SALLY,

I'VE GIVEN your situation much thought and I must impress upon you how it upsets me. I cannot imagine the heartache and suffering you must be facing. For the Harrington's to blame you for their son's abandonment is preposterous.

If I were in any position to help, you know I would. Unfortunately, my family lost everything during the war. Our plantation has been burned to the ground and the homestead razed. Mother now works as a maid and Father works the sugar cane fields like a slave. Because I have no future or prospects here, I am heading West as a mail-order bride.

I know you must think the notion ridiculous but I can assure you it is not. I can't help but think that you should consider doing the same. Included with this letter are clippings of advertisements from gentlemen seeking wives through the Matrimonial Times. Although I can't vouch for any of them, I can assure you that I truly believe I have found love through the Matrimonial Times.

If your situation is as dire as you suggest, I urge you to correspond with one of these gentlemen. Perhaps you can find a better life and hopefully even love.

I'm departing for the West in a few days so it wouldn't help for you to reply. Once I am settled in my new home, I will write to you again.

As an after note, I want to add that the country has changed since the war, Sally. If we do not change as well we might never find happiness again.

YOUR FRIEND,
Betty

SALLY READ the letter again before sighing heavily. How could Betty travel across the country in search of a future with a man she didn't even know? She shrugged realizing she had done more or less likewise when she had traveled to Boston to marry Frederick. Although her father and Mr. Harrington were acquaintances and the marriage had been arranged, it came down to the same thing.

She reached for the newspaper clippings and began reading the different advertisements from men all over the country. Some required mothers for their children while others were seeking companionship. It was such a strange notion that she tucked everything back into the envelope, dismissing the notion completely.

As soon as she had put the envelope down, she thought about Betty's words. The world had changed and unless she was willing to change too, she had to accept the hand life had dealt her. She glanced around the dark and musty room and knew that this wasn't the life she was prepared to accept.

She opened the envelope again and read the advertisements before finding one that appealed to her in particular. Sydney Flanders sounded like a kind and generous man. Although Oregon was on the other side of the country, Sally felt a flicker of hope in her heart. Perhaps Sydney Flanders could offer her the life she had always dreamed of. Perhaps they could find love and build a life together. Perhaps she could even have the family she had always hoped for.

She reached for a pen and a sheet of paper and began to write to the stranger before she had the chance to change her mind.

CHAPTER 5



By late April Sally had received a proposal from Sydney Flanders. Although she had believed corresponding with a stranger to be ridiculous at first, she quickly found herself looking forward to his letters. He was truly a wordsmith, painting beautiful images of Oregon in every letter.

She had received word from Betty and was happy to hear that her friend was settled in her new home and was quickly falling in love with her husband. Believing that her fate would be the same, Sally had taken the leap and accepted Sydney's proposal.

Now the momentous task lay ahead of informing the Harrington's of her decision. Sally knew they would be glad to be rid of her and even considered leaving in the darkness of night, as her husband had done, but her manners wouldn't allow her to do that.

She had asked to speak with them that evening, making this the first time she would be stepping into the drawing-room since she had been banished to the servant's quarters. It had been the room in which she had been introduced to her husband and where she had spent many a winter's day reading, but it now felt like the lion's den as she took her seat.

Mr. Harrington was standing by the fireplace eyeing her warily over his glass of scotch. Mrs. Harrington's cocked brow made it clear that she despised Sally and still blamed her for their son's disappearance. A month

after Frederick's disappearance they had called her in, and told her they had word that he was dead. A terrible accident they had said. They held a funeral and everything. Sally was confused. It seemed strange, and she half expected that they had created this illusion for appearances sake.

But it left her legally a widow. A lawyer had met with her, and told her that she been left a very modest sum of money by her husband, everything else was retained by his family.

She did not care. She had been abandoned. A widow sounded far better than that. And it meant that she could easily remarry.

"Thank you for meeting with me," Sally said in a small voice.

"Our dinner is getting cold, so best make it quick," Mrs. Harrington said in a clipped tone.

Sally nodded, drawing in a fortifying breath. "I have decided to travel to Oregon."

Mr. Harrington's eyes widened. "Oregon! But that's in the West. Why on earth would you go there?"

Sally squared her shoulders, juted her chin out as a show of confidence. "I'm to be married. His name is Sydney Flanders and he can offer me a good life. I know this might come as a surprise to you and that you might judge my decision, but I assure you it has been well thought through."

She could see that Mrs. Harrington was about to argue before she realized she would finally be rid of her son's widow. "That's... startling but good news. I'm sure you know that we only want what is best for you."

Sally resisted the urge to scoff at that comment. "I know," she said pleasantly. "I'll be leaving on a wagon train in two days. I just wanted to inform you of my decision and I wanted to thank you for your kindness and hospitality ever since Frederick's... passing..."

Mr. Harrington coughed, clearly stunned by her decorum and decision. "Are you sure this is the right decision?"

"Yes, I am certain of it," Sally said firmly. She didn't add that living in

the servant's quarters after being married to their son was an insult.

"If that is the case, is there anything we can do to help? With the journey or your preparation for it."

Sally hadn't wanted to ask them for anything but the list of what she would need for the journey came to mind. She had planned on selling a few dresses and hopefully having enough money to buy what was required, but as she looked and Mr. and Mrs. Harrington she could read the relief in their gazes to finally be rid of her.

"I have a list of requirements for the journey. I'd appreciate some assistance with acquiring these." She hated to ask them for money, but since they were so eager to be rid of her, she felt it was only fair. After all, they had arranged for her marriage to their son to be abandoned.

"Of course. You can leave the list with me, I'll make sure it's taken care of in the morning," Mr. Harrington said kindly.

Sally had always liked him more than his wife. But now for the first time since Frederick's disappearance, she could see that he was deeply ashamed of his son's behavior. Not wanting to spend another second in Mrs. Harrington's company, she stood up. "Thank you, that's very generous of you."

Mr. Harrington glanced at his wife before turning back to Sally. "Will you join us for dinner?"

For a moment Sally wanted to accept if only to wipe that satisfied smirk off Mrs. Harrington's face, but she shook her head instead. "No, thank you. I'll return to my quarters now. Thank you for your time."

She walked out of the drawing-room, holding her head high like the Southern debutante that she was. She wouldn't let the Harrington's hold her in their power for another second. She might not know what her future in the West held, but at least she would be free of their blameful looks. Sally returned to her quarters and closed the door behind her. As soon as she was alone she let out the breath she hadn't been aware she had been holding in. Just two days, she assured herself as she made her way to the bed.

For the first time since coming to Boston, she allowed herself to admit that it had never been home. In the early days of her marriage, she had fooled herself into believing that she had been happy. Now she knew that she had never loved Frederick and that he had perhaps felt just as caged in as she was feeling now. Sally had never thought she would be able to forgive him for abandoning her, but with her freedom now winking at her only two days away, she finally understood why he had escaped his parents' control. He was just another pawn in their circle of control. A circle she was finally escaping.

Sally let out a quiet sigh and finally forgave Frederick for leaving and prayed that he would find happiness wherever his new life had led him.

After all, life led in captivity wasn't a life at all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6



Sydney Flanders, or rather Sinister Sid as he was known by everyone in town, punched his fist in the air in triumph. When he heard about the Matrimonial Times he knew it would offer the perfect solution to his problem.

Sinister Sid didn't like problems and avoided them at all costs. When he had been called to war he had broken his own leg just to escape the battlefields. The leg had healed long before the war was over. While everyone was fighting a losing battle, he had headed to California to make his fortune in the gold mines.

He had won a claim in a game of poker and had mined gold for years, building his fortune over time. But when the mine dried up, Sinister Sid faced another problem. Instead of investing the fortune he had acquired, he decided to head to the gambling tables in an effort to double it. At first it had paid off. He had a sure hand and a good poker face, but it had taken only one wrong hand to turn the tables.

He lost every dime of his fortune in a game he would never forget. But that hadn't been his biggest mistake. No, that was when he had pulled his shotgun and threatened the card players if they refused to return his money. What should've been an easy solution to a terrible problem had turned into a terrible situation.

Sinister Sid had been run out of town by the sheriff and his deputies with nothing but the clothes on his back and the steed beneath him. For a few years he had picked up odd jobs, working hard for every meal, until he learned about the Homestead Act. That had become his one and only goal.

Being a landowner became his dream and all that he worked towards. Finally, he had saved up enough to claim his land grant. A hundred and sixty acres of prime Oregon land was his after five years, having met the requirements. But now, greedy as he was, Sid wanted more.

After a thorough investigation of the Homestead Act and how he could acquire more land without spending a single dime, he learned that a married man could claim more acres if he had a marriage certificate as proof.

Finding a wife was a little difficult in Fort Vancouver. His reputation wasn't at all good and every available reputable woman in town avoided him altogether. Over the last year, Sinister Sid had tried to clean up his act, brush up on his manners, and win the heart of a woman or two. But no woman wanted to tie their wagon to the town's black sheep.

Although Sinister Sid had lived on the right side of the law since his arrival in Fort Vancouver, he had skirted close to the line too many times to count. He was as slick as a wet seal when it came to avoiding the law, but not when it came to his reputation.

It was in the saloon one night that he had learned about the Matrimonial Times. The town doctor had sent for a wife from back east after corresponding with her for a few months. When the lady arrived, she was not only easy on the eye but came with a wealthy dowry. That was exactly what Sid needed.

He had written to the Matrimonial Times the very next day. At first he had thought nothing would come of it but then he received a letter from a widow in Boston. Knowing that his letters would win over her heart and her trust, Sid had paid a wordsmith a significant amount to write the letters on his behalf.

Of course, Sid would never admit it, but the wordsmith had done a swell job. Sally Harrington had, within only a few letters, fallen head over heels in love with the man described by the wordsmith. After instructing the man to include a proposal in his next letter, Sid had been concerned that he had been too hasty and had doubted the intelligence of that letter ever since.

But the letter in his hand assured him that his timing had been perfectly on point. In his hand, he held the response from Sally accepting his proposal. His smile broadened, revealing two rotten teeth, as he learned that she was already headed West on a wagon train. It would take her about a month to reach Fort Vancouver, but when she did Sid would put a ring on her finger and finally claim his abutting piece of land.

He couldn't believe how easy it had been to dupe the foolish widow and he applauded himself for his skill and deception. There was only one problem: to claim the adjacent land he would need to pay the grant fees. He glanced around the thoroughfare and knew exactly how to easily come by that amount of money. Fur-trapping was booming at the moment, even more so than the gold mines to the south. Fur trapping was usually a family trade, handed down from generation to generation, but that didn't stop Sid from considering it for himself. How hard could it be to catch a few furry animals in the woods and bring them back to the fort for their furs? It would take him a few weeks, just as long as it would take his wife to arrive on the wagon train, and then he would have the money he'd need.

Decision made, Sid headed to his cabin in the mountains and started to gear up. He packed enough food to last him for a week, a change of clothes, and everything he believed he'd need to be a fur trapper. While he packed he whistled a happy tune. Since Sally Harrington would be the reason he finally got the extra land he wanted, he would make sure to get a fur for her as well. Besides, he wanted his wife to look good when he shocked the whole town with their marriage.

Not once did he consider the dangers of heading into the woods or even

consider that he might not return. For Sid, it was just another way to make money quickly and to finally get the land he had his eye on for years.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



Sally couldn't believe her journey had finally come to an end. She had spent the last five weeks on the Oregon trail and couldn't be more relieved that she had finally arrived. The days had been long, the nights fraught with danger and, although she had enjoyed seeing the country, she had often slept with one eye open knowing that danger could befall them at any moment.

Twice they had come across the remnants of wagon trains robbed by highwaymen. Once, they had even come across a camp of travelers who had been massacred by the natives. She had seen more than she had ever wanted to see and knew that the memories of what she had experienced on the trail would stay with her long after the journey ended.

All she wanted now was to start her new life with Sydney and to put the Harrington's, Boston, and the Oregon trail behind her. Her legs ached from the long journey, her dresses hung loosely around her frame as a result of the weight she'd lost and although she had taken care to keep her bonnet on during daylight hours, she knew she would have earned some freckles on her cheeks and her nose.

She waited for luggage, a single steam trunk, and a suitcase before she glanced around the small town that was Fort Vancouver. As a trading post for the Hudson Bay Company, she wasn't surprised by the number of wagons

filled to the brim with furs or the rough-looking men who called themselves fur-trappers.

A chill ran down her spine as she realized that she didn't so much as know what Sydney Flanders looked like. She waved goodbye to the wagon train as they set off their next destination wondering how much longer she would have to wait for her intended to arrive. It was early afternoon and not knowing what else to do, she sat down on her trunk and waited.

The hours passed slowly as Sally watched everyone around her go about their business. She made out a general store, a mercantile that boasted wares from back East, and even a barber. A small diner sat on one corner, with the saloon on the other. Between the two she spotted the boarding house and a handful of other businesses.

By the time the sun began its descent, Sally began to wonder if Sydney was ever going to come for her. She waited until nightfall before she realized that her fate was now in her own hands. Tears burned her eyes but she refused to let them fall. Sydney might have forgotten about her arrival, but at least she was no longer confined to a life in the Harrington's servant's quarters.

On the day of her departure, Mr. Harrington had surprised her with a money pouch. At first she had refused, but he insisted she accept it. Sally had carefully guarded that pouch throughout the journey and was now grateful for his generosity. After a month of sleeping in camps, she wanted a bath and a bed and she already knew where she could find both.

She picked up her suitcase, grabbed her steam trunk by the handle, and began dragging it across the thoroughfare towards the boarding house. Breathless from the exertion, she stepped into the boarding house to find a small gray-haired woman standing behind the desk.

“Can I help you, dearie?”

Sally caught her breath and nodded. “I'd like a room for the night, please.”

“Will anyone be joining you?” the woman asked suspiciously.

Sally shook her head. “No, it will only be me.”

“Good, because I don’t allow no funny business in this boarding house, you hear. If you want a bath, you’ll have to pay for the water to be taken to your room. There are clean sheets on the bed and a towel in the cupboard. I’m Mrs. Hensley, but you can just call me Annie.” Her wrinkled face crumpled into a smile as she held out a small hand covered in papery skin.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hensley, a bath would be lovely. I’ll pay the extra fee,” Sally said, taking out her money. It might be a little extravagant but she deserved it, she thought to herself as she accepted the key.

Once she was settled in her room, Sally couldn’t help but allow the tears to fall. She had just traveled to the other side of the country only to be forgotten by her groom. She wanted to write to Betty and tell her what had happened but she didn’t want to trouble her friend with her misfortune. Instead, she hung out her dresses, lit the lamp, and took her bath.

By the time she crawled into bed, she was exhausted. She had no idea what the future would bring or when Sydney Flanders would eventually make his appearance, but at least she had enough money to get by for a week, maybe two if she was careful.

Sleep dragged her under and brought with it horrifying dreams. Dreams of being locked in the servant’s quarters in the Harrington’s home and dreams of being hunted by savages in the wilderness. When she woke up startled and terrified, she glanced around the dark room and felt fear clutch at her throat, robbing her of her breath.

What had she done?

It took her a few moments to catch her breath before she turned to the bible she had placed on the bedside table. She read until she found a verse about God promising to prosper her. She felt warmth settle over her shoulders like a comforting blanket. This might not have been what she had planned for her life in the West, but it was a chance to start anew.

Did she really need a husband to make that happen?

For so long, she had abided by everyone else's wishes and now for the first time, she only had her will to live by. A slow smile curved her mouth as she realized this was her chance to do what she wanted to do, whatever that might be.

It was a little terrifying, but also liberating.

Tomorrow, she decided, she would find employment, and then she'd take care of herself until Sydney finally showed up to collect her.

That was if he ever did show up. She had heard grueling and terrifying stories about the West and how dangerous it could be. She couldn't help but admit that chances were very good that Sydney Flanders had met with a terrible fate while she was traveling westward.

A few years ago Sally might have been terrified at the thought of taking care of herself, but after spending the last couple of years as a ward of the Harrington's, excitement at being free quickly extinguished her fears.

She would do this, she could do this and she would do it well. It was a second chance for her, a chance to do whatever she chose whenever she chose. She didn't have to take her meals in her room or hide from society. Here in Fort Vancouver, she could just be Sally, without any expectations or rumors to haunt her.

CHAPTER 8



“*A*nnie, I’ve made the beds and swept the stairs. Was there anything else you needed me to do?” Sally asked as she picked up the dustpan and moved towards the desk behind which Annie hardly ever moved.

Annie shook her head. “That’s all for now, thank you, Sally,” Annie held up her hand, indicating she had just remembered something. “Actually, if you don’t mind, would you run to the mercantile for me? I need a few things. I already have a list.”

Sally nodded. “Of course, let me just put the dustpan away.”

Sally headed through the kitchen into the small storage area and stored the broom and the dustpan before returning to Annie’s side. Once she had the list and the money, she headed out of the boarding house. It had been almost three weeks since her arrival in Fort Vancouver and she was yet to meet Sydney Flanders.

The day after her arrival she had debated going around asking after him but had decided against it. Surely if he had asked her to come to Fort Vancouver, he would’ve been there to meet her when the wagon train arrived. The fact that he wasn’t didn’t sit right with Sally. She had already been abandoned by one husband and didn’t plan on being abandoned by another. She had therefore marched down the stairs to the desk where Annie met her with a cocked brow. She had explained her situation and asked if

Annie needed any help at the boarding house.

Annie scoffed at the mention of Sydney Flanders before she informed Sally that her help had just left town and that she did in fact need someone. They had quickly discussed terms and by lunchtime, Sally had started to work. Her room and board were included and she would be paid a small weekly wage. It wasn't much but it was more than enough for Sally.

Although Annie seemed mean and more often than not complained about any and everything, she was actually a sweet old lady. Sally quickly learned that Annie had lost her husband in the war and that the boarding house was all she had left in the world. Sally wouldn't call them friends exactly, but they got along better than Sally expected.

The thoroughfare was bustling as fur wagons rolled into town and supply wagons rolled out. If there was one thing Sally had learned about Fort Vancouver it was that it was a busy little town. She made her way down the boardwalk towards the general store, intrigued by a stagecoach that had just come into town. Not looking where she was going, she misstepped and felt herself tumbling forward.

Before she could fall flat on her face in full view of anyone watching, she felt a strong hand grab her upper arm and drag her upright. Sally found her balance before turning to her rescuer to thank him.

Her tummy tilted as she looked into the bluest pair of eyes she'd ever seen. His hair was the color of coal, his skin tanned from hours under the unforgiving sun. Her eyes narrowed as all words fled from her mind. Without a single doubt in her mind, he was the most handsome man she'd ever met in her entire life.

"I'm... uhm... sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going..." she stammered.

The man flashed her a smile that made her head spin as he released the hold on her arm. "Better keep your eyes straight ahead, miss." His voice was deep enough to send shivers down her spine.

“I will,” Sally said with a hesitant smile for her rescuer.

“You new around these parts? I know almost everyone in town and I know I haven’t met you before, I would’ve remembered a face like yours.”

Sally instinctively touched her face self-consciously before letting her hands fall to her sides. “I uhm.. no, I’m new in town. My name is Sally.”

“Well, how do you, Sally? I’m Peter Snow.” He held out his hand.

Sally accepted it wondering why this man had the power to rob her of speech.

“Welcome to Ford Vancouver,” Peter smiled, not eager to leave.

Sally nodded, finally finding her words. “Thank you. I’m working at the boarding house with Annie. What do you do?” She knew it was wrong to ask such a personal question within seconds of meeting someone, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

Peter let out a soft chuckle. “I have a homestead a short ride out of town.”

Sally nodded, intrigued at the idea of living on a homestead. During her journey west she had heard a lot about the Homestead Act and how people were making a living off their own land. It seemed like a foreign but wonderful idea. “Do you enjoy it?”

“More than I’ve enjoyed most things, I suppose,” Peter admitted with a smile.

Sally smiled. “I best get going. Annie’s waiting for the things on this list.”

Peter nodded and tilted his hat. “It was nice to meet you, Sally, perhaps we’ll meet again.”

Sally smiled shyly before she turned and hurried for the general mercantile. Her experience of men included only Frederick and what little correspondence she had shared with Sydney. But not once in her life could she remember feeling her cheeks flush and her heart race when she looked into a man’s eyes. Something about Peter’s gaze made her feel happy and hopeful. It was a strange feeling but one she would try to figure out as soon

as she was done with Annie's shopping.

She pushed thoughts of Peter Snow aside and stepped into the general store, wondering when she would see the alluring man again. A smile curved her mouth as she began gathering the items Annie had on her list. Fort Vancouver might not be what she had thought it would be, but just perhaps she might find happiness here after all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Over the next few weeks Peter found any and every excuse to venture into town. Every time he did, he had a reason to stop at the boarding house. When he wasn't taking fresh vegetables for Annie's kitchen, he stopped by just to check in on Sally.

He had always dreamed of finding love and having a family, but he never expected it to happen so soon. Since the first moment Sally had all but fallen into his arms, Peter had known she was the woman of his dreams. His homestead was doing better than he had expected and with summer came harvests he could barely keep to himself. He was surprised to make a sizable income from the sale of his vegetables in town.

After struggling for so many years to achieve his dreams, it was a little overwhelming to find them all coming true at once. First, there had been the harvests bringing in more produce than he expected and then there was meeting Annie.

Peter was curious about what had brought her to Fort Vancouver, but as with anyone else that showed up in town, no questions were asked. Some people came West to flee their past and others just to find a new life. He couldn't help but believe that was why Sally had come to settle in their little town.

After a few weeks of getting to know her, he knew without a doubt that

she was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Over quick visits and short conversations, he had learned that she was a kind and generous woman who didn't think twice about helping others. Although she had been in town for barely a month she had already volunteered most of her free time either at the school, the doctor's office or any place help was needed.

Peter couldn't help but believe that God had sent her to Fort Vancouver for one reason, and that was to make her his wife. He nervously clenched his hands as he climbed out of his wagon and walked towards the boarding house. For some, a period of a month might seem too short to truly know the feelings of your heart, but for Peter a month was more than enough time to know what his heart had known at first sight.

He loved Sally Harrington and if she would have him, he would be honored to be her husband. He drew in a deep breath and crossed the road to the boarding house. He knew she would be busy helping Annie with chores and such but hopefully he could steal her away for a walk.

SALLY NEVER THOUGHT she would enjoy living in a small town like Fort Vancouver, but before she realized it she had friends and plenty of ways to fill the hours in a day. Annie only needed her for a few hours every morning and a few hours every afternoon, leaving her with enough time to help out where she saw fit.

When she had learned that the doctor's nurse had returned East to marry a suitable fellow, she had taken up spending her lunch hour helping him set the surgery to rights. With newcomers arriving in town on a weekly basis, the schoolteacher was overwhelmed with the number of children who suddenly filled her class. Sally loved stopping by the school to help with supervision, even if it was only while they were on recess.

She had come to make friends and found happiness in the small things

she never thought she would enjoy. She even found joy in sweeping the stairs or making the beds. For the first time in her life, she felt as if she served a purpose. And for the first time, she had a certain person who made her mind spin.

For the first week she had kept watch for Sydney's arrival every day, but he never did come to look for her. At first she had felt disappointed that she wouldn't become his wife, but it only took one look at Peter to know that even if Sydney did come, he would never win her heart.

Peter Snow was a self-made man who had none of the airs Frederick possessed. He didn't boast the beautiful words of a wordsmith but he had captured her heart with his kindness and honest smile. Although they hadn't courted, they had spent quite some time talking about their dreams of the future and, just like her, Peter Snow dreamed of having a family and a home.

When Sally had learned that he was orphaned as a young boy, she understood his dreams even better. A dreamy sigh escaped her as she descended the stairs to help Annie with the dinner, and that is when she saw Peter standing at the foot of the stairs with his hat in his hand.

"Peter?" Sally asked, surprised to see him there. She hadn't expected to see him again until the following day.

"Sally, Annie said it's all right if you take a walk with me." Peter winked at the elderly woman before turning back to Sally with a hopeful smile.

Sally's heart skipped a beat. "If she's sure, I'd like that very much."

"Go on, you just get under my feet in the kitchen anyhow," Annie muttered as she scraped back the chair and hobbled towards the kitchen.

Sally suddenly felt a little shy, she and Peter had never consciously spent time together. Usually it was just a few conversations here and there. To go on a walk with him was surely a sign that he was interested in her, wasn't it?

Without saying a word, she fell into step beside him. They walked in silence for a while until they reached the edge of town. Peter turned and looked back over the thoroughfare and to where the large imposing walls of

the Fort once stood. “Sally, when I first arrived in Fort Vancouver I had many dreams. It's only fair to tell you that I never thought some of them would be realized.”

Sally smiled at him with affection in her gaze. “Peter, you’re a self-made man who fought hard for your country and who can now make a good living off a homestead. I’d say your dreams have been realized.”

Peter shook his head. “All but one. Sally, I don’t know the reasons you chose to come West, but I’m grateful for every single one of them because they brought you to me. I know we still have a lot to learn about each other, but I know everything I need to know to know that I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Sally’s heart skipped a beat even as she gasped with surprise. “Peter?”

Peter smiled and took her hand. “Sally, will you honor me by accepting my hand in marriage? I can’t promise you that we’ll always have everything we need, but I can promise that I will always love you and keep you safe. I can promise that I want to build a life with you, I want to have a family with you and I want to watch our children grow with you by my side.”

Sally’s words evaporated from her mind as she felt her heart skip with joy. Her marriage to Frederick had been arranged, much like a business deal. With Sydney, it had been discussed and offered without even meeting each other. But with Peter, she had fallen in love and to hear him now declare his love for her was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

“It’s all right,” Peter said with a heavy sigh as he dropped her hand. “I knew I was rushing things. I should have been more patient...”

Sally sniffed back happy tears as she reached for his hands. “Yes, Peter, yes, I’ll marry you.”

Peter turned to her with a look of both surprise and relief before scooping her up and twirling her in a circle. “You’ve just made me the happiest man in all of Fort Vancouver.”

CHAPTER 10



A few days after Peter's proposal Sally stood in front of a pastor again. This time she did know her husband and this time her future had not been arranged by others. This time she looked to the man by her side with love in her eyes and an anticipation for the future blooming in her heart.

When it came time for her to say her vows, she said them without hesitation. She spoke them with the open-hearted belief that she was committing her life to the man she had always meant to love and marry.

Afterward, Annie hosted a small celebration lunch for them with most of the townsfolk in attendance. Once or twice Sally's thoughts turned to the man she had traveled to Fort Vancouver to marry but she only had to look at her husband to know that Sydney Flanders was just her reason for traveling West. Peter Snow had been her destiny all along.

It was late afternoon when she joined Peter in his wagon, with her steam trunk and luggage loaded on the back to set out for their journey to his homestead at the foot of the mountains. As they traveled higher and higher with every hundred yards, the air grew crisp and her heart grew light. Peter had often told her how he enjoyed living the homestead life at the foot of the mountain, but to see the wilderness and taste the sweet air was different to just hearing about it.

Her heart grew light, her smile broad as they ventured ever further into

the wilderness. They crossed a creek, careful not to startle the horses, and finally arrived at a small wooden sign that read *Snow's Rest*. She turned to Peter with a broad smile. "Home."

Peter nodded as he reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to it. "Our home."

She could see the sections of the parcel of land that had been worked, lush vegetation, and in the fields their bountiful fruits ripening in the sunshine. As they drove past the fields her heart skipped a beat when the small cabin came into sight. It was small enough to fit into the drawing-room of the Harrington's large brownstone house but to Sally, it looked like home.

There was a wide porch with a rocker that Sally already knew she would use and a small patch of dirt beside the steps where she would plant flowers. Once the wagon was unloaded, Peter helped her with her luggage and led the way into the cabin. It was tidy and clean but lacked the touch of a woman. Sally couldn't wait to give it the touch it so desperately needed. Nothing big, she promised herself. Just simple drapes at the windows, a throw blanket over the couch before the fireplace, and perhaps some flowers for the dining room table that was barely big enough for four.

It was small and not at all lavish, but just like Sally and Peter's love, there was room to grow.

She clapped her hands and turned to Peter with a broad smile. "Peter, this is wonderful."

Peter chuckled. "I know it's not much and we'll probably outgrow it soon enough, but it's home."

"It's our home," Sally said as he showed her around. Sally quickly learned that homesteading required work and dedication, both of which Peter offered without hesitation. While he went out to check on things and to see to the afternoon chores, Sally set about making herself at home.

She unpacked her things and made a mental note to ask Peter about more closet space before she made her way to start with dinner. The pantry was

packed with fresh vegetables and although Sally knew that come winter that might not always be the case, she looked forward to cooking them a nice meal on their first night as husband and wife.

By the time Peter returned to the cabin, the scent of cooked vegetables and shepherd's pie hung in the air. "I might have to insist you cook every night if it's going to taste as good as it smells."

Sally laughed turning to him with an indulgent look. "I thought that was why you asked me to marry you, wasn't it?"

Peter shook his head. "I would have been perfectly content for you to sit on the porch and look pretty."

No man had ever made her felt as important or as loved as Peter did. It was a wonderful feeling, one that Sally knew she would appreciate every day for the rest of her life. They dined by the light of a lantern and talked about what the next day would bring as if they had been married for years. It surprised Sally how easily they fell into a routine as if they had known each other for years instead of just a month.

"When we go into town again, I'd like to stop by Annie's. I know she has some preserves and bottled vegetables in the pantry and I hope she'll be willing to share her recipes with me," Sally mentioned while she cleared the table.

Peter nodded. "I'm sure she'll be more than eager. The pastor's wife always buys tomatoes and strawberries from me in summer. I know she also makes preserves, might want to ask her for a recipe or two as well."

Sally smiled. "I will." She searched Peter's gaze and let out a content sigh. "Peter... I'm happy. I never thought I would ever be completely happy but I am."

Peter reached for her hand and smiled. "So am I."

That night they had their coffee on the porch and dreamed of the future. Although Peter offered her the rocking chair, he vowed to get another as soon as he was in town again. As they dreamed of having a family and expanding

the homestead, Sally found herself glancing up at the sky and thanking the Lord for leaving her exactly where she had meant to be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



As the seasons turned so did Sally's priorities on the homestead. With the cooler weather, she soon learned that keeping the cabin warm was her biggest priority. Peter made sure to bring firewood onto the porch every morning before he headed out but it was her job to make sure the fire was burning in the hearth and that the wood stove was always warm.

When the first snows began to fall she realized how dangerous the mountain could be. Most of the travelers and trappers who came down from the mountain for winter had to pass by Snow's Rest on their way into town.

Often Peter would invite them in for coffee and let them warm themselves by the fire. Although they were at the foot of the mountain, the temperatures were already much colder than Sally had ever experienced. She couldn't imagine how cold it might be on the mountain. With every one of the strangers welcomed into their home, Sally learned of the trials they faced on the mountain. Mountain lions desperate for food, turning to men to appease their appetites. Bears accidentally disturbed during their hibernation became aggressive hunters without mercy. She learned of snow slides and tree branches snapping beneath the weight of the snow, and she learned how ruthless the elements could be without suitable clothing or shelter.

She had seen firsthand what frostbite could do to a man's hand and she had witnessed the effects of hypothermia when men had brought a sick man

to Peter's door. They had warmed him by the fire and plied him with tea until he was stable enough to be rushed into town.

This morning, however, it wasn't snow tapping on the roof, but rain. The soft rain she had so loved back in Boston, which out here brought a sense of doom. A little rain was appreciated, but too much could mean the creek flooding which would see them isolated on the homestead. Although they didn't venture into town often, it pleased Sally to know that they were able to whenever they felt the need.

Today, however, the rain didn't seem to ease. Numerous times Sally glanced out the window feeling an impending sense of doom. She wasn't sure what had brought the feeling on, but she had a very bad feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Sally was standing at the wood stove stirring a big pot of soup when she heard a commotion outside the cabin. The spoon clattered to the floor even as Peter rushed to grab his shotgun. He cocked the weapon and carefully approached the door as he turned to Sally. "Stay right there, you hear?"

Sally nodded, a nervous lump stopping any words from leaving her mouth as Peter opened the door.

"Help, you've gotta help us, sir. We found him like this. We gotta go back for our fur but we couldn't just leave him out there," the man explained quickly as he eyed the weapon in Peter's hands.

"What happened to him?" Peter asked, not letting his aim slip for even a second. Out here, Sally had learned that her husband took no chances. He would first get a feel for a stranger before he set his shotgun aside.

"We're not sure. We found him up on the ledge on Lawrence peak. Don't know if he was tryin' to trap sumtin' or if he slipped and fell, but he knocked his head pretty hard. He's breathin' but we're not sure for how much longer." The man gestured to the large bruise on the unconscious man's head.

Peter paused a moment before he set his gun against the door jamb. "Get him in here. Sally, clear the table and get some towels," Peter called out as he

helped the men carry the injured man into the cabin.

A few minutes later the unconscious man was on the table, the other men saying their grateful goodbyes before they left. Peter carefully ran his hands over the man's limbs before letting out a sigh of relief. "It doesn't seem anything is broken. Most likely he fell and was slipping into the chill from the snow."

The snow had melted a little around the homestead but you only had to move a few hundred yards up into the mountain to find it covering every inch. Sally nodded as she glanced at the bump on the man's head. "I'll boil some water and fetch the whiskey. We'll need to clean that up before we take him to town."

Peter shook his head on a heavy sigh. "I went by the creek this morning, Sally, it's flooded, and with the rain..."

"It will be a few days before can reach town at least," Sally finished for him.

"Exactly," Peter said as he began to remove the man's wet shoes and socks. "Help me get him into bed."

Sally huffed and puffed as she and Peter moved the large unconscious frame into the spare bed. Once he was settled she headed to the kitchen to busy herself while Peter dealt with dressing him in dry clothes.

Once she had the water boiled and a bottle of whiskey, she returned to find the man still unconscious. She carefully cleaned the wound on his head which soon revealed a large laceration. She doused it with whiskey only to have their ward curse even as he shot straight up in the bed. "What was that 'fer?"

"You've got a cut on your head, now lie down and let my wife take care of it," Peter said firmly, pushing him back onto the bed.

The man was clearly confused and exhausted because as Sally worked on his wound, he quickly fell asleep again. This time his breathing was steadier and his color began to return. When she was finished, they draped two of

their thickest blankets over him, and then they headed back to the kitchen.

“Do you know him?” Sally asked as she washed the soiled towel.

“No, hardly ever know the men that come through here. They come from all over these parts, believing these mountains have the best to offer by the way of fur.” Peter sighed heavily. “What they don’t know is that the mountain is all but untouched because it’s too dangerous.”

“What men wouldn’t do for money,” Sally said under her breath.

“Yes. We’ll have to keep an eye on him but I think a good rest and some warmth might just be what he needs. That cut will need cleaning though.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Sally said, smiling as she wrung out the towel. “You’re a good man, Peter. Not everyone would take in strangers and care for them.”

“I’m all they’ve got on this side of the mountain, if I turn them away and leave them for dead I won’t be able to sleep at night,” Peter admitted quietly.

Sally nodded with a smile. “Like I said: you’re a good man.”

It still baffled Sally how her feelings had grown for Peter over the last few months. She loved him with all her heart and couldn’t wait to have a family of their own. This might not be the life she had imagined for herself, but it was one that brought her happiness. More happiness than she’d ever hoped for before.

“We might want to try to get him to eat some of that soup later on,” Peter said casting a worried glance towards the room.

“Yes, I’ll see if I can get him to eat. Why don’t you sit down and have some tea now? You’ve had a busy morning even before he was brought to our door,” Sally offered.

Peter smiled at her with love in his gaze. “You say I’m a good man, Sally, but I’m only a good man because I found the right woman.”

When they heard a groan from the bed, Peter stood up. “Best go see if our patient wants some tea as well.”

Sally nodded as she turned her attention back to the soup. It might be a

while before they could get him to see the doctor in town, but until then she and Peter would do everything they could to save his life.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



For three days their patient was in and out of consciousness, sometimes for ten minutes, sometimes only for a minute, but every day his color and injuries seemed to improve. While Peter shoveled snow as the winter set in, she made sure to keep the cabin warm and their patient tended.

On the morning of the fourth day, Peter had made his way to check whether the creek was passable while Sally fussed about the house. In the months since her arrival on Snow's Rest, she had made curtains for all the windows and was now knitting a blanket for Peter to use whenever he sat by the fire at night.

The click-clack of the knitting needles was soothing as the fire crackled in the hearth. The snow had stopped falling during the night and although the skies were crisp blue, it had brought with it a cold that seemed to slip into the bones. As she knitted, she kept spreading the blanket over her lap reminding herself to find warmer undergarments when they were next in town.

Completely absorbed with the task at hand, she didn't hear the footsteps that sounded behind her in the hallway.

"Hello?"

The deep voice had her dropping the needles as she spun around to see her patient standing in the hallway. "You're awake?"

He cleared his throat and dragged a hand through his sleep matted hair. “Yes, I... how long was I out for?”

Sally shrugged as she set her knitting aside and stood up, hoping to be close enough should he keel over. “Three days since you’ve been here, I’m not sure how long before that. Maybe you should sit down, we don’t want you cutting your head again.”

As she said the words, his hand tentatively touched his head to inspect the wound. “Don’t remember that happening,” he grunted as he pulled out a chair and sank heavily into it.

“Would you like some tea, maybe something to eat? I’ve been feeding you soup whenever you were awake, but that never lasted long.” She felt herself growing nervous in the presence of the stranger.

Over the last few days, he had been unconscious most of the time but now it dawned on her that she was completely alone in the cabin with a man she didn’t know, and she had no idea when Peter would be returning. She glanced over her shoulder and couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy at the shifty look in his beady brown eyes.

“That would be swell, thanks,” he said letting out a heavy sigh. “How did I get here?”

“Some men... I think they were fur trappers, found you on some or other ledge. I’m sorry, I don’t know much about the mountain.”

The man let out a heavy sigh. “Yes, neither did I, still don’t. Don’t know if I should be more grateful to you for nursin’ me back to health or to those men for finding me after being lost on the mountain for months.”

Sally’s eyes widened as she turned to look at him. “You were lost on the mountain?”

“Didn’t think it would be too much trouble to trap a few furs and make some money, but I quickly learned that as soon as you’re in the thick of it, everything looks the same. You can hardly see the sky, so thick is the tree canopy. Soon I wasn’t sure if I was heading north or west or just walking

circles...”

“That’s horrible, I’m so sorry to hear that. How long were you up there?”

The man rubbed his beard and shook his head. “What month is it?”

“November, early November,” Sally said as she carried the tea and a plate of last night’s leftovers to the table.

He frowned and shook his head as if unable to believe it. “About five to six months then. Didn’t feel that long. I kept hoping to find someone that could lead me down the mountain, but the only breathin’ things I found wanted to eat me. Met a bear and a couple of mountain lions; got stalked by some wolves for a week...” he trailed off, struggling to fathom the amount of time he had lost.

Sally couldn’t help but feel sorry for him as she took a seat at the table. “That’s a very long time to be lost. I didn’t realize the mountain was that big.”

“It’s a range really. Not just one peak, but many peaks and they all look the same. After a while, I wasn’t sure which one I crossed first. Then when the snow came a few weeks back... everything turned white. I found a cave and took shelter but knew I couldn’t spend the winter there. I hunted a few rabbits, strung ‘em up, and set off to find my way down. Thought I was headin’ in the right direction when I started down that ledge.”

“Apparently you were because those other men found you,” Sally added. “You’re lucky to be alive. I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“Sid,” he said gruffly as he plowed into the bread. He ate with such an appetite that Sally stood up and began preparing him another sandwich as she wondered when Peter might return from the creek.

“You out here all alone, miss?” he asked in a tone that made Sally’s skin crawl.

“No, my husband will be back shortly. He is just checking on something in the barn.” It was a lie but right now Sally needed to make it clear to this stranger at her table that she wouldn’t be taken advantage of.

“That’s good, dangerous out here for a woman to be all alone... what’s your name, miss?”

Sally turned, praying that Peter would return shortly. “Sally.”

Sid’s eyes widened before he began to chuckle. “There was a time I thought I’d marry a Sally.”

Sally’s heart began to race even as she realized that Sid must be the Sydney Flanders she had traveled West to marry. She didn’t say a word, remaining frozen to the spot as Sid continued to speak.

“Got the thought of marrying earlier this year. Corresponded with her by way of letters and all. After some time, I proposed and was eagerly awaiting her arrival. That’s when I decided to head up the mountain... Now I’ll never know what happened to her.”

Sally swallowed past the bile that rose in her throat, realizing that Sid had no idea that she was in fact the Sally in question. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said primly, quickly turning so that he couldn’t read the lie on her face.

“Yes, so am I. So am I,” Sid said heavily.

The door opened and Peter stepped inside. “You’re up, good to see you back on your feet.” He smiled at Sally before moving to the stranger. “Peter Snow, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The man stood up and proved to be taller than Peter and wider at the shoulders. “Sydney Flanders. I’m obliged to you and your wife for taking care of me.”

“It was our pleasure,” Peter said kindly before shaking his head. “Although I’m afraid you’ll be stuck with our company for a while yet.” He turned to Sally with a heavy sigh. “The creek is completely flooded. Probably the early snows, not sure when we’ll be able to get down the mountain now.”

Sally kept her smile in place although she was already praying for the level of the creek to recede so that Sydney Flanders and her guilt could leave this happy place she now called home.

CHAPTER 13



Sally couldn't wait for Sid to go back to bed. Although she was grateful that he was feeling better, she couldn't help but fear that he would learn that she was the Sally he was meant to marry. She feared too that Peter would feel betrayed.

All through dinner Sally kept glancing between the two men, knowing she had made the right choice, but now she had to make sure that Peter felt the same. For a brief few seconds, she considered keeping the information to herself, but it only took remembering the vows she made to Peter to know that she never could.

Sid had plenty of stories over dinner about his time on the mountain. He entertained them with tales of rabbits and bears, and how he had fought against the elements to survive. Peter seemed enthralled but Sally was too anxious about having Sid in her home to feel anything but dread that her secret would be revealed before she had a chance to talk to Peter.

She waited until Sid retired for the night before she sought out Peter. "Peter, would you mind taking a walk with me?"

Peter looked baffled at the request. "Outside? Sally, it's freezing. Come sit here by the fire with me instead."

Sally shook her head. "Please."

She wasn't sure if it was because of the pleading tone of her voice or the

tears that had already welled in her eyes, but Peter nodded and stood up. Relieved, Sally led him out of the cabin and off the porch and started towards the barn.

“Sally?” Peter asked as he walked beside her.

Sally shook her head. “Not yet, let’s get to the barn first.”

As soon as they were inside the barn, the scent of feed, horses and chickens eased her anxiety. She drew in a deep breath and turned to her husband. “Peter, there is something I need to tell you.”

Peter frowned. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it can’t be that bad.”

Sally felt a tear slip over her cheek. “It’s worse.” She found a seat on a sack of grain but quickly stood and began to pace again. “I wasn’t completely honest with you about my reasons for coming to Fort Vancouver.”

Peter nodded, giving her a chance to explain.

Sally began at the beginning, about her marriage to Frederick. As she spoke of the beautiful brownstone home and Frederick’s continued absences until the day he left for good, she felt the burden start to ease. The hardest part was yet to come, but she hoped that Peter would understand.

“The Harrington’s blamed me for Frederick’s leaving. They banished me to the servant’s quarters and, although I had room and board, it was no type of life at all.”

“That’s terrible, I’m so sorry to hear that. Why didn’t you just return home?” Peter asked reaching for her.

Sally took a step back, not ready to have him console her just yet. “My parents both passed on, I didn’t have a home to return to. I learned from a friend about the Matrimonial Times....”

Peter’s eyes widened with a gasp. “Mail order brides?”

Sally nodded. “Yes. It wasn’t how I planned to find my future but it felt like I had no other choice. I began corresponding with a man who seemed kind. We corresponded for more than a month before he proposed. At first I wanted to say no, but I knew I had no opportunities available to me in

Boston, so I accepted.”

Peter’s jaw clenched even as his hands fisted. “What happened then?”

“I took the wagon train West, hoping my new husband would be kind and that I would find love...” Sally sighed. “But when I arrived in Fort Vancouver he was nowhere to be found. I waited for days, but he never came. Finally, I asked Annie for a position at the boarding house, realizing that I’d come West for no reason at all. Then I met you...”

Peter sighed and rubbed a hand over his tired eyes. “Then we got married and you still don’t know what happened to the man you were supposed to marry?”

Sally’s gaze darted towards the cabin and Peter quickly realized exactly what had happened. “You were supposed to marry Sid? Sid was the man with whom you corresponded?”

Sally couldn’t stop the tears from rushing over her cheeks. “I never planned for this to happen. When he didn’t come to collect me from the wagon train I just accepted that he wasn’t interested. I thought that he must have decided that he didn’t want a wife after all. I never once heard mention of his name in town and so I just accepted that he wasn’t coming back for me.”

Peter’s gaze was unmoving, his expression not indicating his feelings. Sally felt her dream life start to shatter into pieces when he suddenly stood up and reached for both her hands. “Does he know?”

Sally shook her head. “No, he mentioned that he had once corresponded with a woman by the name of Sally, but I don’t think he knows.”

“Then we keep it that way. Although he seems like a nice man I have a feeling Sydney Flanders can be quite unforgiving when he wants to be. As long as he doesn’t know, there is nothing to worry about.”

Sally sniffed. “But, Peter, if he finds out...”

“He can’t do anything. I realized this morning that the Sydney Flanders we’re taking care of is the same Sinister Sid that usually makes trouble at the

saloon. Not one person in town will take his side if it comes to that. Besides, he can't force you to divorce me and marry him; it's preposterous."

"I feel like I've betrayed you," Sally admitted quietly.

Peter brushed away a stray tear and smiled affectionately. "You did what you thought was right. You had no idea he was lost on the mountain and I'm sure if you knew about Sinister Sid's reputation, you wouldn't have accepted his proposal. Everything happens for a reason, Sally, and Sid might be the reason you came to Fort Vancouver but I was always your destiny. Just like you're mine."

Sally smiled through her tears. "I was so scared you'd be angry and tell me to pack my things."

"How could I? I love you, Sally Snow, more than I ever thought loving could be possible. We're facing this together, if it comes to that. But I honestly believe that it's best if we keep this to ourselves."

Sally nodded as she stepped into her husband's embrace. She felt terrible for betraying Sid, but she couldn't help but admit that she didn't want to chance her fate with his wrath if he were to find out her true identity.

CHAPTER 14



Sid was grateful for the care from Sally and Peter but he couldn't help but envy Peter's relationship with his wife. Sid had never wanted love or family. When he had placed the advertisement for a bride, it had only been a means to an end. An end that would've secured him the parcel of land he had dreamed of for so long.

But as he watched Peter and Sally interact, he couldn't help but wonder what might have come about had he been in town when his mail-order bride arrived. Perhaps he might have found the companionship Peter had with his wife. Perhaps he might have found love.

Time passed slowly, the routine more or less the same every day. When he woke in the mornings he would join Peter and Sally for breakfast. Soon after, Peter would see to the morning chores and shovel any snow blocking entry to the cabin or the barn before, and then he would walk to the creek to see if it was passable.

Although neither Sally nor Peter stated their concern about the creek's level and being unable to get to town, Sid couldn't help but notice that the meals were becoming ever less substantial. Sooner or later they would need to get to town for rations, whether they admitted it or not. Sid also knew that his presence had impacted their supplies heavily.

His dreams of making money with the furs he brought down from the

mountain had long since been shattered. During his first week on the mountain he had hunted, and over the following five months he had simply tried to survive. It was the bear's fault, he mused as he sat by the fire watching the flames crackle in the hearth.

He could still remember aiming at that otter in one of the mountain streams. Otter pelts were sought after and reached a good price, as long as your aim was true and you didn't harm the pelt in the process of culling it. Sid knew that trappers usually used traps, but as he had no experience with them he had taken his shotgun hoping to hit a couple right in the eye.

It had been summer and sweat had been trickling down his back and into his eyes even as he took his aim. At first he didn't think much of the branches rustling behind him. He didn't even turn to look when he heard the forest floor bristle under the weight of something big. In his mind, he had thought it to be another trapper coming to shoot the breeze. Spending so much time on the mountain could make a man lonely and even Sid was eager for a little conversation, but first he wanted to take his shot. He had his finger on the trigger when the deathly roar sounded behind him.

The shotgun dropped from his hands even as he scampered to the bank of the creek with the large grizzly towering over him. Sid had heard of vicious bears, tall as mountains but he had never believed the stories to be true. Until one of those bears was drooling over him, fangs already snapping at him.

He began to run, first into the creek and then across the bank and into the forest. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to lose the bear. That's when he saw the ravine and the ledge. He jumped, hung on for dear life, and edged himself onto the ledge. The bear growled overhead, furious at having lost its lunch. Eventually, it gave up and left. After a few hours of making sure the bear was gone, Sid made his way down the ravine and that was when he realized he had no idea where he was.

From there it had been a constant battle through the wilderness, fighting for his life as he tried to find a way off the mountain. He blamed the bear, not

himself because if it hadn't been for the bear he would've shot the otters and returned home a wealthy man.

Sid let out a sigh of disappointment at his fate when Peter joined him by the fire.

"I've got good news," Peter said crossing his legs at the ankles.

Sid turned to him with a hopeful expression. "The creek gone down yet?"

"Yes, we ought to be able to cross it tomorrow," Peter said with a relieved smile. "I'm sure you're eager to get home after being away for so many months?"

Sid nodded. "Very much so."

"Well, we're going to turn in. Good night, Sid." Peter stood up and headed to his room.

Sid watched the fire for a while longer, thinking of all he wanted to do when he got home. His homestead must be overgrown and untended, the house probably taken over by raccoons or worse, he thought with a heavy sigh. It was in the dead of winter and he wouldn't be able to do much now but he'd pick up some work in town to tide him over until he could tend the land again.

After a while he stood up, added a few logs to the fire, and headed to his room for his final night. Tomorrow he could finally put the whole mountain ordeal behind him, and hopefully find a new mail-order bride to help him secure the parcel of land adjacent to his.

He was just about to open his door when he heard murmurs from Peter and Sally's room. Curious as to what they were secretly murmuring, he stood still and listened. Sid had never believed that eavesdropping was wrong, seeing it as people saying what they shouldn't within earshot of innocent bystanders.

"He'll be gone tomorrow, Sally, then we can get one with our lives," Peter's voice sounded in hushed tones.

"I'm just glad he hasn't found out yet. If he does... Peter, I can't imagine

what he'll do." Sally sounded distraught.

"He'll never find out that you are the mail order bride he sent for. Unless we tell him and we won't. No one else knows. Your secret is safe."

Sid's vision turned red as he put two and two together. The woman he had sent for had gone and married another man in his absence. For a moment he wanted to tear down the door and curse both Peter and Sally for lying to him, but his rash temper had only brought him trouble in the past.

Instead, he opened the door to his room and slipped inside. He would get her back, but first he needed a plan. A plan they would never expect and when he executed it, he would leave Peter feeling as betrayed as he felt now.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



As the old year made way for the new, the love between Sally and Peter was deeper than ever before. They had shared their first Christmas and, with the joy of the season brightening their lives, had come to forget about Sinister Sid and his recovery under their care.

For the first days after Sid left, Sally had been on edge, afraid that something horrible would happen to either her or Peter. But as the days passed and all was well, she felt at ease knowing that Sid was none the wiser as to her identity or her reasons for traveling to Fort Vancouver.

Sally stopped the wagon outside the physician's office, feeling her tummy flutter excitedly. She had told Peter that she had to be in town to help Annie at the boarding house, but she had actually planned to see the physician. Sally suspected she knew exactly what was ailing her but she wanted the doctor to confirm her suspicions before she shared the wonderful news with Peter.

The doctor asked her a few questions, conducted a thorough exam, and then invited her to sit with him at his desk. "So, Mrs. Snow, I'm sure you know what's been troubling you."

Sally felt her heart begin to race. "Nothing that can't be healed in nine months?" she asked hopefully.

The doctor let out a soft chuckle. "Exactly. More like seven, if my calculations are correct."

Sally laughed clapping her hands with glee. Ever since the day she had said her vows to Peter she had looked forward to the day she could give him this happy news. The news that they would finally have a family of their own. “Thank you, doctor. Is there anything I shouldn’t do during the pregnancy?”

The doctor shrugged. “I wouldn’t go climbing mountains but other than that, just rest and eat healthily. I’d like you to stop by again in a couple of months just so I can look you over.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Sally said already thinking about how she would tell Peter the happy news. She walked back to the wagon with a skip in her step. For a moment she considered telling Annie about the baby right now but decided Peter deserved to be the first to know. She was just about to hoist herself up into the wagon when she felt someone grabbing her by the waist. Before she could scream for help, she felt the butt of a gun in her side. “One wrong move and you’ll wish you never answered my advertisement.”

She recognized the voice and could hear the malice in it. Her heart began to race even as her throat closed up with fear. Had it been any other day, she would’ve fought. She would’ve fought with everything she had to be free of the man known as Sinister Sid, but today wasn’t that day.

Today she had learned that she was responsible for more than just her own life; she was responsible for the life growing inside her. She wouldn’t dare risk her child’s life. She would do as she was told and wait for the right time to escape from Sinister Sid’s clutches.

“That’s a good wife, now fall into step beside me. My wagon is a few yards east in the thoroughfare. If you make one wrong move, Sally, I promise it will be your last.” Sid’s voice seethed beside her ear.

Tears burned her eyes but she bit them back, knowing what was at stake. Her entire life, her future with Peter, and the life of their unborn child. She nodded and did as she was told. When they finally reached his wagon, she climbed in. She waited until he was seated before she turned to him.

“I’ll do everything you ask, I won’t cause you trouble, just answer one question for me.”

Sid shrugged. “Fine.” He took the reins and turned the wagon around, heading towards the far end of town.

“Why me? I’m married to Peter and we’re happy. Why not just find another bride? Why does it have to be me?” Sally asked, hoping that reasoning would make him see the error of his ways.

Sid turned to her with the sinister grin he was known for. “You see, that was the plan. While you so gently tended me back to health, I planned on finding a new bride. But when I realized that you deceived me, looked me in the eye without telling me the truth, I decided not to. Why go through the whole fuss of finding someone new and writing to them for months before they finally agree to a proposal? Do you know how much those letters cost me?”

“Cost you?” Sally asked, confused.

Sid laughed shaking his head. “Surely you didn’t think I wrote them. Got a man with a pretty vocabulary to impress you. But the reason I ain’t doing that is that I planned on filing for the claim on the property adjacent to mine in May. It’s January. I’ve wasted enough time. As soon as I have a marriage certificate, I can file my claim, and you owe me a marriage.”

Sally shook her head, horrified. “You sent for me simply to get a bigger parcel of land. That’s all I was to you.”

Sid shrugged. “Still is.” He slapped the reins and drove the wagon out of town. “I don’t take well to losing what’s mine. You’re mine, Sally Harrington, even if you pretend to be Sally Snow.”

Sally didn’t know where he was taking her, but she knew reasoning with a mad man was a waste of breath.

CHAPTER 16



Peter glanced towards the creek for the umpteenth time that day. Sally had left early in the morning to help Annie and had promised to be back by noon. It was already past one in the afternoon and she had yet to come back.

He couldn't help the uneasy feeling that crawled down his spine. Sally was a woman of her word and always did as she said. He understood that she might have encountered any manner of delay on her return, but he didn't feel comfortable waiting to learn what it could be. He kept himself busy for another ten minutes before he finally saddled his horse and rode into town.

Entering the town, he caught a few curious stares coming his way as he slowed the horse to a walk. He tied the horse to a post outside the boarding house and took off his hat as he stepped inside.

"Mornin', Annie. Sally still around?" Peter asked with a hopeful smile.

Annie frowned, shaking her head. "She ain't here."

"Oh, she left already?" Peter asked as that uneasy feeling started to grow.

"Never came." Annie cocked her head a little to the left. "Peter, what's goin' on? Just a while ago the teacher came in telling me she saw Sally riding out of town with Sinister Sid."

Peter's heart jumped in his throat, fear buckling his knees. "She was with Sinister Sid? She told me she was coming to help you."

“Nope, she ain’t been here.” Annie shook her head.

For a moment doubts raced through his mind. Why would Sally have lied to him? Why would she have come into town to meet with Sinister Sid without telling him? Why would she have taken off with the very man she feared would learn her true identity? None of it made sense.

He let out a heavy sigh trying to make sense of what had happened.

“Peter?” Annie asked carefully.

Peter shook his head. “I refuse to believe that she came into town to meet Sid. There must be another explanation.”

“Well, she rode out of town with him.” Annie shrugged. “Seems you’ve been jilted.”

The words stung even as the taste of bile rose in his mouth. Peter might have believed that from anyone else but not from Sally. Sally loved him and he loved her. They were building a life together. Whatever reasons she had for lying to him, he would find out, but right now he had to find her.

Sinister Sid’s reputation preceded him and Peter didn’t want to imagine his anger at learning that Sally had married another man. He couldn’t for the life of him imagine that Sally had ridden off with Sid willingly. No. Something must have happened.

“Which direction?” Peter asked already putting his hat on his head.

“East,” Annie said with a curious look. “At least I think it was east. Peter, what on earth is going on?”

Peter shook his head. “I’ll explain later. Thanks, Annie.”

Peter rushed outside and all but jumped into the saddle. He never whipped his horse, but right now he needed every ounce of energy his steed could give. He flicked the reins left and right against the horse’s neck and whistled. The horse reared, not used to the harsh treatment, and then set off at a lightning pace. Peter inched forward in the saddle, knowing that every second counted. He wasn’t sure how far ahead Sid and Sally were but he hoped the fact that they were in a wagon would give him a chance to catch up

to them before Sid did anything unthinkable.

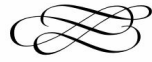
Soon, Fort Vancouver was behind him as the horse's hooves crunched over the snow. The next town was twenty miles eastwards and although Peter didn't know why Sid would be heading in that direction, he planned on catching up with them before they arrived.

As he rode, he found himself praying all the while for Sally to be safe, for Sid to be reasonable, but more than anything he prayed that he might find them as soon as possible.

A light dusting of snow began to fall, covering the wagon's tracks Peter had picked up a few miles back. He adjusted his eyes to find the tracks again, but the snow was falling too thick too quick. For a moment he feared that Sid would've veered off into the wilderness, but after having been lost on the mountain for five months, he doubted Sid would attempt facing the wilderness again.

The only place they could be headed to would be the next town. He kicked his horse again and sent up another prayer, hoping he could save his wife from whatever fate Sid had planned for her.

CHAPTER 17



Sally had never been to this town and she didn't even know its name. All that she knew was they had arrived way too soon. She hadn't known where Sid was taking her, but as they rode into town, she knew that he was feared here even more than he was feared in Fort Vancouver. Women turned away as they spotted him on the wagon beside her, some men tipped their hats, others just lowered their eyes. If Fort Vancouver was Sid's home, this was his playground.

Fear had kept her quiet for most of the journey, knowing that if she made one wrong move the gun he kept aimed at her would not only end her life but also the life of her unborn child. She was devastated and prayed for God to protect her, but even so she couldn't help but wonder if God had abandoned her because she had kept the truth from Sid for the duration of his recuperation under her care.

She thought he might take her to a boarding house or perhaps even the saloon, but the horror of what was about to unfold slammed her like a punch to the gut when he stopped outside a small chapel. She turned to him with terror in her eyes. "Sid... it won't work, I'm already married."

Sid let out a sinister chuckle. "Honey, in this town everything works the way I say it should."

Sally didn't know what he had done to have such control over the town or

how he planned on getting a pastor to marry an already married woman, but she knew it would be foolish to argue. He jumped out of the wagon and secured the horses to a small post in front of the chapel before turning to Sally with an expectant expression.

Sally shook her head. She had taken her vows with Peter with an open heart and she didn't care what Sid threatened to do, she wasn't about to annul those vows. "No."

Sid laughed shaking his head. "I was hoping you'd say that."

Before Sally knew what was happening Sid had her by the collar and he all but dragged her off the wagon. She bumped her knee so hard that her breath caught, but before she could reach for it, Sid had her by the hair and held the gun to her ribs. "Either you smile and play nice or we could have a whole lot of fun doing it my way."

Sally nodded fearing the look on his face. He enjoyed hurting her and he seemed to want to hurt her even more. She knew she had been lucky to find a man like Peter, but now she realized what her life would've been like if Sid had pitched up to collect her from the wagon train.

The snow had stopped falling and although the town was covered in a beautiful white blanket, what was about to happen would not be beautiful at all. The thought caused tears to stream from Sally's eyes as Sid dragged her into the chapel. The pastor jumped up from his seat in the front pew, his hands in the air at the sight of Sid's weapon.

"Just do as you're told and no one will get hurt," Sid shouted out to the frightened man.

"I'll pray for you if you want," the pastor offered with a shaky voice.

Sid laughed shaking his head. "You think your prayers will change my mind?"

Sally moved one foot in front of the other knowing that any resistance would only anger him more. When they reached the front of the chapel she caught the terrified look on the pastor's face. If she had thought that he would

see reason, she had been wrong. Ever since they had ridden out of Fort Vancouver she had believed that the pastor would protect her or even try to defend her. Now she realized that not even a pastor in a chapel could stand up to a man like Sid when he had a weapon in his hand.

“I uhm... what can I do ‘fer ya?” The pastor asked all but cowering beneath Sid’s angry look.

“You see, preacher, I got myself a problem right here. This little lady was supposed to marry me, you see. I sent for her all the way from Boston, planned on giving her a good life at that. Then I happened to find myself lost on the mountain for a few months only to find my way back and learn that she’d gone and married another fella.”

The preacher’s head bobbed up and down. “I can see why that would upset you.”

Feeling the preacher’s scrutinous gaze turn to her, Sally shook her head. “It wasn’t like that at all. I arrived in Fort Vancouver and he wasn’t there. I had to put myself up in the boarding house not knowing what was to become of me. I waited for weeks, months even, but he never came. I met someone else, a good man, pastor, a very good man. We fell in love and got married. I honestly didn’t think that Sid would ever come for me.”

“But as fate would have it, I was delivered right to her door with an injury, only to learn that my bride had taken another man. That ain’t right now, is it, preacher?” Sid asked pointing the gun at the preacher. Sally knew it didn’t matter what the preacher wanted to answer, he would say anything Sid wanted to hear.

“No, no, no, I can’t see how it is,” the preacher stammered.

“So, you see, preacher, I’m here to right a wrong,” Sid said with a malicious grin. “You’re gonna annul her vows to this other man and make her my wife, just like it was intended to be when I sent for her.”

The preacher cleared his throat. “Annulment takes a while. I’m not sure it can all be done today...”

Sid cried out loud enough in anger to make both the preacher and Sally jump with fear. “You’ll do it today or you won’t see the light of another day.”

The preacher nodded. “I’ll need to fetch my register.”

“You do that,” Sid said with a pleased grin. “Then we best get this weddin’ on the way. It’s a long way home...”

Sally crossed her fingers hoping the preacher managed to escape and summon the sheriff. Even as the thought occurred to her Sid began to chuckle. “Why you think I brought you here?”

Sally didn’t move knowing he was going to give her the answer anyway.

“They ain’t got no sheriff, honey,” Sid snickered.

Sally felt the ball of nerves in her tummy coil even tighter. If there was no law in this town, it meant Sid could do whatever he pleased. She glanced up at the wooden cross that hung at the front of the church. Closing her eyes, she took a steadying breath and prayed for God to find a way to save her from this horrible situation.

The preacher returned a few seconds later with a large book in his hand. “I just need to record the lady’s name along with her husband’s so I can file the annulment.”

“Peter Snow. Annie Harrington,” Sid said, surprising Sally with his memory.

“Right, right,” the preacher said as he scribbled in the register. “Your name?”

“Sydney Flanders,” Sid said impatiently. “Is this going to take long?”

“Just another minute or so,” the preacher said, scribbling furiously. Sally wasn’t sure if he was buying time or if he was simply being thorough, but with every second that passed, she prayed that something would happen that would stop the wedding from going through. She didn’t want to say vows to Sid, she didn’t want to break her vows to Peter, and knowing she was with child made the situation all the worse.

In that moment Sally knew that she’d rather face the pearly gates than

have her child raised by a ruthlessly mean man like Sydney Flanders. She drew in a deep breath, summoned all her courage, and planned to make her escape. If it meant risking being shot, she'd rather suffer the buckshot than marry him.

She quickly glanced around at the exits and noticed only two. The one through which they had entered and a small door to her right. If she could manage to get to that door, she might just be able to escape.

She saw Sid's attention was firmly on the preacher and knew it was now or never. Sally shrugged free from his grasp and began to run, but before she could reach the door she heard Sid's footsteps close in on hers. She tried to reach for the door handle as he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her back towards him.

"Not so fast, Sally, we haven't said our vows yet." His breath reeked, but it was the vicious look in his eyes that made Sally's breath catch. She already knew that Sid wouldn't think twice about killing her once he had the deed to the land adjacent to his. She was nothing to him, a means to an end, and once she had served her purpose he wouldn't hesitate getting rid of her.

Resigned, tired and fearing for the life of her baby, tears slipped over her cheeks as she followed Sid back to the preacher.

CHAPTER 18



*P*eter rode into the town and kept his eyes peeled for the wagon Annie had described. He hadn't been to this town before and had no clue where to start searching, but he already knew he wouldn't give up until he knew Sally was safe.

He had heard about this lawless town east of Fort Vancouver and how travelers tended to avoid it. Now he found himself in the thick of it. It was a haven for outlaws, a stopover for highwaymen, a place of gambling and sacrilegious deeds, somewhere he didn't want to spend a moment longer than he had to.

On the ride from Fort Vancouver, he tried to reason why Sally might have lied to him. He couldn't understand why she had lied about seeing Annie since she hadn't been to Annie at all. The only explanation was that she had never made it to Annie's or that she had always planned on meeting Sid. The latter didn't sit right with him. The Sally he knew and loved would never betray him like this. She had to be under duress or worse.

He slowed the horse's pace to a walk, searching for the wagon, but he couldn't see it anywhere. Fear began to grasp at his throat as he suspected the worst: Sid didn't stop here, he just kept going. If he had kept going the chances of Peter ever finding Sally was slim to none. On the outskirts of the town, travelers had the option of taking one of four directions and Peter

didn't have a posse that could split up to help him find his wife. He reached the end of the thoroughfare feeling disappointed as he turned his horse back around. He would need to find men willing to help him search the other roads, he decided. While the horse turned, Peter caught sight of a wagon in a side road.

His brows drew together as he noticed the building and the pitch.

A chapel!

He kicked the horse in the flank and began to race towards the chapel knowing exactly what Sid had planned. He was out of the saddle and running before the horse even stopped. He kicked open the chapel doors only to see a tearful Sally standing at Sid's side and a preacher holding a bible as he read the vows.

His imposing entrance drew three pairs of eyes to him. Sally's face was awash with relief. "Peter!"

Peter had never been one for violence but at that moment he wanted to hurt Sid. He remembered where he was and swallowed back the urge as he walked towards his wife. He took Sally's hand and searched her face. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm sorry, you're interrupting our wedding," Sid said in a sickly sweet voice tinged with malice.

"You're not marrying my wife," Peter said evenly. He turned, hearing footsteps behind him, only to see a small crowd gathered at the entrance of the chapel. Sally sniffed quietly beside him. Although there were so many questions he wanted answers to, Peter knew that had to wait. First, he had to get his wife out of Sid's reach.

"She's not your wife. Isn't that right, preacher?" Sid asked the man with the bible.

Peter frowned turning to the preacher, seeing his hands quivering with fear. He had been confused as to why Sid would want to kidnap Sally but now it all began to make sense. He had heard that Sid had been trying to put a

claim in for the land adjacent to his for a while now. As soon as he had a marriage certificate in his hand he could file for the extra land grant. He squared his shoulders, knowing that he wouldn't let Sid use his wife as a pawn to get more land. "That's not going to happen."

The preacher didn't say a word, shrugging and unsure who was more dangerous: the man who had threatened him with a gun or the man who had just stumbled into the church.

"Peter, he had our wedding annulled," Sally revealed. "I said no, Peter. I did, but he wouldn't listen. He threatened the preacher."

The preacher's head suddenly bobbed up and down in agreement. "I had no choice."

"It's not that easy to annul a wedding," Peter said firmly. "He has to file papers and send them away first." Peter dragged Sally away from Sid.

Sally's eyes brightened with hope. "Is that true?"

The preacher shrugged, afraid to admit that Peter was in fact right.

"You stole her!" Sid cried out in rage.

"She chose me," Peter said turning to Sally. "Tell the preacher that, tell him you chose me."

"I did," Sally said as tears streamed over her cheeks. "I chose Peter. You can't make me marry Sid."

The preacher shrugged pathetically, cringing beneath Sid's terrifying look. "I.. I don't want to die."

Sid's eyes narrowed with fury as he stepped up to Peter, their faces barely inches apart. Peter knew he had to be afraid but he was too angry to feel fear. This man had not only kidnapped his wife, but he had dragged her to a chapel in another town and forced her to do away with the vows she had spoken with him. "You're not going to get away with this. She's coming with me," Peter said quietly, in a tone of voice reminiscent of a caged tiger. Once the latch on the gate was released there was no stopping that wrath.

"I'd rather kill her than see her married to you," Sid said under his breath.

His voice was softer now, but no less mean. The threat remained clear as he held the gun firmly in his hand.

Peter knew that he could shoot him at any moment and be done with it, but he had to believe that good would prevail over evil. God wouldn't let a man like Sid win. Peter drew on the strength of his faith knowing he was standing in the house of the Lord as he met Sid's gaze again.

"You won't," Peter said turning to Sid. "This is over."

As Peter was about to turn to walk away, Sally shrugged free and dived for Sid. For a moment Peter didn't understand what was happening and then he heard the shot ring out. The preacher fell to the ground, covering his head with the bible even as Peter saw Sally and Sid fall to the ground.

If he had ever thought he knew what it felt like to be terrified, Peter now knew he'd been wrong. Nothing could have prepared him for the feeling of devastation that rushed through his body as he saw blood stain the dark wooden floors.

"Sally!" Peter rushed to her side, fearing that Sid had finally gotten his way.

CHAPTER 19



“Sally, Sally!” Peter’s voice called out as he touched her shoulder. Emotion clogged his throat even as he tried to assess where the bullet had entered her body.

Sally pushed up and rolled away from Sid, her entire dress covered with blood. Peter felt his heart racing at the thought of losing the woman he loved even as he reached for her wound.

Only when Sid groaned and cursed under his breath did Sally finally speak. “I’m not hurt. The gun... I think he shot himself,” Sally said, feeling the spot on her waist where the dark red stain had spread.

Peter turned to Sid and saw the agony on the man’s face. He quickly tugged off his jacket and pressed it to the oozing wound. The preacher sobbed quietly to one side as Peter tried to assess the extent of Sid’s injury.

Sally couldn’t stop the tears of relief washing over her cheeks as she watched Peter try to save the life of the man who had caused all this trouble in the first place. “How bad is it?”

Peter sighed shaking his head. Only then did Sally see that the shot had entered Sid’s body in the center of his chest. There was nothing to be done but watch as Sid slowly slipped away.

Sally sobbed quietly as Peter tried to staunch the bleeding but it was no use. In just a few seconds, Sid drew what would be his last breath, exhaling a

soft huff.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry... this is all my fault,” Sally cried feeling as if none of this would’ve happened had she only waited for Sid to show up.

Peter wiped his hands and turned to his wife searching her gaze. “Sally, you listen to me and you listen good. None of this is your fault. None of this.”

“He was out of his mind.” The preacher’s voice finally sounded over the cries and gasps of the small audience that had now moved into the church. “Threatened to kill me.”

“Always said Sinister Sid was a crazy man!” one of the bystanders said.

“Oh, Peter...” Sally cried.

“She stopped him from shooting you,” the preacher said quietly. “He had already taken aim when she covered the weapon with her own body.”

Peter turned to Sally admiring her strength and courage. “You saved my life.”

Sally shook her head. “You saved mine first. If you hadn’t come along... Oh, Peter, I can’t even imagine what would’ve happened.”

Peter stood up and helped Sally to her feet. “We saved each other.”

Sally nodded. “I’m so sorry for lying to you. I should’ve told you where I was going this morning. I should’ve been honest. I wanted to surprise you and then I had no way to tell you what had happened.”

Peter held her close waiting for her tears to subside before he would question her motive for lying. The crowd murmured over the body of Sid even as the preacher sent a rider to fetch the Sheriff from Fort Vancouver.

Sally was quivering in his arms, cold and terrified after a very rough afternoon. He held her even closer vowing to protect her for the rest of his life. He had known he loved her from the moment they had said their vows but for her to offer her life to save his made his feelings for her even stronger. This was the woman he was going to spend his life with. The woman he wanted to spend an eternity with.

A few women moved closer and offered to help Sally get cleaned up.

Sally refused at first, but knowing they'd need to wait for the sheriff to arrive, Peter encouraged her to go with them. While he waited for the sheriff the questions in his mind haunted him.

When Sally returned an hour later she was wearing a clean dress and her hair was neatly braided, but the distraught look on her face was still the same. He took her hand and pressed a kiss to it just as the door opened and the Sheriff walked in.

The next hour was spent explaining the events as they had unfolded: how Sid had come to learn that Sally Snow was in fact the Sally Harrington he had sent for. The sheriff made notes before turning to Peter with an even look. "We've been on Sid's trail for years now but he was slicker than a snake in summer. Couldn't tie anything to him although he's been accused of too many things to count. Good riddance is what I say."

Peter shook his head. "We didn't want it to end like this."

"I know you didn't, but I can't say it was your fault. Got me some witnesses that confirmed what you said. It ain't your fault he tried to shoot you in the back. Only a coward pulls the trigger at a man's back."

Sally sniffed quietly. "Can we go home now, Peter?"

Peter nodded and took her hand. "We've got a long way home, Sheriff, if there's anything else you need from us you know where to find us."

The Sheriff nodded. "You go on and take your wife home, Peter. I'll take care of things here."

Peter took Sally's hand and led her out of the chapel and away from the horror of it all. He helped her into the wagon before securing his horse to the rear. When he climbed into the wagon he reached for the reins before turning to Sally with an affectionate smile. "We're all right, that's all that matters."

Sally nodded before briskly shaking her head. "I owe you an explanation."

Peter shrugged. He didn't want to hear an explanation now, all he wanted was to get his wife home and to sit by the fire and forget about the whole

affair. “I don’t need one.”

“But you deserve one. I can’t imagine what you must have thought.”
Sally sighed. “How did you know Sid had taken me?”

“Annie said you never came by. I figured you either didn’t make it to her or you planned on meeting Sid,” he said quietly, hating the thought.

Sally shook her head. “I told you I had to help Annie because I didn’t want you to know that I went to see the doctor. I was just leaving his office when Sid grabbed me.”

Peter pulled on the reins bringing the wagon to a stop. “Is something wrong?”

Sally’s mouth curved into a smile as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “Nothing that can’t be fixed in seven months.”

Peter drew back and searched her gaze. He remembered the large stain of blood on her dress and felt relief wash over him as he thanked the Lord for keeping her safe. “We’re expecting a baby?”

Sally laughed, the sound sweeter to Peter’s ears than the sound of the first rainfall after a long summer. “Yes, Peter. We’re having a baby.”

Peter drew her close and pressed a kiss to her head. “My beautiful brave wife. I can’t imagine how terrified you must have been knowing you were with child. He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Sally shook her head. “No. I’ll have the doctor take a look just in case but I think the baby and I are just fine.”

Peter smiled feeling his whole world shift back into place. “And that’s the way we’re going to keep it.”

EPILOGUE



Sally sat on the porch with a smile on her face as she watched Peter giving their son his first riding lesson. It was a hot day and although summer brought with it more work on the homestead especially now that they had managed to file a claim for the adjacent land as well, Peter always made time for his family.

Too many times over the last year Sally had wondered how she had managed to be blessed with such a wonderful husband. Peter was kind, generous, thoughtful and most of all he was considerate. He cared for her like no other, loved her without any hesitation, and had turned out to be a wonderful father to their young son. At just nine months old, Peter Junior already exhibited personality traits that stole every heart in town.

His laughter sounded through the air making Sally laugh in return. He was astride the saddle in front of Peter but the look of complete and utter joy on his face already spoke of the horseman he would one day become.

It was hard to think back to the day she had nearly lost a chance at this future. When Sydney Flanders had kidnapped her, Sally had thought she would never see Peter again, and yet regardless of her deceit when she had left that morning, Peter had come for her.

Those first few weeks after the incident in the chapel she had struggled with guilt over Sydney Flanders' death. It had taken her a long time to accept

that it hadn't been her fault. How was she to know that he was lost on the mountain when she had first arrived on the wagon train? She had truly believed that he had decided not to marry her, or that he had passed on during her journey west.

She couldn't be blamed for falling in love with Peter or for building a life with him. She could only thank the Lord that He had looked out for her throughout that gruesome day. For the rest of her life, she would appreciate every day knowing that it was by His grace that she had been saved by Peter and spared to give birth to their first child.

A soft chuckle escaped her as her hand bounced over her swollen belly. She hadn't thought she would be with child again so soon after Peter Junior's birth, but apparently the Lord had thought it well to bless them with another child only months after the birth of their firstborn. This time she hoped for a little girl but deep down she knew she was just grateful to have a family of her own.

She remembered her life in the south and how she had spent her summers on the plantation. She remembered her parents and how she had to leave them to travel to Boston to become a Harrington. Although her life as a Harrington had been charmed over the first few years, she had never truly been happy.

It had taken a self-made man, a farmer, to show her true love. It had taken Peter to teach her about happiness and contentment. There were still months that they struggled a little more than others, but just knowing that Peter was there to face every challenge with her eased those hard times.

Sally wasn't foolish, she knew that the future would hold more challenges, but she didn't fear them at all. She had a beautiful family, a wonderful life, and all in a place she would never have expected to find it. She waved as Peter Junior giggled, his hand in the air before Peter helped him down.

With her husband and her son walking towards the porch, Sally put the

thoughts of the past along with its troubles far from her mind and stood up to welcome them. “You’re a real little horse baby, aren’t you?”

Peter Junior held his arms out to his mother, gurgling with delight. Sally accepted his embrace and pressed her face to his neck to smell the combined scent of summer and baby.

Peter touched her shoulder in a show of affection and smiled. “Soon you’ll have to learn to ride as well. Can’t have the children riding before you do.”

Sally laughed. Ever since their wedding, Peter had hoped to teach her to ride. Although Sally looked forward to learning, there just hadn’t been occasion to do so. First, it had been due to the onset of winter and then she had been pregnant, a new mother, and now a second pregnancy. “One day, I promise.”

Together they stood as a family on the porch watching the sun paint the sky in bold and beautiful colors. A sigh of contentment escaped Sally as she turned to her husband. “Sunsets were never this beautiful in Boston or in the South for that matter.”

Peter smiled and shook his head. “Amazing how happiness can change the way you look at the world. I never noticed these sunsets before I found you. You’ve made me appreciate the beauty in life because you’ve brought beauty into my world.”

The words were so unexpected from a plain man such as Peter, which made them mean so much more. “Peter, that’s a beautiful thing to say.”

Peter shrugged. “I guess it’s time I said something else.”

Sally frowned wondering what was on his mind. “What is it?”

“While I was in the war, a friend and I invested money in a mine. It was more a joke, to be honest. We were young, terrified of dying, and thought that if we invested in the future we might actually have one. We never thought anything would come of it...” Peter smiled. “Something did come of it, Sally. I received a letter yesterday informing me that the mine has proved

to have more gold than ever expected. Dividends will start paying out next month.”

Sally’s eyes narrowed. “You invested in a mine? How much are the dividends?”

Peter laughed, unable to believe the words he was about to say. “Enough to add some rooms to the cabin, maybe another barn, and enough to cover it should we want to buy all the land adjacent to ours.”

Sally’s eyes widened. She had never equated wealth with happiness, but knowing that they had just been blessed with wealth as well made her squeal with joy. “That’s wonderful, Peter. But promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“We’ll donate money to the chapel as well. The Lord only blesses those who bless others.”

Peter nodded slipping an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll donate as much as you want. You’re a good woman, my woman.”

Sally laughed. It was a phrase he had used for the first time on the night he had saved her from Sydney Flanders and it had become a phrase that made her feel loved, cherished, and protected.

“And you’re my man.” She smiled, leaning into her husband.

Sally watched the sun set in the distance and realized that she might have had a rocky start to life, but from here it could only be as beautiful as the setting sun.

THE UNWANTED BRIDE'S SAVIOR



OceanofPDF.com

MAIL ORDER BRIDE

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



Molly Ryan had flour up to her elbows. A damp tendril of hair was plastered to her glistening forehead. Even though it was chilly outside, the bakery ovens and the effort of kneading tomorrow's dough kept her warm. She paused for a moment to brush her hair away from her face, leaving a streak of flour across her cheek. Daniel, the paper boy, rushed into the bakery, letting the door crash closed behind him.

"Miss Ryan! Miss Ryan!" cried the small, dirty paper boy.

"Sakes alive, Daniel," said Molly Ryan, not a little irritated at the interruption. "What's got into you?"

The boy again gulped and said, "You need to come. Now."

Molly dropped everything. Quite literally. The dough she had been kneading was now on the floor. There was only one reason for Daniel to be running in like this. "Gram?" she asked.

Daniel nodded.

Molly ripped off her apron and left the bakery at a sprint. She ran the few blocks home, not caring that her hair had fallen loose; not caring about the glares from disapproving women and stares from admiring men. This might be it for Gram. Molly would never forgive herself if she was not there when Gram...but she couldn't think of it. It was a matter of minutes before she was in their small, tenement apartment.

“Gram?” Molly couldn't believe how small her grandmother looked. Tears welled up in her eyes as she knelt beside the bed. Gram's weak, bony hands were resting on a newspaper, as usual. Molly moved the paper, placed it on the stack next to the bed and took her grandmother's hands in her own. “Gram?”

Gram's eyelids fluttered open, and Molly breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't gone. Yet. Gram's yellowed eyes caught Molly's blue ones, and she smiled weakly. “Molly,” Gram whispered, “Remember, lass. Your Father knoweth what thing you have need of, before ye ask Him.” Gram stopped for a moment to catch her breath, and then continued, “You're a good girl, my Molly. The Lord knows you deserve a good life. He'll bring ya one, lass, and ye must take it when He does.” With her last breath, she whispered, “I love ya, Molly Girl,” and then she was gone.

It was two days after the funeral before Molly noticed the paper. Molly had spent the previous week getting Gram ready for a proper funeral. Gram deserved at least that, even if it did cost Molly every penny of her savings. Instead of resting, Molly chose to work. She was cleaning their home, going through Gram's few treasures, and looking for keepsakes. She had gone through almost everything, leaving the stack of newspapers for last. Molly knew that Gram loved reading “the papes,” as Daniel called them. Molly suspected that Gram started taking the paper because she liked Daniel's incessant chatter, but in the end, she ended up enjoying the actual reading of them. She had refused to allow Molly to burn them before her death, so the stack had grown quite tall.

Molly looked at the stack and wondered if she should just throw out the lot and save herself some time. But no. As silly as it seemed, the papers were a favorite of Gram's, and she felt she owed it to Gram to at least go through them. She sat on the floor of her tenement and pulled her grandmother's “papes” toward her and glanced at the paper on the top of the pile. It was the paper her grandmother had been holding right before her death. *The*

Matrimonial Times? What in the world was this? Molly began reading and became more and more shocked with every line. Then she became indignant. Just what did Gram think she was doing?

The Matrimonial Times was a paper dedicated to advertisements for wives. Some entries had been circled, and judging by the shakiness of the line, Gram had circled them herself. The more she read, the more Molly's exasperation grew. Why in the world would Gram's last act be to marry Molly off? She couldn't help but be offended.

"Widower Seeking Mother for His Children, Montana Territory," Molly read out loud. Another offered, "Texas Rancher in Need of a Wife. Must Be Good at Cleaning." For the first time since her Grandmother's death, Molly wished that Gram was alive for the sole purpose of scolding her.

There was no way on God's green earth Molly would marry some desperate man out West who was looking for nothing more than a free nanny or a housekeeper. One last ad was circled in her grandmother's shaky hand: "30-year-old sheriff looking to share his love, life, and soul with a wife in Dead Water Creek."

Well now, this one didn't sound *that* bad. Molly shook her head, chiding herself at that stray thought. There was no reason for her to leave her home. Life was perfectly fine here in New York. All alone. Without family and next to no friends...

Something was familiar in that last line. Hadn't she heard of Dead Water Creek before? She knew she had, but she was too exhausted to try to remember. Well, it didn't matter; it was nothing to her.

Daniel knocked on Molly's door and came in. "Hello, Miss Molly. Is there anything you need help with?"

Molly smiled as she stood and stretched, "No, I don't think so, Daniel. I'm finishing up here." She paused, looking around her, and her eyes fell upon the papers again. Something was nagging her. "Actually, Daniel, maybe you can. Have you ever heard of Dead Water Creek?"

“Sure, I have!” said Daniel, “Don’t you remember? That’s the place Sally Walsh ran off to. She found herself a husband through the papes and up and left last year.”

“Oh, my goodness, that’s right,” said Molly. How could she have forgotten? She had been friendly with Sally Walsh, and it had been such a surprise to everyone. Sally Walsh had worked in the laundry next to the bakery before up and heading off to Dead Water Creek to be married. “Daniel, you know something?” Molly declared.

“What, Miss?”

“Sometimes I think my grandmother was crazy.” And then, for the first time since Gram died, Molly sat down and cried.

MOLLY COULDN’T SLEEP that night. She missed Gram very much, but she was also angry and hurt. How dare her grandmother try to marry her off to some Wild West cowboy? Why in the world did Gram think that was a good idea? It’s not as if I can’t find a husband on my own, she fumed. There had been plenty of offers; with her flaming curls and bright, clear blue eyes, Molly was never short of suitors. She had refused them all to take care of her grandmother. Well, that and because the suitors had all be stupid and drunk most of the time.

Molly was irritated at the idea that Gram thought that she couldn’t find a man of her own. To be honest, it was a relief to be irritated instead of sad, so Molly indulged in it. There is absolutely no reason, Molly thought, to be wandering off into the Wild West for some cowboy husband out in the middle of nowhere.

Molly’s thoughts came to an abrupt halt at that. The middle of nowhere. Meaning, lots of space. That was interesting. What would that be like, to be able to look for miles and see nothing but grass and sky? No. Absolutely not. Who wants to be housekeeper for some man’s sprawling ranch house? She

was better off working in the bakery. Every day. In the heat. Then come home to a very small tenement apartment that she could barely afford.

Molly looked around her. The bed took up almost the whole room. There was a small stove in the corner, too small to give off much heat. She shared a water closet with twenty other people. A house with actual rooms, even small rooms, sounded luxurious. But Molly knew that she could never marry any person she did not love. And who, really, could fall in love through letters? Except...she could imagine herself loving a man who said things like “share my love, life and soul with a wife.” That didn’t sound like someone who was horrible.

But it was ridiculous. Molly put the idea out her mind and closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep. She tossed and turned. She counted sheep. She even cried a little. She was so tired. Finally, Molly lay on her back and looked at the ceiling. “Alright, Lord. What do You and Gram want me to do?” she said out loud.

She felt her muscles relax, and she began to drift away. When she was almost asleep, she thought she heard Gram’s last words: “*The Lord knows you deserve a good life. He’ll bring ya one, lass, and ye must take it when He does.*”

SHE WROTE her first letter addressed to Dead Water Creek the very next day, for the most part so that she could sleep again. She wanted the letter to be swift and impersonal. After all, she wasn’t *really* trying to get married. She was trying to appease the spirit of her grandmother. She wrote a short, impersonal letter in which she introduced herself and asked a few questions that made her sound interested, but not too much. She addressed the letter and mailed it on her way to the bakery.

Time went by quickly, and Molly fell into an easy and boring routine. She got up every morning, worked at the bakery, came home exhausted, and fell

asleep almost as soon as she lay down. In the midst of the daily monotony, Molly had almost forgotten about her letter. She only vaguely wondered about it in the few nocturnal moments while she hovered between wake and sleep.

So it was a shock when, nearly a month later, she received a letter from the sheriff of Dead Water Creek. She was standing in the doorway of her tenement, unable to enter the room with the letter. It was as if the moment was too shocking, too big, for that tiny space. She didn't know what to do. Open it, of course. That's what she should do. But...what if the sheriff didn't like her? Then, annoyed at her own silliness, Molly ripped open the letter with trembling hands and began to read:

Dear Miss Ryan,

I was so pleased to receive your letter in this morning's mail. I enjoyed your letter very much. At your request, I will tell you a little about myself, my family, and Dead Water Creek. My name is William Cecil, and as you learned from my ad, I am the sheriff of Dead Water Creek. I valiantly fight for peace and justice in our fair town with an eye single to the glory of God. I live in a comfortable house behind the sheriff's office with my mother, Agnes, and my younger brother Hank.

"My mother is an angel of a woman. She is loving, kind, patient, and has sacrificed her life for the welfare of her sons. Her greatest desire in life is to see me happily married and Hank well taken care of. She is a giant among women and is greatly admired in Dead Water Creek for her long-suffering and incredible talent in quilting. Some people say that Mable Young is the best quilter in town, but we all know that Mabel can't make a stitch good enough to close a wound. The quilting society only invites her for her pound cake anyway, and even that is too dense to be called good. We all know the truth that it is dear Mother Agnes to whom we extend the greatest quilting honor.

I do hope that we can continue to correspond. I believe you would like

our little town of Dead Water Creek, even if it does have that dreadful name. I don't know what Old Elias Carter was thinking when he named the town. He didn't have enough sense to shake a stick at, and by the time we all realized he was crazy, we had already made the sign. But Dead Water Creek itself is beautiful.

During summer nights like tonight, I walk outside my door and sit in the chair mother keeps on the porch. There's not a soul around, and there is no human noise, just the crickets and the bullfrogs singing their songs. The sky is crowded with stars, and the night is so clean and fresh that it feels as if the stars are an arm's length away. I sometimes think that if I stretched a little, I could grab one and keep it tucked away forever. I would save it for someone; maybe you. A body feels close to God in this country and on these nights. It feels as though we soak in some of His powers just by being in this beautiful place. I hope someday you could join us, Miss Molly Ryan. I look forward to the day when you do.

Sincerely, Sheriff W. Cecil"

It was like a dream, this letter. True, he did seem overly fond of his mother and more involved with the Quilting Society than most men, but then again, why shouldn't he be? His mother sounded lovely, and a sheriff must know all the goings-on of a town, even regarding the Quilting Society.

But the final paragraph. Molly read it again. Stars so close it feels as if you could grab them. What would that be like? And going outside and the only noises being crickets and...what did he say? Bull frogs? Molly had never heard a frog before. When Molly went outside at night, she heard only babies crying for food, neighbors having another fight, and the occasional horse clomping down the street. Molly had to admit that she was fascinated by Dead Water Creek. And, she was almost embarrassed to think it, she was also fascinated by Sheriff William Cecil.

CHAPTER 2



Molly hadn't intended to continue corresponding with William Cecil, yet she found herself thinking of his letter the next day as she kneaded the dough at the bakery. She silently composed an appropriate letter on her walk home. She lay awake that night until she could stand it no longer. She got up, wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, lit a candle, and wrote to William Cecil. She told herself that it would be the last letter.

In fact, whenever she received a letter from the Sheriff, she told herself that she wouldn't write back. But she did. His letters were charming: filled with details about his mother, the townspeople, and his brother, Hank. But these details were not what interested Molly.

Towards the closing of every letter, William Cecil always wrote about Dead Water Creek. His descriptions of the beauty of the land and the way it made him feel, caused her heart to ache. His December letter celebrated, *"It snowed today. The snow here is deep, white, and clean. It glistens in the moonlight, and for one moment, the world is hushed and still."*

"It is bitter here," his February letter noted, *"the trees are frozen and gray, yet the roots are under that frozen crust, getting ready to come alive again."* These phrases were what Molly couldn't resist replying to.

The sheriff's letters became the highlight of Molly's months. She would read each one many times until the folded edges became delicate. She had

read the letters so often, she had some of the more beautiful lines memorized. She found herself thinking about these phrases at work while she kneaded bread or waited for loaves to rise. More and more, Molly wondered what it would be like to be in Dead Water Creek, living in a house with many rooms. She wondered what it would be like to hear crickets and frogs at night and birds during the day. And, she felt her cheeks warm as she thought it, she wondered what it would be like for William to say those beautiful things about her. Molly paused when she realized that she had never thought of him as 'William'. She had always referred to him in her mind as the Sheriff, or William Cecil. These thoughts felt somehow scandalous, and she wasn't sure what to do with them. After all, what if William Cecil was one of those men who knew how to say the right things, but was cruel in actuality? What if he was... ugly? So much could be said in a letter to fool someone.

After Molly burned her third loaf of bread that week, she decided to stop being foolish and gather facts. Molly decided, as she tried to salvage any of the last batch, that her best course of action was to write to Sally Walsh and ask about the Sheriff. She lived there. She would know about him. If Sally says he's a good man, then...

Molly promptly wrote the letter and sent it. If she was lucky, Sally would reply before the next letter arrived from the sheriff.

Molly was not lucky. Not one week after she sent Sally's letter, William's letter arrived.

Dear Miss Ryan,

Thank you for your last letter. I have so come to enjoy them over these last six months. Please forgive me this short letter today, but I want to be direct. Miss Ryan, I am writing to ask if you would please come to Dead Water Creek and consider being my wife. Of course, there will be no obligation to marry until we meet, and you are satisfied with our circumstances. If you choose to come, please send word by telegram what train you will be on. I have included money for a train ticket. I await your

reply.

Sincerely,

William

A thrill went through Molly. There it was. The moment she had always known would come. She had answered an ad in *The Matrimonial Times* after all, but she was still shocked. And would she go? Somehow, she had never allowed herself to think about the outcome of her correspondence with William. But now she must.

A part of Molly wanted to be somewhere different, somewhere that made her feel the way William's words did. But this felt so daring and adventurous, and Molly had been neither of those things. Molly was steady and responsible. Dropping everything to move West to marry a stranger felt neither steady nor responsible. But...there was something. Then she remembered Gram. Gram had wanted this for her. Gram had wanted her to have an adventure. Gram had told her when the Lord gives her a chance at life, she needed to take it.

And she wanted to, Molly realized. She wanted a different life; she wanted beauty and space. She wanted William.

The next day, feeling very daring, Molly quit her job at the bakery, packed her meager belongings, and sent a telegram telling William Cecil that she was on her way.

CHAPTER 3



The trip across the country was fascinating. Molly had never lived away from crowds and buildings, and seeing actual land and sky was exhilarating. She marveled at the great stretches of land as far as she could see; she loved the uninterrupted horizon. When she caught the train in Nebraska, she sat by the window and watched the landscape. The mountains that began appearing were beautiful and she could hardly believe that she would be a part of this land. She wondered what William might say about all this beauty.

Thoughts of William sent a thrill through her. She had known many men, and she had suitors whom she liked reasonably well, but she had never felt more than a simple interest. She was surprised that she could feel this strongly for a man she had never met. The idea of marrying any of the men she had known had always terrified her, but with William she only felt excitement and anticipation.

After a long week of travel, Molly's train pulled into the Dead Water Creek station. She shielded her eyes from the mid-afternoon sun as she emerged from the train. She scanned the platform for anyone who looked like he could be William Cecil, although she wasn't sure what that might be, exactly.

She noticed a short, plump young man with overgrown, sandy hair and

large blue eyes standing unnaturally straight at the far end of the platform. She approached him slowly, hoping he would ask who she was. He didn't, though. She looked around, and saw no one else. This man had to be waiting for her. No one else was around. He had to be there for her.

Molly made her way to the young man. He looked both confused and tired, as if someone had plopped him down and not told him where he was or what he was supposed to do. *This* could not be William Cecil.

“Mr. Cecil? Hank?” Molly ventured. She hoped this was Hank and not William.

“Yes?” he replied loudly.

“So you *are* Hank? William Cecil's brother?”

“Yes,” he said in the same tone. He neither extended his hand nor made any efforts to introduce himself.

“Oh, um, hello. I'm Miss Ryan.” She walked up to him and extended her hand. He looked at her hand and then looked at her.

“I'm here for someone named Molly,” he said in a loud monotone.

“Oh, well, yes. That's me.” When Hank still looked confused, she added, “Molly is my name.”

“You said your name was Ryan.”

“Molly Ryan.”

“Mother said I'm supposed to meet you here.” Hank walked down the stairs of the platform and toward a buckboard parked off to the side. He did not look back. At first Molly was surprised. She was hoping for some sort of introduction or pleasantries, instead she got only juvenile awkwardness.

Molly hurried to catch up to him. She made it down the steps before Hank slapped the reins and the buckboard took off. Without her. She was stunned for a moment, but only just.

“Wait!” Molly called. She began chasing after the buckboard, dust drenching her. She ran with her bag in hand, bumping against her leg with each step. She felt her hat fly off and her hair work loose of its pins. She ran

as far as she could, but it was hot, she was tired from traveling, and she couldn't run in her skirts.

Finally, in desperation, she shouted, "Hank! Stop!" She hadn't expected this to work, but it did. Hank sat in the buckboard and stared ahead, waiting for her to approach him. He made no effort to help her. Finally, with sweat dripping down her forehead, she caught up to the buckboard and gasped, "Hank, why would you leave without me?"

He looked at her with his big, innocent eyes and in all seriousness said, "Mother said I needed to meet you, and then come home." Molly stared at Hank for one moment, and then she began to laugh. "*My mother's greatest wish is to see Hank taken care of.*" That's what William's letter had said. Now she understood why. He was but a big child who took everything at face value.

Molly sighed, "Well, I supposed you did exactly what she told you. Do you suppose, now that we've met, that you could give me a ride to your home, too?"

"Yes," he replied without breaking a smile.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to meet you," Molly said as she struggled to climb in unassisted, carpet bag and all. Hank said nothing.

Molly tried to initiate a conversation. She asked about the town and their home. She even asked about the Quilting Society out of desperation, but Hank didn't have much to say. Finally, Molly decided to sit back and enjoy the ride through Dead Water Creek, and the silence seemed to suit Hank just fine.

They entered town and Molly was fascinated. The town wasn't as small as she had originally presumed. She had pictured a few houses here and there, with maybe a post office and a saloon. That's all that was ever mentioned in the dime novels about the "wild west" that she had read, but Dead Water Creek was so much more. The town was not as crowded as New York, of course, but it was still alive with activity. There *was* a saloon, but there was

also a general store, a barber, a doctor, and just about anything else a body would need to be comfortable. Men stood in circles, discussing crops or whatever men talked about, and women were coming in and out of the general store with their goods.

One woman caught Molly's eye. She wore a pretty red dress and a straw hat, and she was coming out of the general store with brown packages piled high. Molly grabbed Hank's arm and said, "Hank, stop for just a moment, please." Hank stopped without a word and Molly climbed down. "Sally? Sally Walsh?" Molly called.

The woman looked up. Molly thought she looked a little frightened, but as soon as she saw Molly waving, she grinned. "Molly Ryan!" Sally juggled the parcels, trying not to drop them in her excitement.

Molly rushed to her and took a few off the top of the stack. "Hank, could you come help us?" Hank dutifully got down and removed the parcels from Sally's arms and put them in the back of his wagon. He stood awkwardly in one spot while the women hugged and laughed.

"Oh, Molly!" exclaimed Sally. She pulled back to look at Molly. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I've come for the same reason you did," said Molly.

Sally's face dropped as she looked from Molly to Hank, and back to Molly. "Oh, Molly, why didn't you write me? I could have—"

"Oh! No," said Molly hastily, cutting Sally short. "Sally, I'm sure you already know, but this is Hank Cecil, the sheriff's brother. I've been writing the sheriff, and Hank was kind of enough to collect me from the train station today."

Sally looked relieved. "Oh, how nice. But still, Molly, I wish you would have written me. I..." Sally was cut short again, but this time by the approach of a young man who had come out of the saloon.

"Who ya talkin' to, Sally?" The young man put his arm around Sally's shoulders, and Molly assumed him to be Sally's husband. Molly was

suddenly very conscious that she wasn't wearing a hat and her hair was probably a disaster.

"Joshua," Sally said. Her voice was softer now than before, but barely. "This is Miss Molly Ryan. We were friends back home. Molly, this is my husband, Joshua Duster."

"Oh, you had friends?" he laughed at his own joke, though Molly thought it was in bad taste. "Well, it is so good to see you, Molly. Let me be the first to welcome you to Dead Water Creek." He extended his hand. Molly hesitated to take it, just as she had hesitated with the young man earlier, although she wasn't sure why. Joshua Duster was an attractive enough man: tall; full head of blond hair; blue eyes. But Molly only wanted to wash her hand after shaking the hand of a man that reminded her of a snake.

"Yes, thank you. I'm happy to be here." Molly finally took his hand and shook it, only briefly. "I guess I better get going. Hank," Molly turned to see Hank, standing right where he was before, looking off into the horizon. "Hank, could you please help Mr. Duster with Sally's parcels?" Hank started unloading the packages, and Joshua moved away from Sally to help transfer them to his own wagon.

Sally gave Molly one last hug, and while she did so, Sally whispered in Molly's ear, "I wish you would have written me first. Good luck. Be sensible." And then she was gone, before Molly had a chance to tell her that she had tried. Sally climbed up beside her husband and gave a faint smile. Molly waved, but Sally didn't wave back.

Hank climbed back into his buckboard, and Molly followed him. He urged the horses into motion. "Hank," Molly said, "What do you know about Joshua Duster?"

Hank replied in the loud monotone that Molly assumed was Hank's normal voice. "He's not nice." Molly wanted more details but was sure she would not get more from Hank. She decided that, as soon as she was settled, she would go out to Sally's ranch and see what Hank meant.

After only a few minutes, Hank pulled up to the Sheriff's office, the last building on Dead Water Creek's main street. Hank drove around the side of the building and stopped the horses. Molly climbed down, grabbed her carpet bag, and tried to calm the nerves in the pit of her stomach.

Without saying a word, Hank walked into the sheriff's office. The office was one large room with a desk at one end, which Molly assumed was the sheriff's desk, and two vacant jail cells on the other.

"Where's the sheriff?" Molly asked nervously.

"He's not here," said Hank. Molly was relieved. Hank continued to a door in the back wall. He knocked on the door and it was opened by a small, wiry woman with snow white hair. Hank pushed past her without a word.

"You must be Molly!" the woman exclaimed and clapped her hands once in front of her face. "I'm Agnes. You've heard so much about me, I'm sure," the older woman said as she pulled Molly into a rib-crushing hug.

As she spoke, she relieved Molly of her bag and threw an arm around her shoulders. Agnes steered Molly through the door and into the house. Once Molly was through the door, Agnes carefully locked the door to the Sheriff's office behind her. "Don't mind Hank. We don't give him keys to this door for reasons I'm sure you figured out by now. I'm so sorry I couldn't be there with Hank to greet you at the train station but...well, things came up." She released Molly and looked at her. "You're just like I pictured, except for all the dirt on your face. Goodness, you look like a zebra. All streaked like that. What in the world happened to you?"

Molly was confused for a moment until she got a look at herself in the mirror hanging on the wall just inside the door. Her hair was a mess: Half of her wild curls were free of their pins and straggled around her face, with the rest still tangled in hairpins. And yes, she did have sweat-streaked dirt covering her face. And she had met Sally like this!

Molly was mortified. She had completely forgotten about her mad dash behind the buckboard. "Oh I must look a fright! Well, um...I got caught up in

some dust and then the sweat after running..." she stopped. She didn't want to get Hank in trouble.

Agnes waved her hand. "You don't have to say any more. Hank probably took off without you. I can't tell you how many times this has happened to me. Hank," she called over her shoulder, "You silly boy. Grab Molly's bag and take it into the spare room while I help her clean up."

She handed Molly's bag to Hank. Molly followed Agnes into a large room that was twice the size of Molly's small tenement apartment in New York. To the right of it was the kitchen, and the room itself boasted chairs and a shelf of books.

She knew it wasn't polite, but she couldn't help herself. Molly stopped and stared open-mouthed at the table covered with a pretty floral cloth, surrounded by four wooden chairs; the iron stove stood against the wall beside a wide basin. She looked up at a loft above the sitting area.

"It's not much," said Agnes when she noticed Molly's gaze, "but it's nice enough."

"No," said Molly, "It's wonderful." She noticed two doors to her left, and one door to the right. She couldn't believe there were more rooms besides this one.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," Agnes pulled Molly toward one of the doors to her left. Hank walked past them, crossed the room, and exited the door on the right. "Don't mind him, dearie. He's uncomfortable with change and he's frightened of new people. He's probably gone out to his garden. He loves it out there. Anyway, here we are." They entered a very small, clean room with a bed and a small chest of drawers. "Well, this will be your room until we can convince...well, until the wedding. There's a wash basin there," she pointed at the bowl and pitcher on the bureau. Just then, they heard the door leading to the sheriff's office open again.

"Mother?" she heard a deep voice call.

"Drat," said Agnes. "That's William. And he's home early. Goodness.

Hurry, Molly dear, and clean up. I'll try to distract him," and Agnes hurried out of the room.

Molly didn't like the sound of that. With the unused towel in her hand, she followed the old lady out the door. "Agnes, what do you mean 'distract him?' Wh--?" Molly stopped. In the kitchen, next to a fluttering Agnes, stood William Cecil.

He was the biggest man she had ever seen. He was tall, and the expanse of his chest was...well, she wouldn't think of his chest right now. It made it hard to breathe. He was standing with his hands on his hips. If Molly could think straight, she might have thought his pose was intimidating. He was wearing a hat pulled low over his eyes, so she couldn't see them, but she felt them.

"Mother, someone in town said they saw Hank driving a girl..." William's sentence trailed off when he saw Molly standing in the doorway of her room. He stared at her. Molly had the notion she should put on a few more layers of clothing. Oh, good Lord, she thought as she nervously tamed her hair. She was a mess. As if he could read her thoughts, his eyes paused for a moment on her dirt-streaked face. Molly's cheeks burned with embarrassment. Why in the world didn't she wash her face before she left the room?

She hastily wiped her face with the dry towel and began to chatter nervously. "I'm very sorry to meet you like this, Sheriff. Of course, I look a mess. I had rather a mishap getting here, but I'm so very pleased to finally meet you. Just give me a moment to clean myself up, and we can be talking about...well...any arrangements that we might need to make..." Molly stopped talking. One look at William's face told her that he was very confused.

"Who are you?" he finally asked.

CHAPTER 4



*I*t was Agnes who answered, as if this was any normal occurrence, “This is Molly Ryan.”

“Why is she here?”

Agnes took up the broom leaning against a wall and began sweeping the clean floor.

Molly was annoyed. She knew William must be busy with his sheriff duties, but really. When you invite a woman to move halfway across the country with the expectation of marriage, you really should try to remember her name and her arrival date.

“*She*,” Molly answered when it was clear Agnes wouldn’t, “is here because you invited her. And I think you’re being a very ungracious host.”

Agnes polished the spotless mirror behind William and began humming.

William looked at his mother and then back at Molly. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I have no idea who you are.”

“No idea?” Molly was beginning to forget that William was twice her size. Her voice was rising with anger. “You invite me to move clear across the county and then have the nerve to say you have no idea who I am?”

“What are you talking about? I never invited you to come to my house.”

“You are a despicable man. How dare you write me for six months—*six months*—and beg me to move across the country *and then deny the*

invitation!” Molly was furious. She whirled around and marched back into her room. She flung open her carpet bag and rummaged in it until she found the small bundle of William’s letters. She marched back into the kitchen and stood toe-to-toe with him. “Here.” She slapped the bundle of letters on William’s chest, and he fumbled to grab them before they fell. William’s eyes widened with surprise and his mouth quirked in a kind of a smirk. This did nothing but fuel Molly’s indignation. How dare he laugh at her?

“Are you going to deny that those are *your* letters and *your* words?” demanded Molly. She folded her arms across her chest. She could feel her eyes blazing. At least she hoped they were.

William looked at the letters in his hands. “Well, yes, ma’am, I am.”

The wind was taken out of her sails, and she stepped back. “What?”

Agnes had stopped cleaning, gathered an armful of vegetables and carried them to the table.

“These aren’t my letters,” said William, examining them closely now. “But I think I know whose letters they are.” William turned to look at Agnes, who had an onion in her hand and was chopping vigorously. “Mother,” William said, slowly moving toward Agnes, his voice deceptively calm. “Did you write these letters? To her?” he nodded in Molly’s direction, “and then *sign my name to them?*”

Molly stood frozen. She wasn’t quite sure what was happening. William hadn’t written the letters?

“W-e-ell...” Agnes continued chopping, and Molly wondered how she could remain so calm. “Technically, you wrote some of the letters. But yes, I did sign your name.”

“What?” Molly gasped and dropped into a nearby chair. This was a nightmare.

William closed his eyes as if willing patience from the Lord. “Mother, did you invite Molly Ryan here? Without telling me?” Williams lips were getting tight, and his words sounded strangled.

“Well, obviously I did. She’s here, and you didn’t know about it. One and one make two, William.” Agnes turned back to her onion, as if she were discussing the grocery list with her son.

“Wait just one moment,” Molly interjected. Both William and Agnes looked at her. “Are you telling me, Agnes, that *you* wrote these letters to me?”

“Well, mostly I did. I was hoping to break it to you a little more gently than this, but... here we are.” She began chopping carrots now.

Molly felt sick. “It was you? All this time? I fell in... oh no,” she groaned. “Did you also place the advertisement in that paper?”

“What paper?” William looked slowly from Agnes to Molly and back to Agnes.

“Yes dear, I did.” Agnes finally showed a little regret. “I’m sorry to have lied to you, dear, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“What paper?” William asked again.

“*The Matrimonial Times*, dear,” Agnes replied. She grabbed a large pot and began piling the vegetables into it. “And Molly answered the ad.”

William looked at Molly again. She put her hands on her forehead and rested her elbows on her knees.

Agnes continued talking in her calm, matter of fact way. “I’ve been writing Molly on your behalf for about, what has it been, dearie, six months? I fully intended to give the letters to you, William, and have *you* write her back, but they were so engaging. I didn’t want you to mess it up. And before I knew what was happening, you asked her to marry you.”

Molly was too stunned to speak, and she suddenly felt very claustrophobic. She needed to get out. She got up, not caring what William or Agnes might do, and took the exit Hank had taken earlier.

WILLIAM WAS furious at his mother. He had suspected she had been

scheming, but nothing at this level. To write to a strange woman for six months in his name? To convince her to travel across the country? *To propose to her* on his behalf, without his knowledge? It was too far this time.

“Mother, *are you insane?*” He was doing everything in his power not to shout at her.

“No, dear,” his mother said conversationally. It was infuriating that she could maintain her composure while behaving in an insane manner, “I am not *insane*. I am the only person in this home who is thinking straight, as a matter of fact. You need a wife, plain and simple, William.” She turned back to the counter and continued her food preparations.

William threw his hands in the air. “Says who?”

“Says me. Don’t you think she’s lovely? I really love her hair.”

William began pacing the floor. “I don’t need a wife, Mother. We are all doing fine the way we are. I like things the way they are: you, me, Hank. It’s fine.”

“I think you’ll like her. Her letters were very polite. And she’s pretty. I was sure she would be plain, otherwise, why wouldn’t she be married already? But what a pleasant surprise she is.”

William shook his head and said, almost too softly to hear, “I don’t want another wife, Mother.”

“That’s your fear talking, William, and it’s about time you move on.”

“No, Mother. You’re wrong on this one. And it’s not fear. I just won’t love anyone again, and that is that.”

Agnes stopped chopping and William stopped pacing. She reached a hand to her son’s cheek, something she hadn’t done since he was child. “What a very sad way to live, my dear heart.” She removed his hat. “Don’t wear this in the house.”

William growled in frustration. “She can’t stay here. There’s no room. Where will she sleep?” He thought he had a very good point, but Agnes laughed.

“In your room. Where else? And if you’re not ready to get married, you can bunk with Hank in the loft.”

William sighed and slumped into a chair by the table. He held his head in his hands. This was by far the worst mess his mother had landed him in, and that was saying something.

“Don’t you sigh at me. She’s here, like it or not, and there’s nothing you can do. Not for seven days, anyway.”

“Why seven days?” he asked without lifting his head.

“That’s the next time the train goes back east. That’s plenty of time. God only needed seven, you know. I’m not God of course, but I’m as close as we got.”

William stood in protest. “Plenty of time for what?”

Agnes continued as if she couldn’t hear him. “Now, William, stop sulking, and go apologize to that beautiful girl. She snuck out while you were lecturing me. And leave your hat here. It makes you look intimidating. It’s a good look for a sheriff, but not a beau.”

“I’m no one’s beau.” He put his hands on his hips and shook his head. He wanted to strangle his mother. “But you’re right. That girl deserves an apology, but not because of anything I did.” William walked toward the door after Molly.

“Of course, dear,” replied Agnes. She smiled as he walked outside without his hat.

CHAPTER 5



Molly stopped as soon as she stepped outside. It was all stunning, no matter where she looked. It was early evening and the sky was orange and pink with twilight purples starting to appear. It had been a warm day, but it was beginning to cool. Molly hugged her arms in front of her body and breathed in the fresh air. So William had not been writing her letters. He did not propose to her. She fell in love with words on paper instead of a man. She felt foolish.

She had always known marriage wasn't a guarantee, yet she still felt as if she had lost something. William... Agnes had said in the last letter that there was no obligation to marry, so an engagement had never been official. How could she mourn what she never had?

And what was she going to do? She had no money to return to New York, although she was pretty sure William would pay her way back. He was upset now, but he seemed a kind man. But there was nothing to go back to. She had no job and no family.

Molly began walking on the damp earth of early spring. The Cecil yard was so vast. She marveled at all the open space. Everything was so crowded in New York. And so loud. But here.

She stopped to listen. She could hear crickets.

She had been looking forward to this moment more than any other she

had imagined. She remembered how the idea of being able to hear crickets appealed to her when she read William's first letter. The idea of hearing crickets had been forever intertwined with any feelings she had developed through their letters. She had loved that a man could appreciate the specialness of something so simple. That sentence had opened Molly's heart and allowed her to dream that she could have something bigger for herself.

But it hadn't been William.

Her heart squeezed, and she allowed silent tears to run down her face. She was so disappointed. More than she cared to admit. She had entertained the romantic notion that hearing crickets for the first time would be a signal of the start of her new life. Instead, it was the sound of her heartbreak.

She looked at the stars and wiped her face. She was glad it was getting dark. She didn't want anyone to see how foolish she was being. She thought about Gram and tried to be angry at her for getting her into this mess, but she couldn't. She looked around her. No matter what happened, she knew it had been a beautiful week. Gram told her to take a chance at life, and she had. So it hadn't turned out the way she had hoped. There was always a fresh tomorrow, as Gram had once said.

She looked up at the sky and quietly spoke to God or Gram, or both, "I'm here. What do I do now?" A breeze ruffled her hair and she smiled. She imagined Gram telling her to hold on.

The stars were starting to appear in the purple twilight. She felt as if the sky was so close that she could grab it and wrap it around her shoulders. The *world* was so close. Molly didn't want to leave.

Molly saw a figure crouching next to a garden plot that looked ready for planting. Molly approached Hank. "Hello, Hank," she said.

He nervously stood up and looked in her direction, but not at her. She noticed how he never really looked at her, but rather past her. She wondered what he saw.

"Hello. Do you want to see my garden?"

Molly smiled. Hank was different, but harmless. “Yes, I believe I would.”

She followed Hank as he walked up and down the patch, pointing in the fading light. He talked about places and patches for various vegetables. She smiled as he described in his loud monotone how he would first plant the peas, where the strawberries would fare best, and when the tomatoes should best be planted.

“You really like seeds and plants, don’t you, Hank?”

“Yes. They are very easy. You just plant them and then wait. I like them better than people.”

Molly smiled. She liked Hank. “I’m very impressed with your plans.”

Hank stood up. “You can have some strawberries and peas when they grow, but you have to be patient and wait for the seeds.”

She smiled. “That sounds lovely. I would like that, Hank. Thank you.” Hank walked away without a good bye.

“He likes you,” said a deep voice behind her.

Molly startled slightly and turned around. William was behind her, lit by a square of light coming from the house. He stood with one leg bent and his hands in his pockets. He had removed his hat, and Molly could finally see that he had thick brown hair, the color of bread when it was left in the oven ten minutes too long.

“What?”

“I said, he likes you. Hank doesn’t like many people, especially when it comes to his garden. If he offered you the fruits of his labor, he likes you.”

“I like him, too,” Molly replied. She was unsure what to do, with William standing so near her. She suddenly felt as if she had too many arms or toes, and she didn’t quite know how to hold herself.

William cleared his throat. “Miss Ryan, would you like to take a walk around the property? I think we need to talk.”

“It’s getting dark out.”

“I know, but we need to talk and there’s no place inside without

interfering ears. I guess we could go to my office, but it's a nice night. One of the first we've had this spring. I can help you if you can't see in the dark."

Molly thought about this. "Well, I can't argue with any of that. And yes, I think we do need to talk." William started walking, and Molly fell into step beside him. He put his hand on the small of her back to guide her through the shadows of the early evening.

She felt the warmth of his hand through her clothes, and she realized how big his hands were. She felt warm and safe, rather than scared, and she thought how nice it was to have someone watching out for her. She had always been the one to worry about others. First, her own ailing parents, and then Gram. And then she wondered how those hands would feel on her...

She was very glad it was dark outside so he couldn't see the blush that burned her cheeks. Where had that thought come from?

He led her to the edge of the property where a cluster of aspen trees were starting to bud out for spring. William stopped and leaned up against one's trunk, and Molly stood across from him. Her back was cold without him there, and Molly crossed her arms.

She waited for William to speak, but he didn't. Instead, he looked at her in the dark. The air felt heavy and Molly wasn't sure what was happening. Molly finally looked away. Someone needed to say something, or she would surely pass out from the tension.

"Mr. Cecil..." Molly attempted at the very same time as William spoke out.

"Miss Ryan..."

They smiled silently and she gestured for William to speak first. "Miss Ryan, I want to apologize for this whole blasted day. As you have probably figured out by now, you were brought here under false pretenses. I don't need a wife, and I don't particularly want a wife," he paused a moment. "I'll pay for your passage back, or course."

Molly nodded at this and rubbed her arms as a breeze blew between them.

She shivered, but not because she was cold. She didn't know what was making her feel this way. Maybe it was being out here at night, alone with this large, handsome man. Maybe it was her sudden desire for this moment never to end. Maybe it was because she realized how badly she wanted to stay right here and to get to know this man.

It was true that she had boarded the train because she had started to fall in love with the man behind the letters. She could admit that now. But he hadn't written them. Shouldn't she feel betrayed and angry? Shouldn't William feel like the stranger he was? Why didn't she?

She knew she should be sensible and agree to leave.

William saw her shiver. "There's a cool breeze a blowin' the stars around tonight, isn't there?" He took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. It was heavy and warm. It smelled of him.

Molly looked at William thoughtfully. "What did you just say?"

"I said there's a cool breeze a blowin' the stars around," he paused for a moment, "That sounds funny, doesn't it? I don't usually speak like that out loud."

"Mr. Cecil," she paused a moment as a thought occurred to her, "What did your mother mean when she said she '*mostly*' wrote those letters to me?"

William chuckled and shook his head. "I don't ask questions much anymore. I don't know if you noticed, but my mother pretty much says and does what she wants. These past six months, she's gotten it into her head that I need to get married, and nothing would shake that fool idea loose. And now this. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing."

"I'm not," said Molly. For all her disappointment, she realized that this was true. She looked at William. It was dark now, but she could make out his shape as he causally leaned against the tree. He was handsome with his dark hair and powerful body. And this place was beautiful. *The Lord knows you deserve a good life*, Gram had said. *He'll bring ya one, lass, and ye must take it when He does*. Molly decided right then that she was not going back to

New York. Ever.

“Mr. Cecil,” Molly ventured, “This week I rode a stage coach from New York to Nebraska and then a train from Nebraska to Dead Water Creek. I’ve seen golden plains as far as the eye could see; today I’ve seen snow-covered mountains so tall there’s no way I could have imagined them on my own. And now, I’m standing here. This might not look like much to you. But to me, it’s heaven. Do you know I’ve never seen a tree like this in my life? I’ve never seen this much emptiness. I’ve never heard silence before. So, no matter what happens, I am not sorry for coming here. If nothing else, I will always have this night.”

William looked as if he was trying to solve a puzzle to which Molly held the solution.

Finally, William cleared his throat. “There’s not another train for seven days. You can stay with us for that long, at least. After that... I guess you can make your own plans. But I just wanted to be clear about this whole marriage business.”

Molly smiled and nodded. “I’ll wait then.” She began walking back to the house, William’s jacket still around her shoulders

“For what? The train?” he called after her.

She stopped and turned around. “No. For seeds to grow,” she said, almost too quietly to be heard. Then she turned and continued toward the house.

WHAT HAD JUST HAPPENED? When William had touched her tonight, he lost all his good sense. William had come out to apologize and to make it perfectly clear that he did not want a wife and that she would be on the first train back to New York. Instead, he had stared at her like a love-struck teenager and talked about blowing stars, or whatever fool thing had come out his mouth.

William watched Molly Ryan walk back to his house. She was nothing

more than a dark silhouette in the indigo night. He admired her tiny waist and the curve of her hips. Mother had been right, he thought. She certainly wasn't plain. Mother had mentioned her hair, but it was her eyes that he had noticed first. He had thought them blue before but wondered if they were in fact green. They seemed to flash green when she was angry.

He had to laugh when he thought of seeing her for the first time. She had been standing in the doorway of his room, all hair aflame with a dirt-streaked face. He thought then that she was lovely. And then her eyes started flashing green when she was angry at him, and she was downright beautiful. He had also noticed her full mouth; it looked so soft. He had wondered briefly when he put his jacket around her shoulders, what they would feel like on his.

He shook his head to get rid of the image. It didn't matter how attracted to her he might be. He would never marry again. He had said so when Elizabeth died...he stopped himself. It was no good thinking like that.

William began walking back to the house.

What did it mean that she was going to wait for seeds to grow? That sounded like something Hank might say. Grow into what?

It was going to be an interesting seven days, to say the least.

CHAPTER 6



When Molly returned to the house, Agnes was sitting in a rocking chair next to a bright lamp, crocheting.

As soon as she saw Molly, she started chatting away, as if they had been talking for ten minutes already. “I am sorry to have lied to you, Molly, dear. But you see why I had to now. William is just so stubborn. To be perfectly honest, if I had known you looked like this, I would have had you come months ago. But I needed to be sure. He was nice to you out there?” Agnes nodded toward William’s jacket.

“Oh, yes. He was a perfect gentleman.” Molly thought about taking the jacket off, but didn’t want to.

“He is a nice boy. But he gets silly ideas about life and loyalty and there’s no changing his mind with logic. You got to rattle his cage once in a while.”

Molly sat in a chair across from Agnes. “I have to ask you, Agnes. You had to know that he would be upset as soon as he found out what you had done. To be honest, I should be very upset, too, at being thousands of miles away from home with no idea what to do. Why did you ask me here?”

“Yes, you should be angry at me, but you’re not, are you? I thought you wouldn’t be. Do you think you’re the only woman to answer that ad? Not by far. You’re the only one I liked, and the only one I thought good enough to understand.” Agnes stopped crocheting for a moment and put her hands and

her work in her lap. She looked Molly in the eye. “William needs you, and he’s too stubborn to know it. I know my son better than he knows himself, and I picked the woman he needs.” She tapped the side of her nose confidently. “Give him some time and he’ll figure it out. Thank the Lord you’re pretty—it wasn’t necessary, but it does make our job easier. He’ll come around. Trust me.” She picked up her work again and said, “You haven’t learned it yet, but you will: Agnes is always right.”

Molly laughed and stood up. On impulse, she bent to kiss the old woman on the cheek then went to her assigned room. Agnes had lit a lamp, so there was a soft glow in her room. She closed the door and stood there for some time, feeling the reality of the day. Had she been on the train only that morning? She felt as if she had lived three weeks since then.

She heard William come in from outside, and she felt the weight of his jacket still on her shoulders. She had eight days before William expected her to be on the train back to New York. Agnes said that he just needed time. Would eight days be enough? And did she really want to marry a man who was a stranger?

Outside, in the beauty of the night, she had been sure that she wanted to stay here and possibly marry this very handsome man. But here in the reality of the house, she wasn’t as sure of herself. A bare room was not as romantic as outside with its stars and breezes. Molly sighed and removed the jacket. With it went the last of the magic of outside.

In all the excitement of the evening, Molly had yet to clean up after her travels, and unpack. She looked at her frightful appearance in a mirror. She certainly wasn’t very pretty now. No one would want to marry her like this. She wet a clean cloth in her water basin that was still, thankfully, full, and washed her face. She loosened her hair, and it was only then that she noticed that Agnes had unpacked for her. Her brush was on the bureau next to the basin, and further inspection produced her nightgown in the drawers and her other things put away in logical places.

She was finally ready for bed. She knelt by her bed and recited her prayer, but then paused at the end. “God, I don’t know what You have planned. I’m going to need some help down here. And tell Gram I’m trying my best. Amen.” She slid into bed and put out the lamp.

MOLLY WOKE up in the early morning and couldn’t go back to sleep. She was still on bakery hours, which meant that she was usually up by now to have bread ready for the morning customers.

She had stayed up late into the night on board the train to train herself to sleep normal hours, but it had obviously not worked. She was wide awake, and the Cecil household seemed to be sound asleep.

She lay in bed willing herself to go back to sleep, but she finally gave up. It was no use. Molly dressed in the dark, splashed water on her face, pinned her hair back, and eased open her bedroom door. She didn’t want to wake anyone, particularly not William. She wasn’t sure where he slept, but he was the one person she wasn’t ready to face today.

She made her way to the kitchen and lit a lamp. She realized for the first time that she was hungry. She hadn’t had supper the night before. She quickly inspected Agnes’s supplies and decided that she might as well do what she did best in the morning: make bread.

WILLIAM HADN’T SLEPT YET. He was up chewing on this whole mess with Molly. He hated that his thoughts kept drifting back to her eyes and her hair and how his hand fit the right way on her back. But he wasn’t going to marry again. And these two thoughts caused enough commotion in his head to keep sleep at bay.

He heard someone up and moving around. At first he thought he had stayed awake all night worrying, and that Agnes was already up making

breakfast, but it was still too dark and quiet for that. Mother was a small woman, but she made plenty of noise, especially when cooking. He looked over to make sure Hank was still asleep, and he was. It must be Molly.

William sat up and leaned on his elbow. From his position in the loft, he had a pretty good view of the kitchen. Molly had lit one lamp, and he watched as she worked in the soft, yellow light.

She warmed a kettle of water. Then she combined the warm water with honey and sprinkled something on top of it. She added salt, and he chuckled silently as he watched her throw some of the salt over her left shoulder to appease her superstition. Gradually, she added flour to the water mixture, mixing first with a spoon, and then with her hands when it became too thick. Eventually, she tipped the whole mess onto the table and began kneading the dough.

William was fascinated. His mother made bread, but when she did, it was a clumsy, clanking affair, like watching Agnes wrestle with the devil. But Molly was almost silent, and her fluid movements were gentle. Her small body swayed with the dough, until the goop turned soft and elastic. It was amazing to William that the mess she had started with was now smooth and clean and entirely altered. She paused to push the red ringlets off her forehead with her wrist, and William thought how lovely that moment was. He watched as she lifted the dough back into the bowl and covered it with a cloth to rise.

He lay back down and listened to the soft sounds of her working. He finally relaxed and fell into a restful slumber.

CHAPTER 7



William woke to the smell of freshly baked bread and something else. The sun was peeking in through the windows. He crawled down from the loft, which was difficult. He hated the loft. He was a large man and didn't enjoy crawling around on his hands and knees in small spaces. He might consider marriage just to have his bed back before the week was over, he thought.

He finally lumbered down and turned toward the kitchen in time to see Molly bending to remove something from the oven. He paused a moment to admire her backside, but then quickly looked away. Molly turned and smiled when she saw him.

"Just in time. These are best when they're warm," she said, setting a tray of sweet rolls on the table. "Give me a short minute and I'll have them frosted. Then you can have one."

"How long have you been up?" William asked, even though he knew full well how long.

"Oh, about four hours. I worked in a bakery back home, and my body must think I still work there. I was up way too early, but figured I might as well make myself useful. Your mother won't mind, will she?"

"Mind?" William looked at the kitchen. It was clean and tidy. In fact, were it not for the four loaves of bread on a cloth, ready to be wrapped, and

the tray of sweet rolls, no one would have known the kitchen had been used at all. “She’ll want to marry you herself just for your bread. She hates baking bread, and she can’t manage it without the kitchen looking worse for wear.”

She had been frosting the rolls while he talked, and now she handed him one. He took a bite and groaned. These were the best rolls he had ever tasted. They were tender and warm, with buttery cinnamon and sugar dripping on his tongue.

“What do you think?” Molly asked. She had a look on her face that let William know that she was aware of just how good these rolls were.

“These are the best cinnamon rolls I’ve ever had,” William said with his mouth full. Molly grinned.

“I know. I was known for them at the bakery. I’m glad you like them.”

Agnes came out of her room just then. “What in the world has been going on out here? Molly, did you do all this?”

Molly nodded as she handed Agnes a sweet roll on a plate. “Sit down, Agnes. I thought I’d give you a break and made some sweet rolls for breakfast. When does Hank usually get up?”

Agnes waved her hand. “Oh, don’t worry about him. Some days he’s up early and others he sleeps in. I don’t wake him. He’s an ornery cuss when you disrupt his sleep.”

William polished off his second cinnamon roll and then stood. “I guess it’s time for me to go do some rounds. Much obliged, Miss Ryan, for the delicious breakfast.”

“Of course, Sheriff,” she said.

William retrieved his hat and then stood looking lost for a moment.

“What do you need?” asked Agnes.

William swallowed hard, looked at Molly and said, “Nothing, I guess. I’m fine.” Then he left.

MOLLY WATCHED William walk out the door. “He left his jacket, didn’t he?” she said to Agnes. She felt guilty knowing that it was in her room.

“Yes, but that was his choice. He’s going to have to get over that skittishness pretty soon if you two are going to get married.

“Let’s not talk about marriage, Agnes. We barely knew each other as it was when we were talking through letters. I thought I might be falling in love with the person who wrote the letters, which is why I agreed to come out here, but now...” she stopped. She didn’t want to guild Agnes, but she didn’t need to worry.

“Yes, I am sorry that I had to lie to you for so long, but I couldn’t leave it up to William to get married on his own. And I liked you straight away.”

“Agnes,” said Molly, “What did you mean last night when you said you ‘mostly’ wrote those letters?”

Agnes smiled mischievously. “I’ll tell you another time. But dear, let me ask you a question: what was it that made you think you were falling in love with William?”

Molly paused for a moment. She was uncomfortable talking about this with Agnes, but the woman was looking at her so intently, waiting for the answer. “It was his descriptions. Like the crickets at night, and the way the breeze blows.”

“That was all William, darling girl. Rest assured that the parts that you fell in love with, those are the parts that came from William.”

This did make Molly feel better, but it still didn’t solve the problem at hand. “That’s all fine, Agnes, but William told me he neither wants nor needs a wife. What can be done to change that? He seemed pretty sure of himself.”

“Well, William is wrong on both counts. First, he does want a wife. He just doesn’t know it yet. And second, he needs a wife. I won’t be around forever. Here’s the important part, Molly Ryan: Do you like William? If the William in front of you last night and today was the same William in those letters, would you marry him?”

Molly thought for a moment, "I believe I would."

"Good. That's real good. I thought you were the one." She stood up from the table, cupped Molly's cheek and looked at her just the way her own mother once did long ago. "I promise you, young lady, that I know my son better than he knows himself. He is the man in the letters, even if he did not write them."

Molly could feel the weight of what Agnes was saying. "I believe you, Agnes."

"Wonderful. Now that that's settled, we've got work to do."

Molly was finishing the dishes, and she was grateful to know there was something else to occupy her time. "Oh, of course! Just let me know what chores you need done. Anything to keep me busy."

"You silly girl. I'm not talking about chores! We've only got seven days to get William to ask you to marry him. That's not a lot of time, but I think it can be done."

"Agnes, now wait a minute." Molly moved over to the table and sat in one of the chairs. "William is already upset enough with everything that's happened. And I want William to, oh, I don't know. I want him to seek me out of his own volition. I don't want him to be tricked into loving me."

"Oh my dear, how very romantic that sounds; and very stupid. Dear, when you're on a schedule, I've learned it's best to make things happen for yourself rather than sit back and hope. That's why I'm here. Now, here's the facts: a man can be tricked into marriage, but he can't be tricked into love. He'll fall in love on his own, I'm sure of it. And you already care about him. I saw it when you were cuddling up in that jacket last night. But if we wait around for him, we'll be waiting until the second coming," Molly still didn't look convinced. Agnes added, "Fine, don't think of it as *tricking*. Think of it as convincing...without words."

Molly grinned. She knew it was just a play on words, but at this point, it was just fine with her. She wasn't sure that she loved William, but she was

sure that she was attracted to William, she liked Agnes, and she loved Dead Water Creek.

“Good,” Molly said. “What’s first?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



“*F*irst order of business,” Agnes said, “Is to get you out in the town. You need to be out and about. Introduce yourself to some of the store owners. I’ve been talking about you for a few weeks now, in preparation, so the town is a buzzing with gossip.”

“Agnes, how long have you been planning this?” asked Molly

“How long have we been writing?” replied Agnes drily.

“Are you sure this is the first step? Don’t you think I should—I don’t know, take lunch to William, or something? I think we should spend some time together...” Molly stopped talking because Agnes was shaking her head.

“Well, that’s what you get for doing your own thinking. This is why I’m here, darling. If I keep shoving you two together, William will get suspicious and accuse me of meddling. This way, the town will fall in love with you first, so when William tries to send you away, he’ll get a talking-to from everyone in town. He can deal with disapproval from me, but not his townsfolk.”

“Oh, you are good, Agnes. Remind me to never plot against you.”

“If you need reminding, you’ve already lost.”

Agnes insisted that Molly needed new clothes. Molly protested that she had brought several dresses, plus a very nice one that would work for a social event in a pinch. Granted, they were old, but Molly thought they were good

enough. “What you have is good enough for a city baker, dear, but it’s not good enough for a sheriff’s wife,” Agnes informed her. “You have to look the part. Plus, once we get that little figure of yours into a dress that fits you, William won’t know where to look.”

“Agnes!” said Molly, reddening.

“What? Let’s not pretend men don’t appreciate a pretty girl. Besides, we’ve got to use every weapon in our arsenal, including your physical assets. Do I need to remind you that we only have seven days? Besides, who doesn’t love new clothes? I’ve been saving my spending money for six months for this moment.”

Molly could see that any attempts at argument would fall on deaf ears, so she didn’t try. Besides, Agnes was right: she loved new clothes, and she hadn’t had many in her life. She hated to take Agnes’s money, but she suspected that she didn’t have any choice in the matter.

Molly was to go to the general store while Agnes took her afternoon nap, with strict instructions to not come home until she had a new ready-made dress and orders for two more.

“And don’t forget: be friendly. Say hello to the townspeople, particularly the men. They probably suspect who you are, so just create that nice, first impression to go along with the name that I’ve been throwing about. Now, go!” Agnes commanded as Molly stepped out of the house.

Walking to the shop, Molly again felt that sense of excitement at being in a town straight out of the books she had read. It had one long main street, with stores lining both sides. Wooden boardwalks stretched along the road, giving people a place to walk out of the dust. She strolled along the board walk, nodding to everyone she saw, and taking special care to smile and say hello to the men.

She passed the barber shop, with its door propped open, just as Agnes said it would be. “Hello,” she said, stepping just over the threshold. She looked at the barber, who she knew was Bill Crowley, thanks to Agnes’s

training. “Are you Bill? I’m so glad to meet you. I hate to interrupt, but I was wondering if I could make an appointment for a cut and a shave for the sheriff?” Bill Crowley and all the men in the shop stopped to stare at Molly. She smiled and waited for a reply. When it was obvious that they men were too surprised to offer one, Molly continued. “Look at my manners. I’m so sorry. My name is Molly Ryan, and I’m visiting the sheriff’s family. Do you have a time this week when I can send the sheriff in?”

It was another beat before Bill Crowley could answer. “Yes, ma’am. I’m open tomorrow, right before lunch. Say, 11:00?”

Molly widened her smile the way she knew older men appreciated. “You are so sweet to work us in like that. Thank you so much. See you tomorrow.”

And then she left. She had to laugh to herself, feeling the men’s eyes following her down the street. “Agnes has this town pegged,” she said to herself.

She arrived at the general store and entered. She approached the girl at the counter, just as Agnes had told her to.

“May I help you?” the girl asked in a bubbly voice.

“Are you Jane?” Molly asked. “I’m Molly Ryan, and Agnes...”

“Of course you’re Molly Ryan! You’re just as I imagined. Agnes has told me all about you, and how we need to start right away on a wardrobe suitable for a sheriff’s wife.” Jane came out from behind the counter, grabbed Molly’s hand, and dragged her to the back of the store where the dresses and fabrics were kept, all the while continuing her monologue. “Yes, I’m Jane and I’ve been given strict instructions to make you my sole priority. I’m so glad Sheriff finally asked you out here. He is very handsome. I would have married him in a heartbeat if he would ever look my way. And if Billy wasn’t around, of course. Billy’s my intended, you know. But the Sheriff *is* awful handsome, and he’s one of the most important men in town. Don’t tell Billy I said that.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to,” Molly said with a laugh. “I don’t know who he

is.”

“Oh, don’t be clever,” she said with a laugh that matched Molly’s. Molly decided that she liked Jane very much. “Alright. Let’s see...” Jane examined the wall of fabrics and then turned to examine Molly. “Right. I’m thinking jewel colors to go with that magnificent hair of yours. Definitely green and blue to match your eyes. I’ve got just the right fabric for you.” Jane pulled down the fabrics and Molly was dazzled. They were beautiful. Of course, she had seen beautiful fabrics and dresses on the women who came into the bakery back home, but this was the first time these pretty things were going to be hers.

“Those are beautiful.”

“They are, aren’t they? I ordered them on the off chance you would be arriving soon. You just sounded like a jewel person. Now, we need to get you a dress to wear while these are being made.”

An hour later, Molly admired herself in the full-length mirror. The new dress was a beautiful blue that Jane said made her eyes look like the sky. The bodice skimmed her sides perfectly, setting her waist and hips into a perfect hour-glass. The round neck showed off her delicate collar bones and the sleeves were full and gathered, ending just above the elbow. It was a simple dress made for daily wear, but Molly had never worn anything so pretty.

“Oh Molly,” sighed Jane. “You are stunning! If you and the sheriff haven’t set a wedding date yet, you can bet he will high-tail it to the preacher as soon as he sees you in this!”

Just then, Molly and Jane heard someone behind them clear his throat.

“Sheriff!” exclaimed Jane. Molly turned around, and indeed, there was William.

“Hello, Miss Robinson,” William said while staring at Molly.

“Hello, Sheriff,” Molly said. Frantic questions flooded her mind: When did he come in? Did he hear Jane talking about a wedding? Was he upset?

Probably in an attempt to regain composure, Jane began her chatter. “I’m

so glad you're here, Sheriff. I was just helping Miss Ryan with some new dresses. Doesn't she look lovely? You're one lucky man, Sheriff."

William finally tore his eyes away from Molly and appeared to remember why he was there. "My mother sent me for some supplies," said William, "But I can see that you're busy."

"Don't be silly, Sheriff. I'll help you in just two shakes," she said. A few customers had come in after William, and Jane left the two to help them.

Molly wasn't sure what to do. She thought she should perhaps leave, but she really didn't want to. She pretended to view the items lining the shelves, feeling William's eyes on her. She wondered if he liked what he saw. This was, after all, the first time he had seen her with a clean face and in a decent light. And she was wearing her new dress. Was her dress really that complimenting? William had barely looked away since he came in.

Molly tried not to stare at him by pretending to shop the shelves, but she couldn't help it. She had noticed how handsome he was the previous day, but it had been dark, and he was always brooding about in his hat. But now, in the light of day, without his hat to cover his hair and his eyes... She felt her knees go weak. He had piercing blue eyes and straight eyebrows that gave him an intent, thoughtful look, and she wondered what he thought about her. She also noticed the scruff that had grown in since his early morning shave. She briefly wondered how that might feel against her own skin if he kissed her. She blushed and immediately abandoned the thought. Rather, she intended to, but it kept popping up when least expected.

She could feel him watching her, and she fumbled with the spools of thread she was pretending to examine. Many men had looked at Molly in this way before, but this was the first time she had *wanted* a man to look at her. Per Agnes's suggestion, she pretended not to notice.

Finally, Molly turned to face William, forcing him to look her in the eye. "Is everything fine?" she asked innocently. She could tell that she had caught him off guard, but he recovered very well.

“Yes, it’s fine. You look real nice.”

She smiled slightly. “Actually, Sheriff, I meant at home, with your mother. I could have picked up the supplies for her.”

Molly expected William to hum and haw a little, or blush, or mention being caught staring at her. She certainly didn’t expect him to break into a grin, which is exactly what he did. He looked down at his boots and back up, almost shyly, clearly aware that he had been caught. “Ah. Well, Mother said that she suddenly remembered that she had especially ordered something and sent me to pick it up. Apparently, she forgot to tell you about it.”

“Oh dear,” Molly said. Agnes hadn’t mentioned a package to her. This must be a part of the plan Agnes had orchestrated. She had only told Molly that she should get a new dress, and that she would take care of the rest. This must have been what she meant.

Jane finished up with the last customer and turned to William. “Now, Sheriff, what can I get for you?”

“Mother said she had something ordered, and I needed to pick it up for her.”

“Oh yes! I do remember that. Excuse me for a moment.” Jane went fluttering off and returned with several packages wrapped in paper.

“I don’t get to see what she ordered?”

“I guess not,” Jane laughed, glancing at Molly and William standing beside each other. “I’m so glad to finally meet Molly, Sheriff. Your mother has told me all about her, and I think she’s lovely.”

William said nothing, motioning instead for Molly to exit ahead of him while he held the door. Molly thanked Jane, gave her a quick, friendly hug, and walked out the door.

“I guess Jane’s heard it, too,” William said while walking. Molly was in step beside him, very aware of their arms occasionally brushing.

“What do you mean?” Molly asked.

“Apparently Mother’s told the whole town that I wrote away for a bride.

Has anybody said anything to you?"

"Only Jane."

They walked back past the barber's shop, and Bill poked his head out the door. "Good afternoon, Miss Ryan. See you tomorrow, Sheriff."

William looked at her and cocked an eyebrow. "How does he know you? And what's tomorrow?"

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, but I made an appointment for you for tomorrow around eleven o'clock. A cut and a shave."

She was afraid he might be upset that she had done so without his asking. Instead he shook his head. "Let me get this straight. Today, you made me a cut and shave appointment with Bill Crawly, the biggest gossip in town, and then went to buy fancy new clothes from Jane Robinson, the second biggest gossip in town. This has my mother written all over it."

Molly was getting ready to feign innocence, but William continued.

"I'm sorry my mother dragged you into this mess, and I'm sure you're just trying to be helpful, but it's awful suspicious to me. Miss Ryan, be careful with my mother. She's sly as a fox."

Molly nodded and tried not to laugh. "I think she's lovely,"

"That's because she wants you to think that. You laugh because she looks like a harmless old lady, but she could run this town if she had just a little go ahead."

Molly refrained from telling William that Agnes already ran the town, whether he knew it or not. Molly noticed that they had come to a stop in front of the Sheriff's office. She grinned at him, "Why, Sheriff, did you just walk me home?"

"I do believe I did, Miss Ryan." For the second time that day, William gave Molly a shy smile. "Here. Take this package in for Mother. I've got to get back to work. You should go in 'round back. I've got some more rounds to make, and Mother and Hank are probably taking afternoon naps, so they won't be able to unlock the door for you."

Molly nodded, “Well, thank you for walking me home, Sheriff. It was very kind of you.” She was about to turn the corner to access the back door of his home when William called to her.

“Molly?”

She turned to see concern on William’s face. “Yes?”

“Be careful going around town, will you? If you venture out again, take Hank with you.”

“I will,” said Molly. “Thank you, William.”

Molly turned the corner of the building again and headed for the back door. How nice, she thought. That was the first time he had called her Molly.

CHAPTER 9



William turned and worked his way back up the street without giving Molly another look. Heaven knows he did enough looking at the shop. He was embarrassed recalling the blatant way he had stared at her when he first walked in, but he couldn't help himself. That new dress hugged her every curve. And she had caught him admiring her backside. What in the world had come over him? He didn't want a wife, he had made that plain as day, and Molly knew she was expected to be on the train home in seven days. So why, for the love of everything that is holy, did she have to buy that new dress? It made her eyes sparkle. And it accentuated her waist in such a way that made William want to put his hands around it and pull her close. He had touched the small of her back last night while he was guiding her in the dark, and just his hand spanned her whole back. She was a tiny, gorgeous woman, and whenever she was around, he wanted to hug her. He found himself liking the protectiveness he felt for her.

It wasn't fair, thought William. Especially when she had to go home next week...because he asked her to...

He didn't stop to think through that logic, but he knew there was a flaw in it somewhere, and he knew also that he was better off not addressing it. What he needed to do now was get back to work and forget about the way her eyes sparkled, or how the stray curls always found a way out of her hair pins, or

the way she had looked at him when she thought he didn't notice, or the way he felt when her arms brushed up against him on the walk home. This was not helping, he thought. He needed a drink.

THAT NIGHT AT SUPPER, William was quiet. He listened as Agnes asked Molly about her day, and vaguely heard Hank talk about his garden. The rest of William's day had not gone well. He had stopped by the saloon, but one drink hadn't helped him drown out Molly. In fact, he hadn't had a Molly-free second all day. Just when he had thought he could do his work without his mind wandering to her curves or her mischievous smile, he would encounter someone in town who would always ask after "his new lady, Molly." Everyone seemed to know who she was, how she got here, and her reason for being here. How in tarnation did everyone in town know who she was when he himself had never heard her name before last night?

He wondered if his mother had something to do with him seeing or hearing about Molly wherever he went. He was pretty sure she was, but he had no proof and that made him angry. He had made his position clear to his mother, yet she persisted.

He wasn't upset with Molly; she didn't know what his mother was capable of. It wasn't her fault that she was lured here under false pretenses. It wasn't her fault that she was beautiful, and he couldn't stop thinking about her. It wasn't her fault that he felt guilty every time he caught himself wondering what it would be like to hold a woman, particularly this woman, in his arms again, or kiss her lips. It wasn't her fault that he imagined what it would be like to feel her skin next to his.

It wasn't her fault that when she was around, William forgot about Elizabeth for the first time in five years.

"Agnes, do you know Sally Walsh? I guess her name is Sally Duster now. She married a man named Joshua Duster about a year ago." Molly got

William's attention. He didn't like Joshua Duster.

"He's a mean man," offered Hank.

"Hush, Hank," said Agnes. "Well, I don't know her, really. I know of her. It was a big surprise to everyone when Joshua Duster wrote away for a wife. No one ever had an inkling that he would want a family, since he's always been content with his own company, having no family to speak of. But she arrived. And we haven't seen much of her since. Do you know this girl?"

"Yes. She's a friend from New York. She's the reason I decided to answer your ad, really. I knew she had come to Dead Water Creek, and word was that she was happy. I was hoping I could find her ranch and perhaps pay her a visit tomorrow."

"Oh, well, if that's what was being said, then who am I to paint a different picture? She lives at Lionsgate Ranch. I don't know where Joshua Duster came up with that fool name. He's never seen a lion in his life. Probably doesn't even know what a lion is. But it's none of my never-mind. They live about two miles outside of town, that way," she gestured.

"Joshua Duster is a snake," William interjected. "And I don't want you going over there, Molly."

Molly looked at William in surprise, and he could see the fire light in her eyes, and they flashed green. "Well, Sheriff, I don't see how you have any say in the matter. You have made it very clear that I am a mere guest here, not any special relation you have any say over. And last I checked, we are still in the land of the free." She turned to Agnes, "Is it too far to walk from here?"

"Well, I'm still the Sheriff in this town, and I don't..."

William's retort was cut short by Agnes. "Oh, why walk? We can have Hank drive you over tomorrow. It might be good for her to have a little womanly company." William felt his jaw clench and his hackles rise. He hated being overruled, particularly when he didn't even get a chance to make an argument. Agnes glanced his way and chided, "Oh William, don't fuss so."

She'll be fine."

William fumed silently. He was about done with his mother for one day, and if she meddled or ignored his decisions one more time, he just might blow.

The rest of the meal passed without incident, but it was quiet. Molly appeared to understand that she had caused some measure of tension, even though she might not know how. She kept quiet. Finally, the meal was over and Molly began to help with the cleanup.

"Molly," William stopped her, "I can help with the dishes tonight. I would like to speak with my mother."

Molly looked at Agnes, and Agnes nodded.

"As you wish," she said, "Hank, would you like to show me your garden? I understand you've been hard at work today." He nodded and walked out the door. Molly followed, with one last concerned glance over her shoulder.

William cleared the dishes and stood by the basin in silence.

"So," Agnes began, "What's eating you so much you needed to chase that girl out of here?"

"You need to butt out, Mother," he said bluntly. He began pumping water into a pot to heat for washing dishes.

"I don't know what you are talking about. I haven't done anything...well, besides write to Molly under your name and invite her here. But nothing after that." Agnes was busying herself so she couldn't look at him. That's what she did when there was an argument brewing.

"You know what I mean. I couldn't go anywhere today without someone asking me about Molly."

"And why is that bad, William? People are curious about her. She's new in town. And you like her. I know you do."

"That's beside the point. The town magically knows that she is a mail-order bride. What they don't know, though, is that she's not actually going to be my bride. Someone conveniently left that part out while they were

spreading gossip.”

“Oh William, what do you care what people say?” She was wiping down the table now but getting winded. She sat down for a rest and caught her breath as she watched William continue with the dishes.

“I *don't* care. But I know you, Mother. You don't give up easily, and I'm afraid this whole getting-the-town-curious idea is one of your schemes. And you're dragging Molly into it.” He turned to look at her. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the sink. “Mother, I don't know how much clearer I can be. I'm not marrying again, and that's final.”

“Why not, William? Because of Elizabeth?”

William silently stared at his mother. No one had dared mention Elizabeth for almost five years, but Agnes wasn't backing down. She had an intensity in her eyes that William only saw when she was going toe-to-toe with someone who got in her way. Finally, he broke the eye contact and turned back to the dishes.

“I'll take that as a yes,” Agnes said. “Don't you think Elizabeth, of all the people in the world, would want you to be happy? Do you think she enjoys watching you mope around this town all miserable and lonely?”

“Don't bring Elizabeth into this. This is *my* choice, not yours and not Elizabeth's. Besides, if I hadn't married the first time, she would still be alive.”

After a long pause, Agnes asked softly, “Is that what you believe? Oh, my dear boy. You think you killed Elizabeth? I was there, son. You didn't kill her.”

“She died because of me. It's the same thing. And I'm not going to put another woman in danger that way.”

“She caught a stray bullet, William. It wasn't your bullet. You had nothing to do with it.”

William felt a lump in his throat. He had never talked about Elizabeth to anyone, and he was struggling now. “She caught a bullet from someone I was

supposed to have arrested by then. If I would have been smarter, or faster, he wouldn't have been there. She wasn't meant to be there anyway."

"Well, if you're going to assign blame for Elizabeth's death, you might as well give it to me. She was in the saloon, hunting down Hank for me, when the fight broke out."

William stopped washing, but he didn't look at her. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't know anything dangerous was going on in town. I kept it from all of you. It wasn't your fault any more than it was Hank's. I knew what was going on, and I knew it wasn't safe to be out at night. I didn't say anything. And she died."

"William. It wasn't your fault, either." Agnes got up and walked across the room to stand next to her son. She put a hand on his arm. "Assigning blame is evil, William, especially when you put it on yourself. Blaming yourself, thinking about what you could have done or what you should have done to change things, is to put yourself above God and God's plans."

"You are not above God, William. There is no good in thinking about what might have been. You've punished yourself for too long, and it's gotten you nowhere new. Why don't you try something different? Instead of thinking about what might have been, try thinking about what could be. And that girl out there, whether you realize it or not, is your chance to get over the past and move on. It's what Elizabeth would want. And, speaking as your mother, it's what I want for you. You deserve some happiness, William, and God's given you a chance at it. Snatch at it before it's gone."

She turned without another word and walked to her room.

William continued washing the dishes and mulling over what his mother had said. He couldn't get past the idea that he had caused Elizabeth's death, but what she had said also affected him: He was not God. He couldn't change what had happened. Was it worth ignoring Molly, the first woman he had been attracted to since Elizabeth, and sending her home? What if Agnes was right? What if Molly was God's offer of a second chance?

Molly entered the house again. “It’s cold outside. I thought I’d grab a wrap.”

William had stopped washing dishes for a moment and now watched Molly as she crossed the kitchen to her room. This time he watched her, not as a temptation to resist, but as someone he might want to welcome into his life. To his surprise, he liked the idea.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



The next day dawned bright and warm. Molly was able to sleep later than usual, mostly due the fact that she had been up all night, thinking over all she had overheard the night before. She blushed, a little ashamed of her behavior. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop on William and Agnes's argument. She had walked away with Hank, but it was chilly, colder than the previous night had been, and she had decided to go back into the house for a wrap.

She had her hand on the doorknob and was about to go in when she heard Agnes ask about Elizabeth. She had frozen in place, not wanting to interrupt, and, she was embarrassed to admit it to herself, curious.

It made sense now. She could tell William had been attracted to her. He might not be in love with her, but he had shown enough interest to cause her to be hopeful. But now? William's heart had apparently been badly broken. Maybe beyond repair. This was unfamiliar territory for Molly, and she knew she had to tread lightly.

Molly was sure she and Agnes could convince a stubborn man to marry her, but she wasn't so sure about a grieving man. She wasn't sure if she wanted to convince a grieving man to marry her. She couldn't compete with a ghost and a guilty conscience.

She had spent most of the night debating whether to continue with

Agnes's plans, or to just wait out the remaining six days and then leave the poor man alone. The problem with the first option was that, now that she knew the reason behind William's resistance, her plans to convince William felt very unfair. She felt underhanded, trying to ingratiate herself with the town so that they would all turn against him if he didn't marry her. At first it had been a game of sorts, trying to one-up the confirmed bachelor. But now it was complicated.

The problem with the second option was that she simply did not want to go home. If she was being honest with herself, there was no home to go back to. She didn't want to work in the bakery anymore, even though she liked the work. After seeing the natural beauty of the West, and living in, what to her was a large, sprawling house, she didn't think she could ever go back to the crowded city, with its noise and its dirty air and its uncomfortable tenement housing.

But it wasn't only that. It was also William. He was handsome, so much more so than she had ever imagined. Sometimes when he looked at her, she felt exposed in a way that should scare her and make her feel vulnerable, but actually made her feel safe. The more she was around William, the more she wanted to be around him.

Finally, after hours of tossing and turning, debating between what she felt she should do and what she really wanted to do, she fell asleep. It was a fitful sleep that offered her no rest. She woke up disgruntled, in the same place she had left off.

After her daily ablutions and a good breakfast, without William, she noted, she had decided to best do nothing for now. No scheming with Agnes today. As for leaving, well she couldn't do that for six more days anyway. She decided she would visit Sally instead. William hadn't been too pleased with that idea last night, but Agnes thought it would be fine. And right now, she felt William needed some space.

Molly gathered some of the left-over sweet rolls from the previous

morning and a loaf of bread, also a product of yesterday's sleeplessness, and rummaged through Agnes's pantry until she found a jar of strawberry jam. She added them all to a basket and put on a straw hat.

She walked outside to look for Hank in the garden, where he could usually be found, and indeed he was there.

"Hank," Molly said as she approached him, "I was wondering if you would be so kind as to take me out to Lionsgate Ranch? I hate to bother you and I would go on my own, but I did promise William that I wouldn't leave again on my own."

Hank had been planting peas and looked up. "I was going to put up a trellis for my peas when I was done with this."

Molly knew it was difficult for Hank to switch plans at the last minute, but she felt strongly that she should visit Sally. "I know, Hank, and I'm so sorry to interrupt your plans. What if I promised that when we got home, I would help you with the trellis so it will be built in half the time?"

Hank stood erect in his ramrod-straight posture and considered this proposal for a moment. "Yes," he finally conceded, "I guess I could do that."

Molly grinned. She was worried what she would do today to stay out of William's way if Hank didn't agree.

Hank left to hitch the horses to the wagon, and Molly followed.

MOLLY NEVER TIRED of seeing the scenery pass by, and the journey to Lionsgate Ranch was no exception. Spring was in full bloom; green tufts of grass were appearing, and trees were starting to blossom. From her position next to Hank on the buckboard, she could smell the hyacinths and the lilacs that lined the yards on the way to Lionsgate. Molly had never seen these flowers, at least not outside of a book, and was fascinated. Hank loved talking about plants, so instead of the usually silent ride, Hank chatted tirelessly, pointing out flowers and newly growing plants, naming them all

and telling Molly where they grew the best. Molly listened to Hank intently and soaked in the beauty. She both loved it and hated it. It hurt her heart to think that she might have to leave in a few days. She wondered if she could try to figure out a way to stay in the town, even if she couldn't marry William.

The town didn't have a bakery, so Molly knew that was always an option. But starting up a shop took a large sum of money, which she didn't have. Bakery hours, especially for a one-person bakery, were also less than desirable. Her only other option was to become a saloon girl, but she felt that she hadn't reached that low point just yet. She was certain that Agnes would not allow her to reach that point. So much of what Molly wanted for her life right now depended on William. This made her uneasy and not a little annoyed.

Hank pulled into the ranch entrance and stopped the buckboard next to the front porch of the large, two story farm house. It was a beautiful home, Molly had to admit. White siding, green shingles, a red door, and a large porch with inviting rocking chairs. For a moment, Molly imagined herself and William sitting on the porch on a cool summer night, listening to the sounds of the evening. She sighed again.

There was no activity outside, and the house looked empty. Molly was disappointed. She was hoping for some female advice on her situation, and Agnes had too much vested interest in the outcome. She wanted Sally's opinion because, as a mail-order bride herself, Molly felt she could understand. Molly walked up to the door, knocked, and waited, but no one answered. Molly was just about to signal to Hank that they should go home when the door creaked open. Sally peeked out from behind the door, looking wary of her visitors.

"Sally?" Molly said.

"Molly!" Sally exclaimed. She opened the door wider to give her friend a good look, but she didn't look as excited as Molly had anticipated.

“What are you doing here?” Sally asked as Molly reached and gave her a hug.

“I needed get out of the house. Things aren’t going the way I expected, and well... I needed someone to talk to. What luck that I have an old friend right here in Dead Water Creek! Besides, I’ve been wanting to visit you ever since I saw you in town the other day.”

Hank climbed the stairs and stood behind Molly. He looked unsure what to do, and Molly grabbed his arm.

“Sally, you remember the sheriff’s brother, Hank. Hank, this is Sally, a friend from back home.”

“Of course, I remember.” Sally held out a hand. Molly was about to say something to distract Sally, since she knew that Hank probably wouldn’t return the gesture, but Hank grabbed Sally’s hand and gave it a brief shake. Molly looked at Hank in surprise, but he was as stoic as ever, never quite making a connection with either of them.

“Won’t you come in? Have a seat in the parlor, won’t you? I can get you something to drink. It’s warm today. It seems that winter has gone all at once,” Sally turned slowly, and then walked into the house.

Hank walked into the parlor and sat, but Molly followed Sally. “Let me help you, Sally. It’s been so long since we’ve had a good chat. I want to hear about everything in the last year, particularly about you and Joshua.”

Sally turned from the table top, where she was fetching cups for the lovely pitcher of lemonade that was already out on the table. “Why do you want to know about me and Joshua? There’s nothing really to tell. He put in an ad, and I answered it, and here I am.” She handed Molly a glass, and then left the room to serve Hank.

Molly found Sally’s comments rather curious. What girl did not want to discuss her own personal love story, or lack of one? She certainly did; that was in part her reason for visiting. Sally returned from the front room and sat down at the table. Molly noticed that she eased herself down in a cautious

way, but she didn't want to seem impolite by querying it. Instead she said, "Hank is a little uncomfortable around new people. I hope you don't mind if he sits in there. And then he'll probably get up and leave when he's inclined."

"He's no bother." She sipped her own lemonade and an awkward silence descended upon the room.

Finally Molly broached the subject she was most interested in. "Sally," she started, "How did you and Joshua marry?"

"I told you," Sally said with a note of impatience, "he wrote an ad, and I answered it. When I got here, we married. What else is there?"

"Well, that's what I'm wondering. I did the same thing as you. I answered an ad. And here I am, but I'm having an awful hard time finishing up that last part. I guess things weren't exactly the same with me and William, though."

Sally looked curious. "It wasn't? What do you mean?"

"Well, William wasn't exactly writing my letters. It was his mother, Agnes."

Sally giggled, and Molly was glad to see her friend let down her guard a little. "I've heard stories about Agnes Cecil. She's a powerhouse. So did the Sheriff know you were coming?"

Molly told Sally the story, adding as much drama and romance as she could. It seemed to entertain Sally, who seemed to forget her worries for the moment. She was careful, though, to not mention Elizabeth, as that would have been tantamount to an invasion of William's privacy. Instead, she alluded to William having a case of cold feet. "And so, here I am: no home, no husband, and no idea what I'm going to do next."

Sally sat thoughtfully for a moment before she said, "When he became angry at his mother, what did William do?"

Molly shrugged. "Nothing much. Just hollered at her a little."

"Did he scare you?"

"Not really. I got the idea that he had a temper, but it wasn't any worse than anyone else."

Sally fell silent again. Finally she said, "Molly, I think the sheriff is right to be careful. You don't want to rush into anything, like Joshua and I did. We were married within a day of my arrival. I thought he was dashing and the whole thing was simply romantic. And now... well. I think these last few days were probably a good idea." She smiled again, and the mood lightened. "And I think that there isn't any way that a good-looking sheriff in a woman-starved town can ignore the prettiest girl in New York for very long. If this is something you really want, then I think it will happen."

Molly smiled, excited that Sally was so hopeful about her future. But then she paused. "Are things well with you? You sound unhappy with your arrangement."

Sally paused as if trying to find the right words. "Joshua is not exactly what I thought he would be. He was very sweet and kind for the first week, but then...he changed. I don't know what I said or did, but things were different." Sally got up, cleared their empty glasses and reached for a tin of cookies on a high shelf. She gasped, and then tried to cover it up with a cough.

"But Dead Water Creek is beautiful, and I do love the townspeople. So it's not all bad." Sally handed Molly the tin of cookies and sat down carefully again.

"I like it, too," said Molly.

Something was afoot that Molly didn't understand, and she didn't like it, but she wasn't sure what it could be. Sally was cautious when talking about herself, but lively and funny, like she had always been, when discussing Molly. An awkward silence ensued while the women nibbled cookies and tried to think of something to say.

Finally Sally said, "I wish you would have written me before you came out so I could give you some advice."

"Why, I did!" said Molly. "I wrote you a letter, asking your opinion of the whole affair. You never wrote back."

“You did? Darn that Joshua. I never got the letter.” Sally looked about to cry.

“Well, never mind,” said Molly hastily. “I’m sure it just got lost in the mail. What would you have told me?”

Sally looked at Molly. “There’s nothing really to say, now that you’re here.” She paused. “Like I said, I’ve heard the sheriff is a good man, and I have no reason to doubt him, but be careful, Molly. Be sure he doesn’t...” she paused and looked out the window, then continued, “Do anything surprising when he gets angry. And if he does, you don’t marry him.”

This conversation had become most odd.

Molly set down her cookie and glanced toward the parlor and Hank. “Sally, your spring lilacs are so lovely. The Sheriff doesn’t have any; do you think we could possibly get a start?”

Sally looked confused, but nodded her head.

“Wonderful.” Molly walked to the doorway separating the parlor and the kitchen. “Hank, could you be a dear and dig up a start of Sally’s lilacs? I would love one at home.” Hank got up without a word and went outside.

Molly turned to Sally and said urgently, “Sally, what is going on? Are you well?”

Sally’s eyes widened, and then they filled with tears. “Yes, I’m fine,” she said, but the tears coursing down her cheek said otherwise.

Molly sat back down at the table and grabbed her friend’s hand. Suddenly, everything clicked into place: Sally’s caution, both in words and movements. Her small cry when she reached for the cookie tin. Her strange warnings, even after all the good things Molly had said about William. “Sally, is Joshua hurting you?”

Sally nodded and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Sally, you’ve got to get away, right now. Today! Where is Joshua right now? You can’t stay here.”

Sally brushed her tears away. “He’s out on the ranch, or in the barn. He’s

due to be home soon. In fact, you're going to have to leave. If he finds out that you were here, and what I've told you, I might get into trouble."

"What about you? You can leave too, Sally. You can't stay here."

"Where am I to go? And besides. He'll find me. I know he will. He'll kill me if I try to leave. He's told me that before."

"You can stay with us!" Molly was practically shouting. "I'm sure the sheriff won't mind. And he wouldn't dare come for you at the sheriff's house."

Sally paused for a moment, as if considering the offer.

"Please, Sally," Molly pleaded quietly.

Sally finally shook her head. "I can't Molly, no matter how much I want to. I think...I think I'm going to have a baby." She put her head in her hands and started sobbing.

Molly put her arms around her friend and spoke words of intended comfort which in reality sounded hollow. Molly didn't know the words to make this better. There were none.

Finally, Sally quieted her sobs and sat up. She straightened her back and smoothed her hair. "You need to go. Joshua will be angry if you're here when he gets back, and... well things are not so bad if I can keep him from getting angry."

Molly didn't know what to say. All she could do was to gather her belongings and walk past the lovely parlor and the out onto the beautiful front porch. Sally walked her out to the buckboard, where Hank was waiting with a lilac start wrapped in paper. Before Molly climbed up beside Hank, she gave her friend one last hug and said in her ear, "Please come to the sheriff's house. If not today, then next time. Get away from him."

Tears welled in Sally's eyes again, and she shook her head slightly. "I made my choice. It was a foolish one, but I still made it. And Joshua isn't all bad. He does feel sorry afterwards. Be careful, Molly." She turned and went back into the house.

Hank slapped the reins and they drove away. They remained silent for a time before Molly burst out, “Hank, what did you mean when you said that Joshua Duster was a mean man? What did he do?”

“He kicked a dog,” Hank said in his straightforward monotone.

“I have a feeling that’s not all he’s ever kicked.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11



When they got home, Molly instructed Hank to go straight inside the side entrance into the house while Molly went to the Sheriff's office. She wanted to see William.

William was sitting at his desk, shuffling papers and making notes. He looked up as soon as Molly walked in the door.

William noticed that Molly's eyes were bright green and blazing, which meant she was furious. He also noticed her face was flushed and her lips red, which made him wonder for the hundredth time today what it might be like to kiss her, but he forced himself to focus.

"Molly, are you well?"

"William, I want you to go right over to Joshua Duster's ranch and arrest that man." She stood with her hands on her hips, and looked at him expectantly.

"For what? I can't just go and arrest men because they're unpleasant. He must break the law in some way." He knew she was upset, but she was so appealing right now. She was like a stick of dynamite, and her fury made her all the more attractive to him. He tried not to smile, for fear she would take her wrath out on him.

She looked exasperated. "What is he doing? He's hitting his wife. He needs to be arrested right now, William! Why are you just sitting there?"

Don't you care that an innocent woman is getting beat, probably routinely, by her husband? Go get him!"

William set his pen down. He was no longer amused by Molly's anger. He stood up slowly. "How do you know this?"

"I was just over at their ranch, and she could barely stand up straight from the pain. I flat out asked her if he hit her."

"What did she say?" William was pacing the floor now.

"She didn't say no. You need to get that man away from her before he kills her. And it may not only be her who is in danger, William. She suspects she may be carrying that's dastardly Duster's baby," Molly was raging now. The hair about her face had fallen free of her hair pins and was hanging wildly on her face.

William stopped to face Molly, and said with regret, "I can't do anything, Molly."

Molly stared back, her eyes wide and her mouth open in shock. "What do you mean, you can't do anything. *Of course* you can! You're the sheriff! Go over there and arrest him. Or shoot him. I don't care which." She crossed her arms in front of her chest now, and glared at William.

He shook his head, and dreaded what he had to say next. "Molly, I wish I could. I wish I could hang any man who hurts a woman from the nearest tree, but I can't." He stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulders and made her look at him. "It's not illegal to hit your wife, Molly." He could tell immediately that this was the wrong thing to say.

"Oh really! Is that what you think—is that what all you mail-order men think, that you can just lure innocent girls away from their homes with pretty stories of love and marriage, and then be incredibly handsome and charming, and then reject them or *hit* them?"

"Now, wait just one second," William said, his voice on edge. "That is entirely unfair. Just because I...have some hesitations about marrying the woman my *mother* proposed to, does not put me in the same category as the

likes of Joshua Duster!”

He expected Molly to argue with him, or even throw further accusations, and he was ready for a fight. What she did instead was fall against his chest and cry pitifully for her friend. His anger melted away, and he was at a loss for what to do. Instinct took over and he put his arms around her and held her while she cried. Holding her, he couldn't help but consider what Molly had just said in her outburst. She thought he was handsome? And charming? *Focus.* William was smart enough to realize that this outburst was not about him, but rather the treatment of her friend by that low-down snake, Joshua Duster.

But it was nice to know that the attraction was mutual.

Finally, Molly's tears abated, but she kept her head on his chest while she shuddered in the aftermath of her emotion. Finally she pulled away and wiped her eyes on the handkerchief she had accessed from somewhere. “You're right. It was wrong of me to group you with him. You have been nothing but kind to me and a true gentleman, so I apologize. But William, is there really nothing you can do?” she whimpered.

Her expression squeezed William's heart. He wanted for all his worth to assure her that he would gallop out there immediately and slay the dragon that was Joshua Duster, just for her. But the level-headed, logical Sheriff side of his brain knew he couldn't. “Not until he breaks a law, darling, but I promise you, the second he does, I'll lock him up.”

“That might not be soon enough. William, she was terrified. She said he's threatened to kill her if she ever left.”

William racked his brain for a legal means to keep Duster away from his wife. William put his finger under Molly's chin and lifted her face until she was looking at him. She had tears clinging to her eye lashes and dotting her cheeks. He brushed one away with his thumb, and allowed his hand to cup her face. She was so beautiful. “Tell you what. I'll go out there tomorrow and see what's going on. And then I'll keep an eye on him, day and night. The

second he breaks the law, I'll haul him in and lock him up for as long as I can. Okay? In the meantime, you keep working on her. Try to get her to leave before he can hit her again."

"Joshua Duster has been hitting Sally?" William and Molly whirled around to see Hank standing in the doorway into their home. Molly and William didn't move fast enough, and before they could say anything, Hank had turned and gone out the side door.

Molly and William followed him, calling for him to stop.

"What in the world is going on?" called Agnes, emerging from her room. "What is all this racket?"

"Hank," William said. "He's overheard something that upset him, and now he's gone."

Agnes looked panicked, and started to move toward the door leading outside. Suddenly, she stopped and cried out. She doubled over and was unable to move.

CHAPTER 12



“Ma!” William cried. He pivoted and went to his mother.

“Agnes!” Molly exclaimed at the same time as William. She followed William and together they helped her into a chair.

“No matter!” said Agnes and she tried to shoo William away.

“Agnes, you’re not well. Let us help you,” Molly said gently.

Agnes’s breath was quick and shallow. Molly looked at William and saw that he had turned pale.

“Ma, what’s going on?”

She smiled weakly. “You haven’t called me Ma in years.” She winced again and groaned. Molly could tell that William was starting to panic, so she took over.

“Agnes, we need to get you in bed.”

“No, Hank...” she protested feebly.

“Hank will be okay for a minute,” said William as he scooped her up in a single motion and carried her to her bed. Molly instructed William to put Agnes into her bed, and then told him to leave. She helped Agnes change into her night dress, the effort of which made Agnes pant and wince in pain. Once she was in her bed, she motioned for Molly to sit down.

“Agnes, are you in pain? Is there anything I can do?”

“Molly, dear,” Agnes said. She was still breathing hard, but the pain

seemed to be less. "It's my old heart. It's giving out."

Molly held the old woman's hand, and she had a flash back to sitting beside her own grandmother just a few months before, in similar circumstances. No, she thought. Not Agnes, too.

"I'm sure it's not that serious," Molly placated, trying for a hopeful tone.

"Oh, it is," Agnes said in the casual way she said everything. "The doctor informed me about eight months ago that it was just a matter of time. He said a year at the most."

"Oh, Agnes, does William know?"

"No. He has enough to handle without worrying about me. That's why I put the ad in the paper, you know. I want to see my boys taken care of. I hope you forgive me for that."

"Of course. You didn't even need to ask. What do I tell William?"

"Nothing about this. But I think he knows anyway. This isn't the first spell I've had. But, I must admit, it is the worst." She paused a moment as if considering something. "Molly, could you please go over to my bureau? There's a book there. Bring it to me?"

Molly rummaged through the bureau drawer until she found a book bound in brown leather. She brought it over to Agnes and handed it to her.

"I want you to have this book, Molly." She caressed the cover, and Molly knew that this book was a prized possession. Molly began to protest, but Agnes held up a hand to silence her. "No, I want you to have this book. But you must promise me something, my dear girl. You must promise not to read it until you and William are married."

"Oh, Agnes. There's no guarantee that we're...that he'll..."

"He will. And you will. Trust me. I know my son. Good sense will win out. But you must promise." Molly nodded, and Agnes handed over the book. "Now, I think I'll sleep a little while, if it's all the same to you. Tell William it's indigestion. I'll be better tomorrow. I'm not going anywhere until I see him married." Agnes's eyes drifted closed, and her breathing slowed and

became regular.

Molly got up and left the room to find William pacing the sitting room.

He looked up as soon as he heard Molly. "Is she any better?"

Molly hated to lie to William, but she didn't want to disobey Agnes either. "I think so. She says she has indigestion, and she thinks it will pass."

William sighed and sank into the nearest chair. "She's done this before, you know. She keeps calling it indigestion, but I'm worried it's worse than just that." He rested his elbows on his knees, lowered his head, and massaged his brow with his hands.

Molly didn't want to confirm his worries, but neither did she want to lie. Instead, she walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. He lifted his hand and rested it on top of hers.

Molly didn't want to break the moment, but there was another emergency at hand.

"William," she said softly, "Hank."

"Hank!" William stood quickly, and Molly dropped her hand, but William grabbed it and held on tight.

"Where would he have gone?" Molly asked, "The garden?" Together, they headed toward the door, William's hand still firmly around Molly's. They walked together to the edge of Hank's garden, even though they knew the moment they left the door that he wasn't there.

"I think I know where he is," William said. "But I don't dare leave Mother."

"Go," said Molly. "I'll look after Agnes. But hurry, William. It's getting late."

"I know," said William. He looked down at their clasped hands, and then into her eyes. Reluctantly, he let go of her hand and hurried away.

WILLIAM MADE his way to the Saloon. Hank only ventured to two places

when he was upset, and this was the one.

William walked in and eased up to the bar. He looked around for Hank.

“You want something, Sheriff?” asked the bartender, an old, bent-over man named Creed.

“Nothing right now, Creed. I’m looking for my brother. He got upset and took off. You seen him?”

“Not today, Sheriff. You worried about him?”

“A little. He just not usually this upset. You know Hank. You let me know if comes in, will ya?”

“Sure thing, Sheriff. You tell that little woman of yours, she’s welcome here anytime she wants to bring her goods. She brought over some sweet rolls the other morning before we opened up. Said she thought me and my girls might like a treat.”

William raised his eyebrows. “She did? Is there a place in this town she hasn’t been yet?”

“You’ve got yourself a nice lady, Sheriff. You done real good on that ’un.” Creed began polishing glasses and putting them up on the shelf behind him.

William was getting ready to give his standard protest, that Molly wasn’t “his lady,” but the protest died before it began. He no longer felt any desire to protest. Instead, he felt a sense of pride in what Creed had said.

As William was walking out of the saloon, Joshua Duster walked in, reeling and already drunk. He slammed into William’s shoulder with his own.

“Watch it, Duster,” warned William. He tried to remain friendly with most of the townspeople, but he struggled when it came to Joshua Duster. Before today, William simply didn’t like the man. But now, if what Molly told him was true, he despised the man.

Duster turned around and squinted at the Sheriff. “What do you mean, ‘watch it?’ Looks like you’re the one who ran into me.” William decided the best course of action would be to ignore the belligerent drunk and hope he

drank himself to death.

“Hey,” said Duster, “I was talking to you, *Sheriff*. I said you ran into me, and I reckon I would like an apology.”

“Well,” said William against his better judgement, “Good luck on that.” He headed for the door to leave.

“You’re not better than me, William Cecil. That’s right,” Duster addressed William’s back. “I know what you’ve done. You’ve gone and ordered you a bride. Just like I did. Well, let me tell you, that was a mistake.” William turned slowly. Joshua was treading on thin ice, mentioning Molly. “That’s right, Sheriff,” sneered Duster, “Go back home to your mail-order whore.”

Something snapped inside William. Without knowing what he was doing, he yanked Duster away from the bar and hit him as hard as he could. Duster swung back and managed a good one, landing a fist to William’s eye. William came back again, this time connecting with Duster’s nose. Duster, already unsteady from drink, was unable to keep his balance and reeled backward into the bar, which had been quickly cleared of customers as soon as the fight broke out.

William took advantage of Duster’s position, grabbed him by his collar and forced him to stand upright. “I don’t know what is going on with you, Duster,” William spat, “But you just insulted the sheriff’s lady. I’m taking you in for drunk and disorderly conduct. You’re coming with me.”

William partly dragged the stumbling Joshua Duster across the street to the cells. Joshua was making enough racket to wake the dead, but William paid him no attention. William flung the door to the office open with a loud crash and pushed the man into one of the jail cells, locking it behind himself.

“You can stay there until you’re sober,” William barked. He turned and walked down the hallway to the door to his home. He pounded on the door. He knew he should walk around back when he had someone locked up, but it was late, his brother was missing, his mother was sick, there was a gash on

his nose, and his eye was swelling up fast. He just wanted to get home.
The door opened and Molly cried, “Oh good Lord! William!”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



“It’s nothing,” William said, walking past Molly.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing!’? You’re bleeding and your eye is swollen shut! What in the world happened? Did you find Hank?” She rushed after him and started rummaging through Agnes’s medicinal supplies.

“I’m fine, Molly. And no. I have no idea where he could be.” William walked over to the basin and began pumping the lever. He ran his hands under the cold water, giving his sore knuckles relief, then pumped some more. Molly rushed to his side and shoved a pot under the running water.

“Here,” she said, taking his hand from the pump handle and lowering his knuckles into the pot. His eyes closed as the pain numbed. She too plunged her hand in the water, wetting the towel she held. She pulled it out and said, “Put this on your eye for the swelling.” She turned to him and reached for his face with the towel. William froze. A woman hadn’t touched him in a long while, and he wasn’t ready for her to be this close. It turned out he didn’t have a choice. Molly put the cold towel on his eye, and he groaned with relief.

“There,” she said softly, “Is that better?”

William opened his good eye and studied her concerned face as she dabbed his eye. “It’s really not a big deal, Molly. I’ve been hit before. Just never by that no-good Josh Duster, but a black eye’s a black eye.”

“Well, you’ve never been hit when I was here, so it is a very big deal to me.” She dabbed again and he winced at her touch. “I’m sorry. Did I push too hard? Would it be better if you held it?” she asked softly.

“No,” William said huskily, “You’re fine,”

William realized how close he was to her then. He was taller than her by a good measure, so she had to reach for his eye. As a result, she was pressed up against him. He could feel the curve of her against his chest, and he remembered the argument his mother had made the night before. Was it time to move on? Molly’s eyes were full of compassion, and he realized just how tired he was. Tired of missing Elizabeth. Tired of carrying the burden of her death. Tired of resisting the attraction he felt for Molly. He wanted something different.

Slowly, William reached up and took the towel from Molly’s hand. He couldn’t see well, and he knew he must look awful, but he didn’t care. His mother had warned him to not let another moment pass. He didn’t intend to.

William’s good hand touched her cheek and Molly’s eyes drifted closed. She turned her head into his hand until her lips touched his palm, and she gently kissed it. He pulled his other hand from the water and dropped it to her waist to pull her close. He lowered his head until their lips met.

His kiss was soft and hesitant at first, but when Molly parted her lips in acceptance, he pulled her closer, and their kiss deepened. William’s hand wandered from her face and tangled in her hair. He became lost in her and could think of nothing but Molly, her lips, her breath, her body against his. He kissed her again, and then again, his passion and need increasing. A moan escaped her lips, and William muffled it with yet another kiss.

Finally, Molly broke away, and William rested his forehead against hers, trying to catch his breath. Molly pulled free.

“I’ll get the witch hazel,” she breathed, “So I can tend to your cuts and bruises.” He watched as she walked away, wondering what he had just done, and why he hadn’t done it earlier.

He grabbed the basin and sat at the table. He was soaking his knuckles again when Molly came back into the room with the witch hazel in one hand and fresh cloths in the other. She approached him, and besides the color in her cheeks, there was no hint of what had happened between them.

“Did you say Joshua Duster did this?” she asked as she dabbed medicine on the cut across the bridge of his nose.

“Yeah.”

“Does that mean...”

“He’s spending the night in a jail cell.”

“Good. That means Sally is safe. For tonight, anyway.” She took his hand out of the basin and gently dried it with her towel. He closed his eyes briefly, enjoying her touch. She dabbed the witch hazel on his bruised knuckles.

Finally, he was able to ask, “How’s mother?”

“She’s better, I think. She’s been asleep since you left, but her breathing hasn’t changed any. You didn’t find Hank?”

He shook his head, “No. And I don’t know where else I can look tonight.”

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “Hank has done this once before. We looked everywhere, and couldn’t find him. He eventually showed up three days later. We still don’t know where he went.”

“When?”

William didn’t answer.

“When Elizabeth died?” she ventured.

William was silent for a moment, and then gave a quick nod. “Did Mother tell you about her?”

“No,” she admitted. “I came back last night for my wrap, and I heard you talking. I’m so sorry. For everything. For your loss, for overhearing your conversation. For being here. For reminding you.”

“Don’t,” William interjected, “Don’t be sorry for being here.”

Molly put the witch hazel on the table and then sat in the chair next to

William. She touched his arm. “What do we do?” Molly whispered.

“About Hank? Or about us?”

“Both,” she said with a chuckle.

“I don’t know. Wait, I guess.” William covered her hand with his own.

They sat like this for some time. William wanted to kiss her again, but he didn’t dare. It had been five years since he had kissed, or even touched, a woman. He wasn’t sure he trusted himself. Finally, he stood, and did as much as he dared: he kissed the top of her head. “Go to bed, Molly. I’ll wait up for Hank and keep an eye on Mother.”

Molly nodded and headed to her room. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it. She touched her lips where only an hour ago William’s lips had been. She had been kissed once or twice by the few beaus she’d had before Gram fell ill, but never like that. A kiss had never made her dizzy and left her body aching. What she felt for William thrilled her and frightened her all at once.

Molly pulled the book Agnes had given her from her apron pocket and put it in her own bureau drawer. She splashed her face with water, dressed in her night gown, and brushed her hair, her normal night time routine, without a second thought. But tonight was different. For the first time, she was aware of the way her face felt when she washed it. The bones and the structure were new to her. Putting on her nightgown, she felt the light, flimsy fabric wash across her face, neck, arms, abdomen and legs, and felt the hem as it skimmed her toes when she moved. When she brushed her hair, it felt foreign to her: soft and silky. William’s kiss had awakened her body, and for the first time, she was truly alive.

She lay down and prepared to spend the rest of the night wide awake, intensely aware of the man on the other side of the door.

CHAPTER 14



The next morning, as soon as she dressed, Molly went to Agnes's room to check on her. She was relieved to see the older woman sitting up in her bed, a crochet hook and yarn in her hand.

"Hello," Agnes greeted Molly. "Came to see if I was dead?"

"Not exactly. But I am certainly glad to find you alive. Did William get your crochet work for you?" Molly asked casually. She was desperate to know if William had spoken to his mother about her.

"Yes, he was in here earlier. But he shouldn't have bothered. I haven't wanted to make a stitch. And no, he hasn't said anything about you." She smiled weakly at the expression on Molly's face. "It's written all over your face, dear. He didn't mention you, but he tried so hard to *not* mention you that he would have said less if were shouting. He asked me to let you know that he was in his office." She raised her eyebrow at this. "Apparently he needs to discuss a prisoner with you. I assume the prisoner had something to do with the state of his face this morning? He said if he's not there, he'll leave you a note. Seems like you all had an eventful night."

"Has Hank come home yet?" Molly asked, ignoring Agnes's last comment.

Agnes swallowed as though she was trying to control her emotions, and indeed her voice sounded choked when she spoke again. "No. But I'm sure

he'll find his way back. He always does. And William is going to look for him today."

Molly busied herself tending to Agnes. She made her breakfast, got her extra pillows, and anything else she could think of until Agnes shooed her away. "Goodness sakes," she said irritably. "I'm grateful to you, but I just want to rest. Why don't you go to the office? William said he wanted you to come over and help him with a prisoner. I don't know what he expects you to do, but that's none of my never-mind."

"Are you sure, Agnes? I hate to leave you."

"I'm going to sleep, dear. There will be nothing to do. I'll be fine." Agnes, true to her word, closed her eyes. Molly didn't leave until she was sure Agnes was asleep, and then she dawdled a while.

She was unsure how to feel. He had kissed her last night as if he wanted her, but she remembered his assertion that he didn't want to marry, and she understood his reasons. One kiss did not necessarily mean that anything had changed. She was afraid to let herself indulge in the idea that he might marry her. It would hurt too much if he didn't. Finally, with Agnes sound asleep and nothing else to do, Molly unlocked the door to the sheriff's office and went in.

William was not at his desk. She was both relieved and disappointed. She wanted more than anything to see William again, but with the confusion, she didn't know what to expect. The jail cell was empty, too. She hated that man, and she wanted nothing more than to see him locked up, but she knew William couldn't hold Joshua Duster for long since he hadn't actually broken the law. William could only keep him long enough for him to sober up, and then he had to let him go.

She went over to William's desk, looking for the note Agnes had told her would be there.

"Molly, I've gone to look for Hank. Please look after Mother. Keep Hank here if he comes home. W."

She felt a little silly. All those nerves and all that build up for nothing. What did she expect? A love letter? Not while William's brother was missing, she knew.

She was about to go back to the house for a nap, being very tired after two restless nights, when she heard thundering horse hooves and the clatter of a buckboard careening down the street, stopping right in front of the office.

She rushed to the door and flung it open. "Hank!" she exclaimed, as soon she recognized the driver. Hank's usual emotionless face looked panicked and scared. "Where have you been? What's this?"

"Sally is in trouble," he said. He spoke faster than usual, although still in his characteristic monotone. This, more than anything, worried Molly.

Molly didn't ask questions. She didn't think about Agnes or William's instructions to keep Hank home. Her only worry was Sally, and what Joshua might do after a long, drunken night in a jail cell. She climbed into the buckboard and without a word, Hank slapped the reins harder than usual and the horses took off again.

The ride to Lionsgate Ranch was reckless and bumpy. Hank didn't say anything, but the manner in which he steered the horses indicated that something very bad had happened to Sally. Finally, the horses came to a stop in a cloud of dust. Molly jumped off the buckboard the best she could and rushed into the house. "Sally!" she called. She looked in the parlor, where she had sat only yesterday sipping tea, but Sally was not there. She wasn't in the kitchen or the bathing room.

"Sally!" she called again, and she thought she heard a groan.

Hank charged into the house behind her, and motioning to her, said, "Upstairs." They both ran up the stairs, Molly in the lead. She could hear Hank's heavy breathing behind her, and she was glad she had someone to help her.

"Sally," she called again. Again, she heard a noise, this time it sounded like soft crying coming from the direction of a bedroom. Molly ran in that

direction and stopped in her tracks.

Sally was sitting on the floor, against a wall, under a broken window. Shards of glass lay around her, and her eye was bruised worse than William's had been the night before. She had a gash on her head and a broken lip. She could barely move, but when she saw Molly and Hank in the doorway, she started crying. She tried to talk, but her swollen lip made it impossible to decipher.

She rushed to her friend's side. "It's going to be fine, Sally, I'm here. I don't care what you say, I'm taking you home. Hank, grab some of those blankets off the bed and come here."

Sally grabbed Molly's arm. She was struggling to speak, and Molly put her ear next to Sally's lips "M-my b-baby," she whispered just before she lost consciousness.

Molly looked down and for the first time noticed the blood pooling under them, soaking Sally's skirts. "Oh good Lord. Hank, she needs a doctor." Molly wasn't sure what to do now. She was sure it was safe for Sally to travel, but the alternative was to leave Sally here, and that she simply would not do. She might die from blood loss. "Dear God," said Molly out loud as she supported her friend's lolling head, "Don't let her die. Hank!" she barked, "Change of plans. Grab that mattress off the bed and put it in the buckboard. Fast. I have no idea where Joshua is, but I have a feeling he won't take kindly to us stealing his mattress or his wife. Then come straight back here."

Hank obeyed her orders without hesitating. He grabbed the mattress with next to no effort. Say what you want about that man, thought Molly, but he's strong and loyal. She carefully placed Sally's head against the wall to grab whatever clothes she could find and stuff them into a pillow case. By that time Hank was back, waiting for orders.

"Good, grab some of those blankets," she pointed to the discarded bed clothes, "You're going to need them; she's bleeding a lot. Now, Hank, come here. Can you pick her up?" Molly stood back for Hank to scoop Sally up.

“Good. Take her out to the wagon and lay her on the mattress. Careful, Hank, I don’t want to hurt her more than she already is. Watch her head,” she said as she followed Hank out the door and down the stairs, the pillow case in hand.

Hank made good time to the buckboard, and gentler than one would expect of him, he lowered Sally onto the mattress. Molly had grabbed a quilt from another room on their way down the stairs, and she handed it to Hank to tuck her in. Once Sally was situated, Hank climbed onto the front of the buckboard and picked up the reins.

Molly was about to climb into the wagon herself when she heard a gunshot. She whirled around to spot Joshua running from his barn, gun in hand and pointed at her. She put her hands in the air as a sign of surrender, but looked at Hank and said urgently, “Hank, take her to the doctor first, and then go get William. Go now!” She slapped the rump of one of the horses for good measure and the buckboard started moving.

“Stop!” yelled Joshua, but it was too late. Hank was on the road, but that didn’t stop Joshua. He stopped and took aim again. Molly hit the ground just before the shot sounded, and she heard a bullet whiz over her head. Molly heard Joshua approaching. He grabbed her by the arm and yanked her to her feet.

“Who are you?” he shook her by the arm until her teeth rattled.

“I’m Molly,” she finally answered.

He stopped and peered at her. An evil smile spread across his face. “I know you. You’re the sheriff’s whore. My, my, my. You sure are a pretty thing, ain’t ya.” He pulled her to him until they were nose to nose. “Tell you what, Molly,” he said her name like he was rolling it around his mouth, and it made Molly want to gag. She could smell alcohol on his breath and the sour smell of a man who had spent the night in jail. “You lost me my wife. The way I figure it, you owe me another one. And since the sheriff doesn’t seem too keen on having you, I don’t think he’ll mind if I borrow ya.”

Molly knew she should be frightened by Duster's suggestions, but she was angered instead. "You are disgusting," she retorted, spitting in his eye. She had just enough time to marvel at her great aim before Joshua hit her on the temple with the butt of his gun.

WILLIAM WAS ANGRY. William had spent the morning combing the town for Hank, and was frustrated to begin with. When he got home to check on Molly and his mother, Molly was nowhere to be found. William rushed into Agnes's room and breathed a sigh of relief to see his mother asleep, her chest still rising and falling, albeit slowly. Why in the world would Molly leave his mother alone on a day like today? He felt as if steam might be coming off his face, he was so mad.

"William?" his mother said softly.

"I'm here, Mother," he replied, trying to control his anger.

"I thought that might be you. Come here, my boy."

William grabbed a chair standing off to the side and dragged it closer to his mother's bedside. He sat close and took her hand. She looked worse, and he forgot his anger. "You don't have indigestion, do you, Mother?"

She smiled weakly. "You always were smart. No, I don't. I don't have much more time, William, so I need you to listen closely to me. That girl. She's good for you, William. Don't be a fool. Don't let her leave here. Marry her. She loves you, and she'll be good to Hank. And don't be angry that she's not here right now. She has a good reason."

William's eyes started to fill with tears. He didn't cry often, and he didn't want to do it now, but he couldn't help himself. "Why didn't you tell me, Ma? I could have fetched you a doctor."

She barely shook her head. "I got a doctor myself and he told me there was nothing he could do. But I realized there was something *I* could do. For my sons. Both of you. I couldn't leave you alone. So I put an ad in the paper.

I know you're angry with me, William, and I'm sorry. But I'm not sorry I found Molly. The Lord knows what you need before you do. He's giving you a second chance at happiness, William. Please, for me, for yourself, take it."

William didn't say anything, but nodded his head.

"You're a good boy. Take care of Hank."

"You know I will, Mother."

"Yes, I do." She lifted a hand to his cheek for a moment and then dropped it back on the sheets. "I'm tired now. I want to see Hank when he gets home. Make sure he comes in."

Again, William nodded. Agnes closed her eyes and went back to sleep. He got up, wiped the tears off his cheeks and tried to compose himself. He would tell Hank to see her, if he could find him.

William left Agnes's room and eased the door shut. Suddenly, Hank burst into the room, opening the door with such force that it hit the wall and swung wildly.

"Hank! Where have you been? Mother is sick, and you disappeared."

"Molly! Hurry!" and with that, he turned and ran back out the door.

William was immediately alarmed. Hank never moved quickly, and he was practically running now. William followed him out the door. He saw the mattress in the buckboard, covered with blood. "Molly," he whispered, panic entering his heart. "Molly!" he said louder and with fire under it. "Hank! Where is she?"

"She's at Sally's ranch. She made me bring Sally to the doctor. But he's got Molly!" William swore. "Sally's ranch? That's Lionsgate, right? Duster's place?"

Hank nodded and started to climb into the buckboard.

"No, Hank, you stay here. This horse is too tired to go out there again. Take her out and get her rested, then go see Mother. Sit with her until I get back. I'll go get Molly."

He ran to the barn and saddled his own horse. It would be faster than the

wagon. He swung into the saddle and urged the horse into a canter. He rode hard all two miles to Lionsgate, fear rising in his chest every time he thought about what might happen to her. Not again, he thought over and over. If he would have just kept Duster locked up another day...he urged the horse to gallop faster. He couldn't lose another woman to his mistakes as Sheriff. He wouldn't. Dear God, he prayed as he rode, let me get there in time.

He finally reached Lionsgate Ranch and slowed the horse, taking in the property. He saw the house and a barn, but where was she?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



Slowly, Molly opened her eyes, but she couldn't focus. Her head was throbbing, and the light, even the dim light of the room, made it ache worse. Something was dripping into her eyes, and she tried to wipe it away, but she couldn't move her hands. Why could she not move her hands? She closed her eyes and opened them again, trying to focus on her wrists. Shapes formed and she realized that she was tied to the chair on which she was sitting. She began to panic. Where was she? Slowly, the events of the day started to come back to her. Hank, saying that Sally was in trouble. The rush to the house, and finding Sally on the floor. Duster catching them just as they were about to rescue Sally.

That snake. He must have knocked her out and then tied her up, hands and feet bound to the chair. She also had an old bandana around her mouth. She started to struggle, to check for any weak spots in the ties that held her.

"It's no good," said Duster. She hadn't noticed him sitting across from her on a bale of hay, drinking from a bottle. He looked very drunk. "Took ya long enough to wake up. I got bored, so I had a drink. And then another one. You sure like making men wait, don't ya?"

Molly stared at him with big eyes. She had to get out of this. But how? She kicked again, feeling the tether relax a little around her right ankle. She began to pull at the tie the best she could under her long skirts, praying that

he didn't notice.

"I must admit. I never did understand the sheriff. He sent away for a bride, a pretty one at that, and then doesn't want to marry her. Why not? You stingy?" He got closer, and Molly could smell his sour breath again. She continued to work surreptitiously at the tie and, finally, she felt it loosen a little more. "You don't look stingy to me," he continued. "Maybe I can try to find out why the sheriff changed his mind." He bent over and rested his hands on his knees so he was looking straight at her. He removed the bandana, but before Molly could yell or scream, Joshua forced his mouth on hers, hard enough to bruise her lips. She yanked her right foot hard in surprise, and it came loose. She began to gag on his breath, and he pulled away, leering horribly.

Molly didn't waste another moment, bringing her right knee up hard and fast into his groin. He groaned loudly and fell to the ground.

WILLIAM WAS NEAR THE BARN, deciding it would be faster to check there first, when he heard a distinct groan of pain. He ran full speed into the barn, to find Molly tied to a chair. Only her right leg was free of the bonds, and he suspected it was the reason Duster was now rolling on the barn floor, hands between his legs, practically sobbing.

"William!" she breathed, as soon as she saw him.

"Molly!" he rushed to her side and began to untie her. "You're bleeding."

"He hit me. But it doesn't matter. Just get me out of here!" After untying her, he began rubbing her feet, trying to get the blood to circulate faster. Just as they were about to stand up, Molly saw something behind William.

"William! Watch out!"

William turned in time to see Joshua moving in to attack him with a broken bottle. William launched himself at Joshua, and the bottle was knocked free of his hand. William and Joshua went down on the floor. They

rolled, first Joshua on top, punching William in his bad eye. William yelled in pain, and the room started spinning. Joshua was winding up for another hit.

I've got to get up, William thought. William blocked his face with his forearm just in time. While Duster recovered from the block, William swung his elbow in Joshua's direction and felt it hit just as he heard a crack. Duster collapsed with his hands over his nose.

William staggered to his feet and leaned against the barn stall. He could think only about Molly, and whether she was hurt. And then there she was, in front of him. His beautiful Molly. The Molly he had almost lost; just as he had lost Elizabeth. He couldn't handle losing someone again. But she wasn't lost. And William decided right then and there that he would make sure that he would never be without her again. William took a step toward her, arms wide, wanting nothing more than to hold her.

"William!" Molly screamed, "Watch out!" But it was too late. Duster had run head first into William's gut and knocked the wind out of him. William went down, and Duster went with him. How in the world did Duster have this much stamina when he was so drunk? But now was not the time to ponder such questions. William covered his face with both arms. He knew he couldn't afford to take another hit to the face, or he would be out, and Molly would be at the mercy of a drunk and violent Duster. William kicked and twisted, trying to get free. He knew Duster was drunk, and he knew he couldn't keep this up for much longer. The question was whether William could last longer than him.

Just then, Joshua Duster stopped hitting and collapsed forward, face down, onto William. William was shocked that it was finally over, and lay still for a moment, trying to figure out what had happened. He finally pushed the limp body from him and looked up long enough to see Molly, crying, and holding a shovel.

William stayed down, trying to catch his breath. He heard the shovel fall to the ground, and then Molly was there, kneeling over him. "Are you okay?"

she asked, a hand on his cheek. Without waiting for an answer, she kissed him, long and hard. She finally pulled away. "Are you okay?" she asked again.

"If I say no, will you kiss me again?"

She smiled and laughed, but the laugh turned into a sob. She couldn't hold it back anymore. She began to cry.

William sat up, wincing slightly as he crossed his legs in front of him. He pulled Molly onto his lap, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and sobbed. Eventually, her tears abated into hiccups. When she pulled away enough to look at him, William kissed her for a long time.

"I'm so glad you're safe," he said finally.

"Me too," Molly managed. She slid off his lap, and William stood, taking her hands to pull her up.

"You've got a nasty cut on your head. What happened?"

"I think he hit me with his gun. But that's nothing. Are you okay?" she was looking at his eye, which had been hit twice in as many days. "I'm worried it will damage your vision."

"I can see you just fine." He smiled, but then grew serious. "Molly, when Hank told me you were in danger, I couldn't stand it. The pain was unbearable. I knew then, but I think I've known it since the moment I saw you standing in my sitting room three days ago. I love you, Molly Ryan. I want to marry you, if you'll have me."

"I love you, William Cecil." Molly kissed him again with as much passion as she could manage. "I've wanted to marry you since the first night when you told me there was a breeze blowing the stars around."

He looked confused, but let it pass. "We need to figure out what to do with Duster."

"Oh, Sally?" exclaimed Molly suddenly, "Is she alright?"

"I don't know. I think Hank got her to the doctor, since she wasn't in the buckboard when he came to get me. The best we can do is pray."

“Can’t you arrest him, William?”

“He hasn’t broken any laws that I can see. He’s a despicable man, but fighting isn’t illegal.”

“What about what he did to me? Isn’t kidnapping your future wife a crime?” Molly was really getting her dander up.

“It would be if he snatched you. You were trespassing on his property, the best I can see it. Him tying you up, while it makes me furious, could be seen as an act of defense.”

“William!” Molly stamped her foot and put her hands on her hips. “Stop being so sheriff-y!” She looked at the disgusting man out cold at her feet. “We can’t let him free. He’ll try to track down Sally and the next time, he will kill her. I know it.” William, ignoring Molly’s outburst, was distracted by something on the ground. He bent down to examine the bottle Duster had used in his attempted attack.

“Where did this bottle come from?”

“He was drinking out of it when I woke up. And then, when you tackled him, he dropped it.”

Without another word, William started walking around the barn, looking in the stalls. Molly followed him closely, curious about what he was doing, but also afraid to let him out of her sight. Finally, William found what he was looking for.

In one of the stalls were several wooden barrels and crates of empty bottles. William grinned. “We got him.”

“What is all this?”

“This, my dear lady, is a whiskey-making operation.”

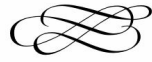
“Is that illegal?”

“Not if you make it for yourself. But that’s not what he’s been doing. See these bottles? They’ve been finding bottles exactly like this in abandoned camps over the last few months. He’s been selling whiskey to the locals, and *that* is illegal. I would guess he’s been sampling his own product, too, which

is why he's already arriving drunk at the saloon lately. And he's a mean drunk. Don't worry, he'll be going away for a long time."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



Molly, William, and Joshua Duster's horse bearing a gagged and bound Joshua Duster, arrived at the sheriff's office. William got down and then helped Molly.

"Why don't you go in and check on Mother and Hank?" William instructed, "I'm going to get Duster locked up and squared away. He's going to have to stay here for some time, until we can wire for a judge to come down for at trial."

"You know," Molly said thoughtfully, "Now that we're getting married, we really should consider building a place some ways out of town. It's not safe to live next to where the criminals are held. What if we have children? I don't want them anywhere around the likes of him."

William looked at her thoughtfully, "What would we do with the house?"

"I don't know," Molly shrugged, "Rent it to your deputy?"

"I don't have a deputy," William reminded her.

"I know. That's something else we will need to discuss."

HANK WAS PACING the room when Molly entered, clearly agitated. "Hank," she said, worry settling in her stomach, "What's wrong?"

"Mother," was all Hank would say.

“Oh no! Hank, knock on that door and tell William to hurry.” Molly quickly crossed the room and opened Agnes’s door. “Agnes,” Molly sank to her knees and took her hand. She could hear shuffling behind her and turned to see William and Hank standing helplessly against the wall. She motioned for them to come closer.

Hank went around the other side of the bed, and William moved closer to Molly.

Agnes’s eyes fluttered open and focused on the three around her. “Oh, good. You made it.” She shifted her focus to William. “Do you have any news for me?”

William’s eyes were wet, but he managed a smile. “You were right, Mother. Molly and I are going to get married.”

Agnes smiled. “That’s what I was waiting for.” She weakly pointed at the bureau. “Get that package, dear. That’s for you and Molly. A wedding present.” She looked at each of her sons, and then her eyes settled on Molly. “Take care of my boys, won’t you?”

“Of course. I’m not going anywhere.”

Agnes patted Molly’s cheek and then closed her eyes. Only minutes later, Agnes’s breathing slowed, and then she was gone.

Hank walked out and Molly started to follow him, worried that he would disappear again. This time William stopped her. “I’ll follow him and make sure he’s okay.” He looked at Molly intently. Their eyes were both glistening with tears, and Molly reached up to wipe one that had escaped down his face.

“I’m so sorry, William,” she said gently. He gathered her in his arms and held her tight, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. She could feel his silent tears in her hair. Finally, he pulled away. “You should go look after Hank,” Molly instructed. “He’s going to need you. I’ll go to the undertaker, but it’s getting late. I hope he’s still there. I’ll also stop in to check on Sally.”

William nodded. “Thanks, Molly.” He hesitated a moment, bent to kiss her tenderly, and then left.

HANK AND WILLIAM were seated at the dinner table, drinking coffee, when Molly returned an hour later. She walked in from the outside, but she wasn't alone. The town doctor followed Molly, and in his arms was Sally Duster.

William looked at Molly in alarm.

Molly started talking before William had a chance to speak. "She needed someone to take care of her. And I volunteered. Doctor," she turned to the man behind her. "Follow me. I'll show you where you can lay her down." When Molly and the doctor returned, Molly thanked the doctor and saw him out the door, then turned slowly to face a stunned William.

"What are you doing? We have to deal with my mother who is still in her bed."

"I know," said Molly, holding up her hand. "But I really have thought this through." Molly took a seat next to the men and looked at them sternly. "I went to the undertaker's and he said he would be here later tonight; I was right, Agnes had already arranged to have a coffin made, and it's even paid for. After that, I went to see Sally. William, Hank, she wasn't doing well. She's beat up badly, as you saw for yourself. The doctor said that she would recover from her injuries, but it's her heart I'm worried about."

"Is Miss Sally okay?" Hank asked.

"Hank was worried about Miss Sally," William interjected. "That's where he was last night. He heard us talking about Joshua hurting her, and he went over there and watched from the barn to make sure she would be okay. When Joshua got home this morning and started whaling on her, apparently Hank ran in there and got in a few wallops of his own. Duster got scared enough and retreated to the barn. That's when Hank left to fetch you."

"Aah," said Molly. That explained so much. "Well, Hank," she said gently, "Her body is going to be okay. The doctor said that whoever stopped Joshua might have saved her life. I guess that's you, Hank. But her heart hurts right now. She lost her baby." She looked at William. "I know I should

have asked you before I brought her here, but she needs someone to take care of her. And, with Agnes gone, we need another woman in the house until we can marry. I thought it might be a good solution.”

William sighed. “I hadn’t thought of that. Molly, I would’ve married you tonight if we needed to.”

“I know you would have, but...” She shrugged, “I want Agnes taken care of first. I want to give you time to grieve.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, the undertaker arrived at the Cecil home, and with him he carried instructions Agnes had left about her burial and her funeral. She did not want people to attend. Especially not Mabel of the quilting society. Just Hank, William, Molly, and the preacher.

The next day, they held Agnes’s funeral. Hank cried into Molly’s lap, and William held on to her hand. Molly’s tears ran down her face. She had come to love Agnes, and in five short days had come to consider her a combination of mother, grandmother, and friend. Three things she had not had when she left home to make a new life in Dead Water Creek. She would miss her sorely.

That night, after Hank had gone up to the loft and Sally had been led back to bed, Molly and William sat together across the dining room table, holding hands.

“There’s something I need to show you,” William said. He got up and left the room, but came back with a package in hand. He sat back down and placed the package between them.

“What’s this?” Molly asked.

“This is the package I picked up on the day you got your new dress.” William grinned at her, and his eyes lit up in a way that Molly hadn’t seen since Agnes died.

“Is it possible that was only four days ago? It feels like a lifetime.”

“It’s the package mother told us was a wedding present right before she died. Remember?”

“Yes,” said Molly, “But I had forgotten.”

“Me too. But I remembered it later today. Should we open it together?”

She nodded, and together they removed the brown packaging. Inside they found a box. William opened the box to reveal a simple wedding ring.”

“I think,” said William, “That this is for you.” He took the ring and slid it onto her finger.

“It’s beautiful,” Molly murmured. “When did she order this?”

“It had to have been months ago. At least six months. It takes a while for these types of goods to reach us out here.” William looked at her and quirked an eyebrow. “About the time she started writing you. Looks like she knew about you from the first.”

Molly shook her head in disbelief. “I guess so. You know, she left me something, too.” This time it was Molly who got up and returned with something in her hand. She set it on the table.

Before she could say anything, however, William snatched up the book. “Where did you get this?” He sounded upset.

“I told you: Agnes gave it to me before she left. She told me I couldn’t read it until we were married, but I figure there’s no harm, since we’re going to be married by the end of the week...” she trailed off when she noticed William opening the book and ruffling through the pages. He swore quietly under his breath. “What?” Molly asked.

“This is my book,” he finally replied. “This is the book I used to take outside with me to write down my thoughts. Why did she have this, and why would she give it to you?”

Molly took the book from him. “Do you mind?” she asked before she opened the pages. He hesitated a moment, but then nodded his permission. Molly opened the book to a random page and read. She flipped to another page, and read again. This time, she started laughing.

“Hey!” William said angrily. “I’m not going to let you read this if you’re just going to laugh at me.”

“Oh, darling,” said Molly. She reached over to pet his arm as if she was soothing his injured pride. She stood up and left the room again, quickly returning with a clutch of papers. “I’m not laughing at what you wrote. I’m laughing at Agnes. Dear smart, wonderful Agnes. These are the letters she wrote to me. Read them, William.”

William, brows furrowed, started to read the letters. “What in the…” he said under his breath. He swore again. “These are my words. She wrote letters to you using my words.”

“And it was those words that convinced me to come out here. William, I fell in love with you through these words. I thought maybe something like this might have happened.”

“You did not,” he said in disbelief. “You could not have guessed this.”

“Well, no, not *this* exactly. Do you remember that first night, you put your jacket around my shoulders, and said something about the breeze blowing the stars around?”

“No,” he said. He took back the book and started thumbing through it again, looking for that phrase.

“Well, you did. And I remember thinking, ‘he might not have written those letters, but there was a piece of him in them; the piece that I fell in love with.’ So that’s why I decided to wait it out. And it turns out, I was right. You might not have written those letters, but they were your words.”

He put the book down and looked into Molly’s eyes. “My mother was a meddler.”

“Yes,” Molly laughed, “She was. And I am so grateful she was.”

EPILOGUE



Two days later, on the day that Molly would have boarded the first train back to New York from Dead Water Creek, Molly and William exchanged vows. Molly wore her new dress, and William looked handsome in pressed trousers and a Sunday shirt. Hank stood at William's side, and Sally stood at Molly's.

After the ceremony, William and Molly went to the graveyard alone. They stood in front of the mound that was Agnes's grave. Molly laid her wedding flowers at her feet while William looked on.

"Well," William said as he took his new bride by the hand, "Are you ready?"

"Ready?" Molly asked, "Ready for what?"

"Ready for life as the wife of the Sheriff of Dead Water Creek."

Molly put her arms around William's neck, and kissed him the best way she knew how, knowing he would know her answer.

Knowing that Molly would not be content with a life as just someone's wife, albeit the sheriff of Dead Water Creek, William had another ace up his sleeve. On their first morning as husband and wife, Sally had made them the perfect honeymoon breakfast, which they ate alone together outside in Hank's garden. Afterwards, William told her to get dressed for a stroll. Molly could tell that her husband was up to something, but she had not the slightest

inkling what it could be. With her parasol over her head and her arm safely tucked into William's, Mr. and Mrs. Cecil walked side by side through the town that was now theirs, in which they would raise their children and grow old together, God willing.

Molly looked in the distance to the very end of Main Street, where she noticed a freshly painted sign hanging from the building which had stood vacant for a long while before her arrival in town. "Gram's Bakery and Treats" it read. She looked at William and was about to ask him who had taken up the buildings, when the smile on his face stopped her in her tracks.

"What have you done?" she squinted at him.

"I heard all about you impressing all and sundry about town with your sweet rolls and cinnamon buns," he winked. "You didn't think you would get away with lazing about all day and night, being just the sheriff's wife, did you?"

"Lazing about, would I?" she punched his arm lovingly.

"Got to keep you busy. Idle hands are the devil's playground, so they say. Besides, Sally will be needing a job, won't she?"

"Oh, William. Thank you. Have I mentioned how much I love you?"

"Not since breakfast. Which is really an unacceptably long time to leave a man waiting, you do know," Williams teased.

But the bakery was not the end of the surprises William had in store for his bride. Not a half mile from the bakery was the Millers' land. The Millers had never got around to building their home before Mrs Miller walked out on her husband, taking the children with her back to the city life on the East Coast. William had made Mr Miller an offer he could not refuse on the large piece of land, since Mr Miller only wanted to join his family as soon as he was possibly able to. Molly would have her home near the bakery. Hank would have a pice of land on which to garden and grow vegetables and fruit to sell locally. Sally would have a cottage of her own on the land. William would employ a deputy, who would take up residence in the house in which

his beloved mother had passed away after she was secure in the knowledge that her boys would have Molly to look after them.

* * *

WHEN THE WARDEN of the county prison arrived outside the sheriff's office, William knew that he was not bringing welcome news.

"Mr. Coombs, what brings you all the way out here to our little neck of the woods?" Williams asked in his capacity as sheriff.

Mr. Coombs was a middle-aged man, toughened and honed on the battlefields of the new country. He beat the dust from his hat against his leg and struck up a cigar, while eyeing William, "Bad news, I'm afraid." He drew on the cigar and exhaled a plume of smoke before elaborating. "That prisoner we took off your hands after sentencing. Duster. He has gone got himself killed in the county jail. Seems he had a widow in Dead Water Creek. You wouldn't know where the estate lawyers can get a hold of her, would you?"

"I certainly do," William offered with open relief. "She is with my wife down the street, at the bakery."

By the end of the day, Sally was the rightful and legal owner of Lionsgate Ranch, all its stock and a valuable stable of breeding horses. Since it was too far out of town to live while working at the bakery, and it held no fond memories for Sally whatsoever, she wasted no time accepting an offer to purchase. As luck would have it, the lawyer handling the estate, Mr. Alright, took up a post in town. Before the year was out, Sally and Mr. Alright had fallen in love.

GRAM'S BAKERY went from strength to strength, and the townsfolk were at a loss as to how they had ever managed before Molly and Sally were around to

keep them in breads and cakes. And of course, the saloon and Mr Creed in particular were their biggest client when it came to sweet rolls and cinnamon buns!

When Sally became Mrs. Alright, a heavily pregnant Molly was her maid of honor. Sally was a very reliable partner while Molly was home with her and William's newborn daughter, Cecily Cecil. Then it was Molly's turn to run the bakery singlehandedly when the shy Mr. Alright became a father to his and Sally's firstborn, Willy Alright. Complications unfortunately set in, what with Sally's miscarriage, and baby Willy's difficult birth, and the couple were to have only the one child, who they adored beyond explanation.

Sheriff William and Molly however made up for any potential shortfall in children for the town by having four siblings for the proud older sister, Cecily. Twins, Rachel and Richard, arrived when Cecily was two. Little David was born almost two years after that, followed over a year later by little Elaine, a fiery red head who was the spitting image of her mam. William could not have been prouder of his family or his town. God indeed had a plan for him so far beyond his expectations that it often overwhelmed him on those quiet country-town nights, when he looked out over his family and his town from Hank's garden. Hank's garden, where the crickets and the bullfrogs conducted their nightly symphonies; lullabies to the Cecil children who would never know the hardships of living in a cramped tenement on the noisy city streets.

THE CHARITABLE BRIDE



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



*A*nnie glanced at the grandfather clock in the parlor as soon as she walked through the door of her house. It was not quite six, so she had plenty of time to freshen up and dress for her brother Charles's dinner party. Dinner parties at Charles's Upper Westside home always required more effort than Annie liked to put in to her appearance after a long day of volunteer work at St. Bernard's Children's Home, but her attendance was expected, and she did not like to disappoint her brother. He, his wife, Charlotte, and their children, Benjamin and Katherine, were the only family she had left.

Her brother's home was within walking distance of the lovely, albeit slightly too large town house Annie's parents had left her, so Annie knew she had time to get ready. Without a doubt, Ruth, her maid, had already drawn her bath and laid out her evening dress. The younger woman was probably beside herself that Annie had once again arrived home late, but the orphanage was short-handed at the moment. Annie couldn't leave until she was sure the children had completed their homework assignments. It just wouldn't do for the poor children to fall behind in their studies. They had enough marks against them.

Just as the clock struck six, Annie heard Ruth's steps rapidly descending the grand staircase. "Is that you, Miss Annie?" the petite young woman

asked.

“I’m here, Ruth. I was just on my way up to get ready,” Annie said, giving the brown-haired girl a soft smile.

“Your bath is ready. I’ll be up in a few minutes to help with your dress and your hair,” Ruth said. “Should I have the cook prepare you a light meal?”

“No, thank you, Ruth. I’ll be fine until dinner,” Annie said, and Ruth nodded and went on to the kitchen.

Annie left the parlor and climbed the stairs leading to her room. She paused at the top of the stairway and took a moment to look at the portrait of her parents. They had been gone nearly three years, and she missed them dearly. The house seemed so empty without her father’s laugh booming from the parlor or her mother’s gentle voice asking about Annie’s day. Charles reminded her of their father. He had their father’s sandy brown hair and light complexion, although Charles was strikingly taller than their father. He also had their father’s laugh, and it always brought a smile to Annie’s face when she heard the boisterous laugh from across the room. Charles was well-liked in their social circle, and he was so good to her. He dutifully made sure her town house was always in excellent condition and provided her with a more than adequate living allowance. While she realized these were stipulations in her father’s will, Charles never seemed to begrudge her her needs or desires. He was St. Bernard’s Children’s Home’s best benefactor, and Annie had no doubt his primary reason for assisting them was her happiness, just as he assisted so many of his wife’s charities to please her. Charles was a very good man.

As soon as Annie finished bathing, Ruth helped her into her corset. Ruth didn’t lace the corset very tightly, thankfully. Annie didn’t really mind the contraption. It did make it much easier to maintain a proper posture, but her dearest friend, Kitty, was entirely against corsets as a matter of principle. Kitty Banks was a whirlwind of activity. At 22, just a year younger than Annie, Kitty was a teacher at one of the city’s most prestigious schools and a

true activist for the rights of women and children. Kitty believed, like so many other suffragettes, that corsets were just another tool used by men to keep women in their place. Annie wasn't so sure about that, but she was grateful current fashion allowed corsets to be worn looser than they had been when her mother was her age.

Ruth moved on to help Annie loosen the hair from her bun to arrange it in a more sophisticated updo appropriate for the evening, and Annie listened as the young maid talked about her latest suitor. Ruth was a chatty young woman who had not had an easy childhood, and Annie sometimes felt like a protective older sister when they discussed certain subjects. Ruth wasn't as selective in her choice of men as Annie would have liked, but Annie herself was very particular. Her sister-in-law, Charlotte, often told Annie she should be a little less choosy, but Annie suspected Charlotte was just anxious to see her wed to a respectable man within their social circle. Whether Charlotte's intentions were in Annie's best interests or her own was a question Annie couldn't answer. Charlotte generally made her decisions based on what looked best and had the best potential to increase the Smith family's influence, while Annie saw no reason to marry at all unless it was for love.

It wasn't that Annie hadn't had her share of suitors when she was younger. With her golden blonde hair, blue eyes, and dainty figure, Annie had many of New York's most eligible bachelors knocking on her door in her day, but none seemed particularly special. Annie wanted more from life than just to be a trinket on a man's arm. She longed for adventure. Marrying into one of New York's finest families would never offer the kind of excitement she craved. At her age, it was highly unlikely she would ever marry, and Annie was content with the fact. She loved her work at the orphanage and Kitty always kept her busy, fighting for women's basic rights, such as the right to vote. Annie saw no reason to give up whatever made her happy merely to become some man's wife.

"All done, Miss Annie," Ruth said, finishing Annie's hair. "Is Miss Banks

walking with you tonight or should I?"

"No, Ruth, it's a short walk. I'll be fine on my own, and I'm sure Charles will see to it his driver brings me home in his trap later. You don't have to wait up for me."

"It isn't any trouble," Ruth assured her, but Annie only shook her head.

"I should get going. Have a good night, Ruth."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



Charlotte Smith watched her husband Charles greet his younger sister with a kiss on the cheek. It made her blood boil every time she saw her husband with Annie. He was so attentive to his younger sister that he didn't even see how much Annie's presence in their lives was costing the family. With the expenses of Annie's town house and the costs of providing for Annie's way of life, they would all have been much better off if the girl had just done the proper thing and found herself a husband. Why was her sister-in-law so stubborn?

Annie wasn't plain. She was a pretty enough woman in her own right, even if she didn't have quite the air of sophistication Charlotte prided herself in having. While Charlotte may have had a slightly womanlier figure, which had helped her attract Charles in the first place, and Charlotte had lovely auburn curls, Annie's blonde hair should have been an alluring enough feature to help her attract a man of means. It's not that Charlotte hadn't tried to help the girl. She'd seated her beside so many suitable candidates through the years, but Annie was stubborn. And Charles! He thought his sister could do no wrong. Charlotte had tried repeatedly to make Charles understand that Annie's existence took money from their own children. Why couldn't he see the benefits of cutting Annie off financially?

If they could sell Charles's parents' house, she could buy a nice place in

Europe. It wouldn't even necessarily have to be all that large of an estate. All she really needed was a pleasant estate with room for the nannies, a few housekeepers, a cook, the children and herself. A well-established stable was a must, of course, and she would need a comfortable area in which to entertain during her and the children's summers abroad. Without having to give Annie her living allowance, there would be no reason why she couldn't have a pretty cottage on the estate for her parents to stay in when they visited. Didn't Charles see that paying for his sister's lifestyle was costing Benjamin and Katherine the chance to spend time with her parents? It was highly unlikely her aging parents would ever consider a move to America, and with the children already 8 and 6, it wouldn't be long before they'd be ready to leave for boarding school. Annie should have married well and made their lives easier. As old as Annie now was, Charlotte could only seat her sister-in-law near widowers at the dinner table, and she seriously doubted the girl would take an interest in any of them as long as Charles was taking care of all her needs.

Dinner was a lively affair, and soon the men excused themselves to Charles's study for cigars while the women gathered in the parlor. Charlotte made small talk with a few of the wives and tried not to focus on her irritation at Annie's presence in their home. She probably would have been successful in her efforts had she not heard Annie and Kitty giggling at the small table in the corner of the room. What on earth were they giggling about? They sounded like school girls. It wouldn't do for the other women to notice their behavior and tell their husbands how Charles didn't keep a tight enough hold on his younger sister, so she quietly excused herself from her own conversation and walked across the room.

Kitty was reading aloud from the New York Times. "Listen to this one, Annie. *Widowed land owner seeks wife. Must be tolerant of children and able to grow a garden and cook,*" Kitty read. "I assume this means he has a house full of children he can't control who are eating him out of house and home."

Annie giggled. "I don't know. He might be a perfectly agreeable man who is just ready to start a family." Annie took the paper from Kitty's hands and read the next ad. "*Banker with means seeks companion to give his life meaning. Well-educated women preferred, but others will be considered.* He doesn't sound so bad, and he seems to value women having an education. He just sounds lonely. I think it's sweet the way the men out West aren't afraid to look for love. Can you imagine a man here being so honest about his preferences?"

Kitty just shook her head. "The men in this city have no preferences other than a pretty woman who'll make their business associates jealous and hopefully come with a wealthy father willing to help them gain more money for themselves."

"They are rather boring," Annie said. "If I were to marry, I'd want someone who didn't wear a suit to work every day. I think life out West sounds exciting. Can you imagine what it must be like out there? Husbands and wives must have to be true partners just to survive the locals and the dangerous elements. It sounds almost romantic to me."

Charlotte listened intently. This was useful information. She hadn't realized Annie was looking for adventure. Perhaps the New York Times would come in handy for more than just its society pages for once. She took the seat opposite the two women at the table and listened as Annie read a few more ads. She even forced herself to laugh along with them as Kitty gave her own commentary about what she assumed each man was actually like. A few of the advertisers even seemed to slightly interest Kitty, but Charlotte didn't expend much effort listening to Kitty's preferences in men. She was much too busy focusing on the characteristics that most appealed to Annie. By the end of the evening, Charlotte had the beginnings of a plan forming. A plan that would rid them of Annie and free them of her expenses. Charlotte just needed to work out the rest of the details and she would finally be free of her sister-in-law once and for all.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



Annie wasn't surprised to see an engraved invitation to have tea with Charlotte. Her sister-in-law always loved to throw a party. She was very surprised, however, when she arrived and found herself the only guest. She was led into the parlor as soon as she arrived. Charlotte was waiting for her, and she seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood. Annie's first thought was that Charlotte might have invited her to let her know she was expecting again, but the thought quickly left her mind. Charlotte did not like being with child, and Annie clearly remembered her insisting several times she had no desire to have any more babies.

Considering how little time Charlotte spent with Benjamin and Katherine, Annie actually hoped Charlotte did not have another child. She wasn't particularly maternal, but with each child having a nanny, her nephew and niece were never lacking in supervision. It saddened Annie at times how different their childhood was from her own. Annie's mother had used the nanny very sparingly, only as someone to mind her and Charles during dinner parties. Annie had wonderful memories of her mother sending the cook away for hours at a time, so that she and Annie could make delicious messes in the kitchen. Her mother also read to the children almost every night. Annie wasn't sure Charlotte ever consorted alone with her children. She seemed to be one of those people who firmly believed children should be seen and not

heard.

The two women kept the conversation light until the maid arrived with tea and lemon squares, Annie's favorite. It was then that Charlotte pulled out a copy of the New York Times. "Annie, I completely blame you for my latest hobby. Ever since I listened to you and Kitty read the ads from those men out West, I haven't been able to stop myself from reading these silly things. I think I've even become fairly good at figuring out what the men behind the adverts actually mean by their choice of words."

"It's really more Kitty's hobby than my own," Annie said. "I rarely look at them myself, but I'm glad it has provided you some amusement."

"Oh, it has," Charlotte said, opening the paper to the classified ads as she spoke. "I thought it might be fun to test my skills with you. Doesn't that sound fun?" Annie gave Charlotte a nod, and Charlotte began reading. "This one is too easy. *Looking for a hardworking woman with a big heart to help a kind, hardworking man turn his homestead into a home.* Notice he didn't say anything about being a man of means? I'm guessing he's a poor farmer, barely making enough to get by, looking for a wife who is willing to slave away all day and not give him a hard time for his lack of success. Do you think I'm close?"

Annie didn't really want to answer. She loathed making judgment calls on little information, especially unfavorable judgements, but if this was Charlotte's attempt at actually being a friend to her, she didn't want to ruin the moment. "I think that's exactly what Kitty would say about the ad," she said, hoping her words would suffice.

Charlotte seemed content with her answer. "This next one is much harder. Perhaps you should give it a try."

Charlotte passed the paper across the table and Annie began reading the ad aloud. "*Successful, dark-haired, taller than average rancher, bronzed by outdoor life, has an agreeable house in the mountains with a view of the Pacific Ocean and a successful timber business. Seeks wife willing to help*

him use his wealth to better the lives of orphans. Must be kind and willing to work with indigent children. Oh my, he said more in a few sentences than most men say in several meetings with a woman, didn't he?"

"And, the New York Times charges by the word. I suppose he probably is rather wealthy," Charlotte said. "What do you make of what he says here?"

Annie reread the ad in her head. He sounded wonderful. "As specific as he is in his ad, I would suspect he is being completely honest about his intentions. I can't imagine any man going to the trouble of saying he worked with orphans unless he actually did so. He sounds like a good man who is really searching for a soulmate to stand beside him and lighten his load."

Charlotte took the paper. "He does sound rather intriguing. By that description, I'd guess he's also rather handsome. I'm sure he'll have several letters from kind young women looking for adventure. This is a rather fun game, isn't it?" Charlotte set the paper aside, leaving it open to the classified section. "How are the orphans at St. Bernard's? Do I need to have Charles make another donation? We know how much you enjoy working with them, and it would be terrible for the children to go without."

"They're doing well. Once the orphanage is back up to a full complement of staff, I think the children will have all they need for a while."

"Good! New York City orphanage children should never need to go without. With so many wealthy families willing to do what is necessary for those less fortunate, they should have every advantage," Charlotte said. "Can you imagine how hard it must be for those poor orphans in the West? This man must be a saint to do all he does for those children. I do hope the woman who responds to the ad does so for the right reasons. Honestly, I wish we had a... what was his name again?" she quickly looked at the bottom of the ad, "There it is. I wish we had a man like Billy Jones around here. I'd sit him beside you at every dinner party. He sounds like a worthy fit for a woman like you. It's too bad he's all the way on the other side of the continent."

"Oregon is very far away," Annie said, "But can you imagine the view he

must have if he can see the ocean? It would be such a wonderful place to raise a family, and one would never lack for adventure. I've always yearned for adventure."

"I guess adventure would be around every corner, and I suppose some women long for that sort of thing. I personally do not, but it would be a good life for a woman so inclined," Charlotte said. "Annie, I almost think you are considering replying to Mr. Jones' ad. Am I right?"

"No," Annie said, probably more firmly than she intended. She softened her tone. "He does sound exactly like the kind of man I could grow to love, and I love working with orphans, but what would Charles say?"

Charlotte laughed. "Charles? Oh, dear, sweet Annie, no wonder you aren't married yet. Haven't you realized your brother will never see anyone as good enough for his younger sister? You shouldn't worry about Charles. If you were to decide to respond to Mr. Jones' ad and found yourself wanting to go West, I would gladly help you handle Charles. I know you think I'm a terrible bore for always trying to find you a husband, but I only do it because I want you to be happy. You must know that. Tell me you never doubt my desire for your best."

"I know you think marriage is in my best interest," Annie said.

"Good, while I love city life and all the socializing that comes with our status, I know it is a chore for you; a chore you kindly endure for the benefit of the family. If a life in Oregon would make you happy, I think you should answer this ad. Nothing may come of it, and if it doesn't then so be it. But it could be exactly what you need. Don't let any sense of duty here stand in your way. Take some time to think it over. Here," Charlotte said, handing the paper to Annie, "Take this with you. I'll send an errand boy to pick up another copy for Charles, and I won't mention any of this to him until you make up your mind. I almost envy you, Annie. I don't think I could leave everything behind and follow a tall, handsome man into the wilderness to help the less fortunate, but it is exactly the kind of thing I can see you doing. I

would never stand in your way.”

Annie nodded and carefully folded the newspaper, placing it in her bag. “It is worth praying about, of course. Like you said, the orphans of New York do have advantages these poor children will never have, and this does seem almost as if it has to be a God-ordained appointment, doesn’t it?”

“You know I am not particularly a woman of prayer, although I do attend services faithfully as a good wife should, but Mr. Jones does seem like a perfect match for you. Don’t wait too long to decide, Annie. I doubt an ad like this will go unanswered for long.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



Annie found herself rereading the ad from the gentleman in Oregon, sitting in her parlor that afternoon. Billy Jones did seem exactly the type of man who could capture her heart, and she did truly long for adventure. Her life sometimes felt more like an existence than a real life, and she had felt like she needed a change for some time. But Oregon? With a stranger? It was a preposterous proposition. What would her parents think of her even considering such a notion?

She was rereading the ad again when Ruth informed her of Kitty's arrival. The two women were supposed to spend the evening preparing for the suffragette march Kitty had planned for the following weekend, and Annie had almost let it slip her mind completely. She mildly chastised herself for her forgetfulness and greeted her friend.

"Oh Annie, you'll never guess who I've convinced to join us in Saturday's march?" Kitty said as soon as the two friends were alone in the parlor. "I'll just have to tell you. Mrs. Davis is coming and bringing several women from her garden club. Can you believe it? I met her at one of your brother's parties, and we started chatting. She's willing to give our walk her full support. They'll have to take us seriously with a woman of her reputation involved. Isn't it the most wonderful news?"

"It is good news. She's been involved in so many of her husband's

political rallies. I'm actually a little surprised she is willing to help us," Annie said.

"Apparently, she is inspired by our movement. Being a woman of her age group and such a prominent member of society is sure to help our cause."

"It sounds like we have something to celebrate over dinner. You are staying for dinner, aren't you? I had Cook prepare for two."

"Of course," Kitty said. "How was Charlotte's tea? Did you convince any of her guests to join our march?"

"Actually, I was the only guest," Annie admitted.

"Oh, you poor thing. That had to be dreadfully uncomfortable. Charlotte can be a little difficult at times."

"She isn't so bad. She's just different to us. Today, she and I had a really pleasing visit. I think she was trying to be an understanding sister-in-law. She had her cook prepare lemon squares using my mother's recipe, and we read the Times together."

"The society pages are such a bore," Kitty said, putting her forearm to her head in mock frustration.

"True enough, but we were reading the mail order bride ads. She said she enjoyed our commentary on them a few weeks ago and has been making an attempt at her own. We even saw one that was particularly interesting," Annie said.

"Interesting, as in yet another widower searching for a mother for his large brood, or interesting as in intriguing and worthy of consideration?"

"Intriguing. Here, read it for yourself," Annie said, handing the paper to her friend and pointing to the ad that had captured so much of her attention."

Annie watched as Kitty read the ad. She noticed the small, mischievous grin on Kitty's face as she silently read through it a second and possibly even a third time. "Annie, tell me you are considering writing to this rancher. He sounds perfect for you!"

"I think I am," Annie said. "Are you sure it doesn't sound like a foolish

idea?”

“I think it would be foolish not to at least correspond with the man. Of all the ads I’ve read, I’ve never seen one that really describes everything I would want in a husband, but this one does that for you. He even has a heart for orphans, Annie. Can you imagine the life you could lead out West? You’d have all the adventure you’ve ever longed for and the chance to make a real difference. I almost hate to encourage you to pursue this matter. I certainly don’t want to lose you, but you really must write to him.”

“I am considering it,” Annie admitted.

“Well, stop considering it and just do it. We’ll write your letter after dinner, and I’ll put it in the mail on my way to the school in the morning. I’m not going to let you talk yourself out of what could be exactly what you’ve always wanted.”

After dinner, the ladies entered Annie’s father’s old study. Annie rarely used the room herself, but Kitty insisted Annie sit at her father’s desk to pen the letter. Annie removed a piece of paper from the desk drawer and stared at the blank sheet in front of her. Just what does one write in response to an ad posted by a man looking for a bride?

Kitty must have sensed Annie’s anxiety, because she urged her friend on once again. “Just introduce yourself, Annie. You have nothing to lose.”

Dear Mr. Jones,

I came across your advertisement seeking a helpmate to share your life in Oregon, and I felt compelled to respond. My name is Annie Smith, and I live in New York. I am 23, and I have never been married. I am from a family of means, so I have the luxury of devoting my time to charity. I volunteer at St. Bernard’s Children’s Home. Most of my time there is spent with the school age children. I help with their studies and try to teach them the basics they will need when they have homes of their own.

Our common love of orphans has persuaded me to write to you. One reason I have never married is out of fear that my husband might not be

understanding of my need to work with the children. It has been brought to my attention that the orphans of the West have far greater needs than those in New York City, and I believe I could help them navigate their difficult path.

I can't deny that life in Oregon sounds like an adventure, and I have craved adventure since I was a small girl. Please don't discount this letter based upon the fact that I am born and raised in a large city. I believe I would be quite content in the more rugged environment of the West, so you need not worry that I might find it too difficult.

My parents have passed away, and the only family I have is a brother and his wife and children. I look forward to the idea of starting a family of my own. Is raising a family of your own of interest to you, Mr. Jones? I would very much like to know more about you. Do you have relatives somewhere? What brought you to Oregon? As a woman of faith, I must also inquire after your spiritual beliefs. Do you consider yourself a Christian?

I suppose it is only right that I show you the courtesy of describing myself since you went to the trouble of providing a description in your ad. I must admit that I am not tall. I believe I am perhaps 5 foot 3, but I'm willing to admit I might be fudging on that last half an inch. I have blonde hair and my eyes are blue. I feel it is important to inform you that I am not flirtatious, and I rather find such behavior appalling. If we should decide to pursue correspondence then you may trust I will not be corresponding with anyone else.

Sincerely,

Annie Smith

Annie looked over her letter before passing it to Kitty. "Does it sound suitable? I can't believe I actually wrote a letter to a stranger."

"Of course you wrote it. It would have been foolish not to write to him. He sounds like your perfect match. Put it in the envelope. I'll take care of the rest and we'll await his response. I'm sure he'll see you as perfect a match for him as he is for you. Oh, Annie, this is terribly romantic!"

Once Kitty had left for the evening and Annie was in her bed, she allowed her mind to wander. Imagining life in the West was thrilling, but could she truly leave everything she had ever known to seek an unknown future. By the time she drifted off to sleep, she wasn't sure, but she hoped Billy Jones would respond to her letter just the same.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



Billy took a moment to make sure his pelts were still secured to his saddle bags. The ride from his homestead to Fort Astoria was rough, and he'd had a good run with his trapping this time around. He wasn't about to lose even one of those pelts before he received his payment. Once he was sure Old Nelly, his mule, was as secure as she could be, he climbed on his horse and took off on his journey.

He arrived at the fort at just about noon and had a powerful thirst for something stronger than the well water he'd been stuck with for the last few months, so he tied Old Nelly and his stallion Clyde to the hitching post outside the saloon and walked inside. If luck was on his side, he wouldn't run into one of the undesirables whose traps he'd pilfered from while he was there. He didn't understand why the fort let their kind trade here anyway, so it didn't bother him at all to steal a few of the better carcasses once in a while to meet his own needs.

Not that he'd have any needs if that blasted gold had ever just showed itself to him during his younger years. When he came out West, he planned to make a real name for himself. He had the right stuff, and he knew it. Even at fourteen, he'd been hell bent and determined to make his fortune, but California and its gold hadn't panned out the way he planned. Now, here he was, more than a decade later, having to scrape by through trading pelts. It

wasn't right.

Billy hadn't even made it all the way to the bar when he heard his name called out. "Smelly, is that you?" Roger Parker asked from half way across the dingy old saloon.

Billy hated being called Smelly, but none of the fools around here seemed to care. He supposed his line of work was on the stinky side, and bathing was a real chore he preferred to save for special occasions. It wasn't like Billy couldn't look presentable when he had the need. He figured he was a pretty handsome fellow with his dark hair and eyes to match, and he was taller than almost anyone around Astoria. That ought to count for something, but it didn't to these fools. They never gave him the respect he deserved.

Just because the name fit didn't make Billy like it any better, but he still figured he might as well respond. Billy turned to face Roger and gave a nod. "Roger," he said through gritted teeth.

"I have a telegram for you, Smelly, and it gave me a good chuckle. Follow me back to my office, and I'll give you your message," Roger said, pulling a cowboy hat over his own nearly bald head and heading for the door.

Billy glanced longingly at the bar and all those bottles of whiskey on the wall behind it. He'd been so close to getting his thirst quenched, but he supposed it could wait a few minutes. It wasn't like he got very many telegrams. This could be worth a few minutes of his time.

The telegraph office wasn't far from the saloon, so Billy just glanced over at his animals to assure himself no one had tried to steal what was his before he crossed the dirt road to the small wooden building. The Western Union sign on the outside of the building was left hanging by only one fastening. The other side was dangling in the wind, looking like it could fall at any moment, but Roger wasn't one to look after such things. He was soft. Roger would never make it a day outside of the fort, and Billy took pride in knowing he was the better man. Once they were inside, Roger handed Billy the message and stood smiling while he read it.

Billy Jones

Fort Astoria

An advertisement for a mail order bride has been placed in the New York Times under your name. Read it, but do not respond to any of the women who send you letters. I will arrange for an Annie Smith of New York to respond, and I will handle all correspondence in your name. You will be informed when the proposal has been accepted.

Charlotte Smith

Billy shook his head as he stared at the telegraph. He hadn't heard from his younger sister in more than a year, and they certainly weren't close anymore. What kind of hair-brained scheme could she be up to now? She hadn't needed him for anything unsavory in years. Her rich husband's money usually handled all her problems. Who was this Annie Smith? She had to be a relative of his brother-in-law, but it wasn't like Charlotte had ever gone to the trouble of arranging a meeting between him and her new family. If Charlotte needed his help, this newest scheme had to be so dastardly that she didn't ever want it traced back to her.

His thoughts were interrupted by Roger. "I didn't know you were looking for a bride. By the look on your face, I'm guessing you didn't know it either. I got to say, Smelly, whoever this Charlotte is, she is on to something. You could use a good woman to keep you out of trouble."

Billy held the telegraph up in one hand while making a fist with the other. "You won't tell anyone about this. Do you hear me?"

Roger put both hands up in surrender. "I have no intention of losing my job over you, Smelly. I'm honor-bound not to say a word, and I won't. You have my word."

Billy dropped his fist to his side, leaving it clenched more out of worry over his estranged sister's plan than any desire to beat up the weak man standing in front of him. "See that you keep this quiet, and we'll have no problems," Billy said before quickly exiting the building, slamming the door

behind him. He slammed the door so hard the sign gave up and fell to the ground, but Billy kept walking until he reached the saloon. If he hadn't needed a drink before, he sure needed one now.

Billy thought back to the last time Charlotte had involved him in one of her schemes. It could have landed him behind bars if he weren't so smart, but he knew how to be discreet. He hadn't been caught yet. Billy was proud of his ability to throw the law off his tracks, and the skill had served him well many times over the years. Charlotte's foolishness was one of the main reasons he'd struck out on his own so many years before. He had a hunch her latest plan would be a lot more trouble than his uppity sister was worth. He didn't even entertain the idea of refusing her request. Whatever she'd gotten herself into, she was still his sister and he'd help her.

Billy smoothed out the telegram as he sat nursing his second glass of whiskey and read it again. Maybe this Annie Smith was his sister's way of doing him a favor. A wife was something he didn't particularly want or need, but he would just have to wait and see what his sister had in mind. It wasn't as if he had any prospects around here, because he wasn't about to marry for need as so many of those other foolish trappers had. Oh, he was certain Charlotte would gain somehow by sending this girl all the way to Oregon, and he was prepared to let her get her way. If he could finagle a way to help himself in the process, well, more power to him. His sister was a woman with means now. It was about time that paid off for someone other than herself.

CHAPTER 6



Annie tried not to think too much about the ad or the intriguing man who had written it once Kitty took her letter to the post office. Oh, she occasionally daydreamed about life in Oregon, but she didn't really expect the Western rancher to consider a girl from New York as his match. There was just no point in dwelling on the matter.

It had been only been two weeks since she'd taken the chance and responded to the ad, and school had just recently let out for the summer. With the orphans at St. Bernard's no longer in school all day and the orphanage still down an employee, Annie found her days busier than ever.

She often brought a few of the older girls to her townhouse for the afternoons and taught them how to hand stitch. She always served tea and tried to give guidance as her mother had given her on subjects like boys and modesty and even fashion. Her friend Kitty often sat in on their sessions and advised the girls on politics and history, so Annie was content the girls were continuing their education properly. Since it was only possible to bring three or four girls at a time, Annie drew up a schedule to ensure all the young ladies had their turn.

During one of her afternoons with the girls, her sister-in-law Charlotte decided to make an appearance. Annie was grateful for Charlotte finally taking a more direct interest in the children she and Charles supported so

willingly financially. It was a pleasant surprise since Charlotte, a supporter of many worthy causes in the city, rarely did any true volunteer work. Not that Charlotte was doing any work at the moment, she was just sipping tea and listening to Annie and Kitty converse with the girls, but it was a start.

They were just finishing their tea when Ruth walked into the parlor with a letter in hand. "Mail for you, Miss Annie."

Annie smiled as she took the letter from her maid and looked at the return address. Her heart started racing. It was from Mr. Jones. He had answered her letter. She almost couldn't believe it, and she knew waiting to open it was not even an option.

"Girls, continue your stitching. I'll be back in just a few minutes," Annie said before quickly walking across the hallway to the study. She hadn't even made it to the desk when she heard footsteps behind her. Kitty and Charlotte were at her side before she could even find the letter opener.

"Is it from him?" Kitty asked, a grin on her face.

"It must be," Charlotte said. "Why else would she have rushed away so quickly?"

"I see asking for some privacy wouldn't do me any good," Annie said, a soft smile forming on her lips. "I believe it is, unless one of you can think of another gentleman from Oregon who might wish to write me a letter."

"Well, go on and open it. Don't keep us in suspense," Kitty urged, picking up the letter opener and handing it to Annie.

Annie felt very nervous as she carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the letter. "I'm a little surprised he actually responded."

"Of course he responded. How could he not see you as a worthy candidate to be his bride? Oh Annie, this is so romantic!" Kitty nearly bounced as she took a seat across the desk. "Go ahead and read it. We'll wait."

Dear Miss Smith,

I cannot tell you how pleased I was to receive your letter. When I

advertised in the Times, I very seriously doubted I would find a woman with a heart for orphans that matched my own. Your letter was a welcome surprise.

You asked for more personal information, and I'll try to provide just that. I have no living relatives. I was raised on the frontier, so I don't remember much about life back East. We set out for greener pastures, as my father called them, when I was not even three years of age. I am twenty-seven now, so I'm not much that many years older than you. My mother was the first to pass. She died when I was fourteen, and while she gave birth to other children, I am the only one who survived past infancy. My father was with me until just over a year ago, and he helped me build my timber business. I took over the ranch after he passed away, and both businesses provide a comfortable living.

My work with the orphans comes from my desire to give back. I have been blessed with so much, and these poor children have so little. My father supported my decision to help them and would even lend a hand before he fell ill. He and my mother saw to it that I was well-educated, and I do my best to see to the education of the orphans who've come into my care. I believe I mentioned in my ad that it is important that whoever I marry is comfortable working with the local children as well. I believe all children have to right to be looked after, so I hope you will respond truthfully if this will cause you any problems.

As for my faith, I am a man who prays more than most, I would guess. Whether it's because of my connection to God or the loneliness of life without a family of my own, I am not sure. I do appreciate that your own faith made it important enough for you to ask.

I will say it plainly. I have read other letters, but none touched me but your own. If my answers to your questions have been sufficient, I ask you to please respond so we can continue to see whether or not we are a proper fit. I am signing this letter with only my first name in hopes you will not address the next letter to Mr. Jones, but rather to Billy. I hope it is not presumptuous

of me to request permission to address you as Annie.

Sincerely,

Billy

Annie handed the letter to Kitty after reading it silently and waited as Kitty read it aloud to Charlotte. Billy, and she would most certainly think of him as Billy rather than Mr. Jones in the future, sounded like a wonderful man. She could almost feel his loneliness while reading his letter. She understood all too well the hardship of losing both parents, but Billy had no one else. His tenderness for the children and the value he placed on seeing them educated, touched her heart. He seemed to understand her in a way no one else truly had, and she knew in her heart she would be writing her next letter to him before her head hit the pillow again.

“I must say, Annie, this man does seem like a good match for you,” Charlotte said as soon as Kitty finished the letter. “By the look on your face, we don’t need to ask if you’re interested in pursuing a possible relationship, do we?”

“He does seem to be a very special man,” Annie said, trying not to give too much away.

“Your perfect man,” Kitty added. “Well, what are you going to say in your next letter?”

“I think I’ll keep that information to myself, ladies,” she said, taking the precious letter back from Kitty’s hands and putting it in the top drawer of the desk. “For now, we should get back to our charges.”

That evening, when the house was quiet and Ruth had also turned in for the evening, Annie slipped her housecoat over her shoulders and returned to the study. She reread Billy’s letter in earnest, hoping to learn as much as she could from his words before she began her reply.

Dear Billy,

I was delighted to receive your letter today. As you can see from my greeting, I am perfectly fine with proceeding in a less formal manner. You

may most certainly address me as Annie. I would also like to see where things could go between us.

I am sorry you have already lost your parents. I wish I didn't understand your loss as well as I do, but I must imagine it has been harder for you. I have my brother to lean on, and I am sorry you do not have any family around to give you comfort from your loneliness. I am very glad you find comfort in your faith. Mine has always given me a great deal of comfort.

As for working with local children, I would not have even the slightest problem giving them my time and attention. Like you, I also believe all children have the right to be cared for and all children need a good education. Just today, I hosted a group of older girls from St. Bernard's Children's Home. I think it is important they get the opportunity to do as girls their age would. I have fond memories of attending tea parties with my mother and hand stitching with the other women. My friend Kitty and my sister-in-law, Charlotte, were in attendance, as well. Kitty is a teacher, but she spends a great deal of her time pursuing the protection of women and children's rights. I think it is only fair to inform you that I am also quite active in her pursuits, so I must ask your opinion on women being allowed to vote. It would be unfair of me not to disclose my own involvement in the suffrage movement now that we have chosen to be rather less formal with one another.

I would also like to inquire about Fort Astoria. What distance is your ranch from the fort? I've heard stories about the wild West, and some of them are so outlandish I am not sure they could possibly be true. Can you tell me more about the land I may, in the future, consider calling home, should we decide we are a fitting match?

Sincerely,

Annie

Annie sighed as she sealed the envelope, leaving it on the desk to be mailed the following morning. She quietly went up to her bed but found it

difficult to sleep. She wondered if Billy had found it half as difficult to sleep after writing his letter to her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



*A*nnie received Billy's next response only twelve days after sending her own, and it tickled her no end to know he must have been just as excited to send another letter as she had been when she received his. Thankfully, this time she had the privilege of reading his letter without witnesses.

Dearest Annie,

Your letter touched my heart. I don't think I realized how much I needed someone to understand the pain losing my parents has caused me until you sent your kind condolences. The loneliness has been overwhelming at times.

I am glad you feel you can work with all the orphans I try to look after, and that you already try to do your part for those less fortunate. I must say, I never would have dreamed of finding someone so likeminded. I believe you would be a wonderful caregiver for the orphans here.

You asked my opinion on the suffrage movement, and I will give it to you now. I believe my mother would have firmly stood at your side and insisted upon the right to vote, and I loved my mother. She was a wise and wonderful woman. How could I ever be against something so important to her or to you? I would firmly support your continued involvement if you were to one day take up life at my side.

Fort Astoria is half a day's ride from my ranch, and it has all I need. I'm

sure the available options pale in comparison to those you have in New York, but I find them quite adequate. With the railroad, it is no longer a difficulty to acquire goods from the east, should the need or desire arise.

The West is indeed a wild land. I will not attempt to deny it, but it is also a land of adventure. This is where people come to fulfill their dreams, and not everyone is as successful at finding fulfilment as I have been. That does cause rather a great deal of lawlessness, but I promise I would always do everything in my power to protect you from danger. If adventure would make you happy, you would most certainly find it here with me.

I must confess that I cannot think of a single question to ask you. Your previous letters have assured me you are an intelligent, compassionate woman, and I would be a very lucky man to have you by my side. I hope to hear from you soon, and I long to hear that I too have lived up to your expectations.

Yours hopefully,

Billy

Billy sounded so confident they were a good match that Annie couldn't resist responding immediately. She was so grateful she didn't have anywhere to be until evening, because, for once, she might have had to skip Charles's dinner party and stay home. A letter like this deserved a response. Many men had complimented her on her beauty. That was nothing new, but no man had ever complimented her compassion or acknowledged her intelligence. It was as if none of the men who had attempted to woo her really knew her at all, yet Billy seemed to understand and accept her without ever laying eyes on her. It was thrilling.

Dearest Billy,

I was so pleased to receive your letter. I believe your mother and I would have become firm friends, and I am grateful she raised such a kind son. My parents would have liked you, too. They never tried to force me into a courtship, because they understood my preference for someone who would

look beyond my appearance and the family's money and value me as a person. I have never felt more heard or valued by any man, and we haven't even truly met. How can that be?

Fort Astoria sounds lovely. I honestly have no need for the variety available in the city. I think I could live quite contently in the West. As for the dangers, I believe you would make every effort to keep me safe, and I have always longed for adventure. Perhaps, one day, we will have adventures together.

I don't believe I have any more questions for you at the moment. You have answered all my questions quite satisfactorily. I do fear not asking anything will cause you not to respond as quickly, however, and that would make be disappointing. I look forward to your next letter.

Yours hopefully,

Annie

Annie looked at the clock. The post office was still open, so she quickly sealed the letter and shouted up the stairs to Ruth. "Ruth, I'm running a quick errand. I'll be back shortly."

Annie heard Ruth's muffled reply acknowledging she had heard her before hastily rushing out the door. She had felt such confidence and contentment while walking to the post office that afternoon. If her woman's intuition was serving her well, she knew exactly what had come over her. She was in love, and nothing had ever felt more right in her life.

Later that evening, with Billy's latest letter tucked inside her handbag, Annie entered Charles and Charlotte's home. Her smile must have been brighter than usual, because Kitty immediately noticed and pulled her aside.

"What has you in such a good mood, Annie?" Kitty asked the very moment they had some privacy.

"I received another letter from Billy," she said, handing the prized envelope to her friend.

"Already?"

“Yes, he must have sent his reply as soon as he received my letter, and it is such a wonderful reply.”

Kitty quickly read the letter and returned it to her. “It does sound like he is smitten with you.”

“I think I’m pretty smitten with him, too, Kitty. I’ve already sent another letter. I never would have believed I was capable of feeling this way after just a few letters, but I think I may have found my match,” Annie said.

“You sound awfully certain,” Kitty said. Neither woman noticed that Charlotte had walked up beside them.

“Certain of what?” Charlotte asked.

“I got another letter today,” Kitty said.

“A letter,” Charles asked from just behind his wife. “Who from? The Bixby’s? I know you corresponded with their daughter Beth for a while after they moved to Boston. Are they settling in well?”

Annie bit her lip. She wasn’t sure she was ready to tell Charles about Billy, but she saw no option. She was almost grateful when Charlotte took it upon herself. “Charles, Annie’s letter is from a man. She’s been corresponding with a very wealthy rancher in Oregon, and you are going to be happy for your sister.”

“How on earth did you even meet a man from Oregon?” Charles asked, directing his attention fully at Annie.

“Billy is a very nice man. He’s a year older than I am, and he’s lost his parents. He’s all alone out West, and we have been writing each other to get to know one another better,” Annie said.

“That doesn’t answer my question, Annie. How did you meet this man in the first place?”

“I responded to his ad in the newspaper,” Annie said, her voice just above a whisper.

“You responded to one of those mail-order bride ads. Why would you even consider such a preposterous idea?”

“He works with orphans, and we view so many things similarly. Please don’t be angry. I think he is someone you would really like if you got to know him.”

“Perhaps I would if he weren’t on the other side of the country. Annie, this is an option for women who have no other options. It isn’t for you. You don’t need to subject yourself to the risk. You have me,” he said.

Charlotte cleared her voice. “Charles, having a brother who loves her and having a man who adores her are two very different things. Don’t be cross with Annie. Kitty and I knew exactly what she was doing, and we support her completely. You should reserve judgment and allow things to play out as they must. It isn’t fair to try and hold her back from the love and adventure she craves.”

Charlotte’s words seemed to have the desired effect on Charles and his voice returned to normal. “Would you really consider moving so far away from us?”

“I would miss you terribly, but I think I would accept if Billy proposed. He is so kind and compassionate. I think he would make me very happy, and I am sure I could make him happy. Please don’t be cross with me. I don’t want to cause you pain,” Annie said.

“You could never cause me pain by being happy, Annie, but I won’t pretend I don’t have some concerns. Tell me you will be careful and use good judgement in your decision.”

“Of course, Charles. I promise.”

With the conversation over, Charlotte led Charles away, leaving Annie and Kitty alone once again. Kitty put a hand on Annie’s back to calm her. “I know you are excited about Billy Jones, but you can surely understand Charles’s surprise, can’t you?”

“I can, and I wish I had the opportunity to tell him on my own terms. Kitty, I’ve never wanted anything quite as much as this and I think it’s likely I will go West. Do you think Charles will understand?”

“I think he needs some time to digest this new information, but I’m sure he would never truly deny you the chance.”

Annie hoped Kitty was right and tried to enjoy the rest of the evening. Although her excitement over Billy’s letter had abated some, she nevertheless knew with certainty that she wanted more than the life she currently led. She wanted a life out West with Billy and all the adventure it promised.

As it turned out, Annie did not have long to wait. The next letter arrived precisely twelve days after the first, and Annie found herself once again giddy with excitement. Billy’s letter was much shorter than the previous two, but what he said changed everything.

My Dearest Annie,

Nothing pleases me more than receiving your letters. I am grateful you have no questions for me to answer, because it tells me you see what I see. I believe we would be very well-suited. I know matters of the heart are supposed to take time, but things run much more quickly in the West. I could spend months longing for your letters and responding in kind, or I can do what I believe to be intelligent and propose you come to Oregon.

I am sorry the distances between us takes away my opportunity to see your face as I ask this question but asking seems the only way to remove the miles between us. Annie, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife? I do hope you will say yes, and I hope I am not being too forward in sending a train ticket with this letter. I just cannot bear the thought of waiting longer than necessary to see you and begin our life together.

Yours Truly,

Billy

CHAPTER 8



*K*itty watched quietly while Annie hugged Charles on the train platform. The man looked absolutely beside himself at the idea of his younger sister traveling clear across the country to marry a man she had not even met. Charles had made no secret about his misgivings regarding his sister's impending marriage plans, but no one had doubted he would be there to see Annie off.

Honestly, Kitty had her own concerns. The letters seemed to arrive far too quickly. One letter arriving quickly from Oregon would not have bothered her, but it seemed completely illogical that every letter had arrived within such a short time. The last two had arrived well within a full two weeks, and Kitty couldn't quite shake her feeling that something was amiss.

Annie was excited about the adventure ahead of her, so Kitty chose to keep her own misgivings to herself. Perhaps she was merely having second thoughts about encouraging her friend to pursue the prospects with Mr. Jones now that it was clear her friend would be leaving. Kitty rationalized that it wouldn't be fair to Annie to voice her concerns, since she really had no proof they were anything more than a figment of her imagination. Annie was happy. It was her duty to be happy for her.

Once Charles and Annie had said their good byes, Charlotte stepped in to offer a rather strained hug. Kitty watched the exchange from a distance. She

wasn't certain Charlotte had ever hugged Annie before that moment. The woman seemed devoid of emotion for the most part, well, unless she thought a slight show of emotion would benefit her in some way. It had been odd watching Annie and her sister-in-law bond over Mr. Jones. Charlotte very obviously resented the relationship Annie had with Charles. She'd made more than one attempt through the years to cause a rift in their relationship. Kitty assumed Charlotte probably saw Mr. Jones as an answer to her prayers for taking Annie away.

Finally, it was Kitty's turn to say good bye. Annie put her arms around Kitty. "How do you say good bye to the best friend you have ever had?" Kitty asked.

"I don't know. I want to go; but leaving is harder than I expected. Let's not say a true good bye. Promise you'll visit once I'm settled in at the ranch."

"I promise," Kitty said, wiping a tear from her cheek. "Oh Annie, you're going to be a bride, and I'm not going to be there to see it happen. Please write to me and tell me everything as soon as you can."

"I will, and I'll write often. You can tell me all about your students in the Fall, and I want to hear about your marches. I will miss you so much."

"I'll miss you, too, Annie," Kitty said when Annie stepped away.

When the announcer made the last call, Kitty stood beside Charles and Charlotte and waved her friend good bye. She looked to her side. Charlotte was wearing a small smile, even as Charles frowned beside her. The train left the station, and the trio were about to part ways when Charlotte reminded Kitty that she would still be welcome at their dinner parties. "Now that Annie has found a husband, I think I shall seat the most eligible bachelors beside you, Kitty."

"Oh, please Charlotte, no more matchmaking," Charles said, "At least let it rest for today. Can't you see how much Kitty and I will miss Annie?"

"I'm sorry, Charles, but I don't understand why you are so unhappy. Annie is a grown woman, much past marriageable age. You should be

grateful she is finally getting married.”

Kitty was grateful her home was in the opposite direction, so she didn't have to listen to the continued bickering. She said her good byes and went home, but her concerns for Annie continued. Had she done the right thing not sharing her worries with her friend?

As the days passed, Kitty found herself once again at Charles and Charlotte's house. It felt very different without Annie beside her, but she felt the need to check on Charles and satisfy her unsettling compulsion to keep an eye on Charlotte. She hadn't been at the party long when Annie's former maid, Ruth, approached to speak to her. Annie had arranged for Ruth to take up a position in Charles's home before leaving for Oregon, and Kitty was grateful for the friendly face.

“Miss Kitty, you left your blue floral hat at Miss Annie's. I put it in Miss Charlotte's personal study so that I could return it to you easily. I'll fetch it for you now,” Ruth said.

“Thank you, Ruth,” Kitty said.

Before Ruth could reply, another of the maids called for her. “I'm sorry, Miss Kitty. It may be a while before I can retrieve your hat.”

“It's no bother. I'll just fetch it. I know the way to Charlotte's study.”

Ruth nodded and rushed to do the senior maid's bidding, and Kitty walked up the stairs and down the hallway to Charlotte's study. It was a beautifully decorated room with a large floral print rug which Kitty assumed was sent from Europe, and a tall bookshelf positioned behind an ornately carved desk. The hat was on the third shelf up, so Kitty stretched to retrieve it. Turning back, she noticed an envelope on the desk. Curiosity got the better of her, and she glanced at the return address. What she saw sent a chill down her spine. The letter was from Billy Jones and it was addressed to Charlotte. She picked up the envelope to look at the letter, but it was empty. Something was very wrong, and she needed to get to the bottom of this mystery very quickly. She searched for but couldn't find the letter.

Kitty's first thought was to take the envelope directly to Charlotte and confront her, but she was afraid to give the woman any chance to cover her tracks. She considered going to Charles, but the envelope alone wasn't much proof. She needed hard evidence, and to get it, she would have to hire a private investigator. She quickly hid the envelope in her hat and made her excuses to her hosts. This matter could not wait.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



Grant Miller pulled his hat lower to block the sun from his eyes as he walked through Fort Astoria. He was glad for the sunshine after a few days of rain, but it sure made the dirt roads a mess. The main road was more or less just a series of mud puddles. Had the weather not eventually improved, Grant figured he'd have been able to bring his boat straight up Main Street. Wouldn't that have been a sight?

Grant was grateful for the river that ran between his ranch and Fort Astoria which made it much easier for him to make the trip. He had finished most of his business for the day and was on his way to get a bite to eat when he saw the stage coach gallop into town. Grant took a few steps back to avoid the coach splashing mud up onto him, and then he watched with curiosity as the stage coach driver stepped down from his seat and opened the door for a woman. A very pretty woman, from Grant's perspective. He couldn't stop watching as the driver unloaded her trunks and a carpet bag before hopping back onto his seat and careering off.

The pretty blonde seemed to be looking for someone, and it was pretty obvious to Grant that whoever it was, wasn't waiting for her. She looked somewhat out of place in her city clothes, slightly wrinkled from the long trip. It was pretty obvious that the dainty little lady would not manage moving her trunks from the side of the street by herself, so he decided to

offer assistance.

She smiled at him as soon as she saw him approaching. "I was beginning to worry my letter had been delayed," she said, putting out her hand. "Even without a picture, your description gives you away. It's wonderful to meet you face to face."

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm afraid I don't understand. My name is Grant Miller. I saw you with your luggage and thought you might need a hand."

The woman's face turned slightly pink, and Grant thought the look suited her. "Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. Miller. You look so much like the description my fiancé sent me when I saw you walking in my direction. This is terribly embarrassing. My name is Annie Smith," she introduced herself.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Smith," he said. "May I help you move your trunks?"

"That would be helpful, but I'm not quite sure where to move them to. I expected my fiancé to meet me here. It never occurred to me that he might not be waiting," she said.

"I see. Well, the stage coach can be a little unpredictable at times. I'm sure your fella will be here soon. I have to admit to being a little puzzled that you don't know exactly what he looks like."

Annie laughed. "It's a rather funny story. I'm sure you are familiar with the mail order bride ads. I never thought I would answer one myself, but when I read one from a rancher in Oregon who works with orphans, I couldn't resist at least writing to him. We had so many things in common. I worked with an orphanage in New York, and now I'm here to marry him and assist in his work. I apologize again for my assumption. He said he was taller than average, and his skin was darkened by the sun, so when I saw a tall, tanned man walking my way, I guess I forgot myself for a moment."

"It's not a problem, ma'am. I am pretty tall, and most of us work in the sun. I can understand your confusion. I guess I didn't realize anyone was working with the orphans hereabouts," Grant said, slightly ashamed the

thought hadn't occurred to him. He remembered how difficult his own life in an orphanage in Chicago had been before he grew old enough to enlist in the army and join the war. When the war ended, he'd come West to collect his land allotment. He worked hard, built his ranch, and just lived his life. He had become pretty successful. Maybe he should offer to help this woman's intended with the orphans. "Do you mind telling me who your fiancé is, Miss. Smith?"

"Not at all. His name is Billy Jones."

"Billy Jones," Grant repeated, unable to contain his surprise. "Well, ma'am, I guess I know your fiancé after all. I think it might be best if we get your things off the street. There's a boarding house up the street. I'll carry the bigger one and we'll send for the rest as soon as we get you settled."

"Mr. Miller, you're making me quite nervous. You seemed astonished when I mentioned Billy's name. Is there something I should know? He hasn't been hurt, has he?"

"No, ma'am, to the best of my knowledge, Billy Jones is fine," Grant said, but Grant wasn't sure he'd be able to ensure the man's condition would remain that way after he got a hold of him. What was Smelly thinking, telling this woman he was a successful rancher? Smelly's lying, conniving ways were no secret to Grant. The foolish trapper had been his nearest neighbor for years. What was that fella thinking, bringing a woman all the way out here under false pretenses? The rundown shack Smelly called home wasn't fit for anybody to live in, let alone an obviously sophisticated woman like Annie Smith.

"Good, you had me worried for a moment," Annie said, grabbing her carpet bag as Grant picked up the heavy trunk.

"Follow me, Miss Smith. We'll get you settled in and go find out what's keeping Billy," he said. He was going to drag that no good low life to town, kicking and screaming if necessary. Smelly needed to be the one to tell this woman the truth and then Grant would help her get back home. This was no

place for a woman like her, and Grant was determined to see to it that she got returned safely where she belonged. He just hated that the woman was likely to leave with a broken heart. Smelly was going to get a serious tongue lashing for this stunt. That was for sure.

Once at the boarding house, Grant insisted on paying the landlord for a week's room and board. Annie argued that it wasn't necessary. Even if she had to stay a night or two, she claimed she could pay her own way, but Grant didn't budge. He knew this woman would need a place to stay until she could make arrangements to travel back home, and he wasn't about to add to her hardship any more than absolutely necessary. Once he was certain she was settled, Grant took off for Smelly's place to begin the process of making things right.

CHAPTER 10



Grant wished he had brought his horse into town instead of taking the river, but since the river passed by Smelly's house he figured he'd still make good enough time to have his little talk with the fool and drag him back into town before nightfall. He rowed hard and got to the border of Smelly's property in better time than usual.

The walk from the river to the dilapidated shack Billy called home was not at all long. When Grant arrived, he quickly made his way around the traps scattered about the yard, holding his breath to avoid the stench of the rotting animal carcasses Smelly hadn't bothered to discard. Again, his thoughts turned to the young woman in town. He was glad she would never have to see this mess. Would it have killed Smelly to clean up some before bringing a wife home? It was bad enough the girl would have found herself married to a liar; having to come home to this would have probably sent her running back to New York on foot.

He pounded on the front door, but there was no answer. "Smelly, it's Grant. I'm coming in," he shouted before pushing the door open and marching inside.

The cabin was deserted. Grant looked around the small room. The bed was unmade, and the dirty dishes were stacked in the old metal wash tub. The rickety rocking chair was surrounded by more traps, most in need of repair,

by the looks of it. He glanced at the fireplace where a few red embers still glowed, indicating it hadn't been long since Smelly had been home. His attention was drawn to the small table on which letters were strewn. Grant couldn't resist taking a look. He was a little curious about the correspondence Smelly and Annie Smith had entered into, which had enthused her enough to travel so far and appear so smitten. But the letters weren't from Annie Smith.

Oh, a few were from a Smith alright, but the name on the envelope was Charlotte. Opening the one on top, Grant began to read.

Dear Billy,

I know I am asking for a rather large favor, and I understand your reluctance to agree without some measure of compensation. I assure you on our bond as siblings that once you have handled my problem, I will ensure you are paid very handsomely.

I have taken care of all of the details on my end. My sister-in-law, Annie, has accepted the proposal and I've arranged for her to travel to Fort Astoria. When she arrives on the 22nd of next month, collect her and dispose of her in the most efficient way possible. There can be no evidence of foul play or my husband will spend a fortune trying to get justice for his sister, and we can't have him discovering the connection between us. It is imperative we have a death certificate. Her claim to Charles's money must be put to an end once and for all.

*Your sister,
Charlotte*

Grant's heart sank as he read the letter in his hands. Annie Smith wasn't only in for a broken heart. She was in real danger. He knew Smelly was a scoundrel, but he never would have believed his only neighbor was capable of murder. He had to get to Annie before Smelly reached her, so he took off for the river.

Grant was sure he had never run so hard in his life. He quickly put his small boat back on the river and thanked God he wasn't going to have to fight

the current to get back to the fort, praying the whole way. “Lord,” he said aloud, “Just let me save this woman. I know You and I haven’t been on speaking terms since my parents died, and I suppose that’s my fault since it can’t be Yours. If You’ll just spare Annie’s life, I promise I’ll do a better job of talking to You and serving You. Amen.”

In record time, Grant made it back to the fort. He found the older couple who ran the boarding house working their small garden outside. “I need to see Miss Smith,” he said, suddenly realizing how out of breath he actually was.

Mr. Jensen wiped the sweat from his brow and looked up at Grant from his crouched position in the garden. “You just missed her. Her fiancé picked her up not more than an hour ago. I never would have believed it if I hadn’t seen it for myself, but Smelly looks almost passable when he’s bathed and gotten a good shave. I guess the idea of having a wife motivated him some.”

“I need to borrow your horse. Miss Smith is in a great deal of trouble. Smelly is up to no good,” Grant said, handing him the letter. “I’m going after her. Take this letter and show it someone who can make sure Jones pays for his crimes.”

Mr. Jensen nodded. “Horse is in the livery stable. Tell them I sent you. I’ll get help.”

Grant didn’t even bother responding. He took off for the stable and then onwards to the trail leading to Smelly’s house. He had to catch up to the couple before Smelly could put his plan into action, and time wasn’t on his side.

CHAPTER 11



*A*nnie sat on the mule while Billy rode his horse slowly down a well-worn path. She had never been on a mule and had only ridden horseback a handful of times, but Billy was doing all the real work. He had the mule's line tied to his own saddle.

It had been rather a surprise when Billy arrived without a wagon to carry her and her belongings to his ranch, but he had explained that the rain had made the path almost impassable. He promised to return for the rest of her belongings as soon as the path dried up sufficiently. She was just so happy to see him that she didn't care.

Not arriving to find him waiting for the stage coach had been rather unsettling, not to mention embarrassing. What must Grant Miller think of her for not even realizing that he wasn't her Billy? Mr. Miller did seem a kind man, and he obviously knew Billy well. She hoped they'd be able to laugh about the incident in the future.

Annie's eyes turned to Billy's back. He certainly wasn't as talkative as she would have assumed from his letters. He was tall and sun kissed as per his description, with fairly handsome features. He was on the thin side, but she intended to make sure he was well-fed from now on. She wanted to be a good wife to this man whom she had grown to care for, and a good helpmate to him.

“You said the pastor will meet us at the ranch this afternoon,” she said, hoping to draw him into conversation.

“Yes, he'll be there,” Billy said, never looking back as he spoke.

“It was nice of you to arrange for our wedding to take place at the house. I think it will be much nicer than just marrying at the fort. Thank you for going to the trouble to arrange it.”

“It was no trouble.”

Annie didn't bother speaking again. He was probably nervous. Surely, he would be more talkative once they were settled. Instead, she enjoyed the view around her.

Oregon certainly was beautiful, and there was so much open space. They hadn't passed a single person or seen a house since leaving Astoria. Annie loved being able to simply enjoy nature without all the buildings and the hustle and bustle of the city. The path led alongside a river, and Annie marveled at the sight of a deer calmly drinking at its edge, completely oblivious to the couple as they passed by.

Although disappointed by Billy's lack of conversation, Annie really could see herself being very happy with this simple life. Her thoughts turned to the orphans. She wondered what the children would be like. Would they warm up to her quickly?

“Can you tell me more about the orphans you care for, Billy? Will they be at the house when we arrive?”

“Orphans? Yeah, sure they'll be there.”

“How many children are there?”

Billy didn't answer right away. “About a dozen,” he finally said, but Annie didn't think he sounded confident in his answer. She suddenly worried that all was not quite right about the situation.

“And how about the local children?”

“Local children belong with the locals. I don't bother counting them,” he said, a hint of disgust in his tone.

Annie bristled. Her Billy had a strong love of the orphans, locals included. She remembered Grant Miller's surprise when she told him that her fiancé worked with orphans. She also now thought on his insistence on renting her a room for more than a night. She suddenly felt ill. This could not possibly be the man with whom she had corresponded these past months. She had to act on her misgivings, but what could she do? They were alone in the middle of nowhere.

“Would it be possible for us to stop for a moment? I need to stretch my legs,” she asked.

“We'll stop after we get across the pass up ahead. You'll have a better view,” Billy said, increasing his horse's pace as he spoke.

Annie looked around. There was nothing she could do. The horse was pulling the mule at a much brisker pace. Even if she wanted to jump off and run, she wouldn't dare. They had traveled too far up the mountain, and the river seemed so far below them now, that jumping to her left would surely cause her to trip and fall to her death. There was still a small space to her right, but it would soon be gone once they reached the pass. She was debating her options when she heard the galloping hooves of another horse coming up behind them. She turned her head to see Grant racing towards them.

“Stop the horse and get away from her, Smelly!” Grant shouted. “The law is coming for you. They have the letters from your sister. Don't make this any worse. Leave the woman be.”

“You shouldn't have got involved, Miller. This don't concern you,” Billy shouted, kicking his stallion into an even faster gait. Annie tightened her grip on the mule, praying she could hold on a little longer.

“It does when a woman's life is at stake,” Grant replied.

A part of Annie wanted to close her eyes until whatever was coming was over, but she resisted. They'd made it to the pass, and Annie was completely certain that their pace was not appropriate for tackling the pass. The sharp curve up ahead intensified Annie's panic.

“Billy, watch out!” Grant shouted in warning, but Billy only pushed the horse harder, the wet ground giving way slightly beneath his horse. The stallion neighed loudly in protest before attempting to halt without his master's consent. In an instant, the horse reared onto its back legs, unseating Billy and throwing him into the river below.

Annie screamed as the horse continued along the pass with no one at the reins. Billy was gone, and she was entirely at the mercy of the stallion. She looked behind her. Grant's face was ashen, but he and his horse were gaining on her. As soon as they cleared the pass, he whipped around her left side and reached a hand out for the horse's dangling reins. It took a few tries, but soon he was pulling the frightened stallion to a halt.

Grant quickly jumped from his own horse and helped Annie down to the ground. She felt so weak. Her gaze went from Grant's concerned face down to the river bed beneath them. “He was trying to kill me,” she said, more to herself than him.

“You're safe now. He'll never hurt you or anyone else again.”

Annie nodded, numbness overcoming her. She sat on the ground and stared in the opposite direction of the river. “You saved me, Mr. Miller.”

“Grant, you may call me Grant. I almost cost you your life. I thought Smelly, that's what we called Jones, had just lied to you in order to get himself a bride. I went to confront him and bring him back to the fort. That's how I discovered the plot against you. I was afraid I wouldn't make it in time. Guess I better make good on the bargain I made with God to save your life.”

“Why would anyone want to kill me?”

“Money,” Grant replied. “Your sister-in-law is Jones's sister. She put him up to this.”

“Charlotte?”

“Yes, ma'am. He was supposed to provide her with a death certificate so she could make sure her husband no longer spent their money on you.”

“Call me Annie, please. You just saved my life, Grant. If you have

discovered that my sister-in-law is the one who wants me dead, I certainly think you have the right to call me Annie. I knew Charlotte wanted me to come out West. I even knew she wasn't the most trustworthy person, but I really believed she was on my side this time. I was foolish. I let my desire for adventure and a life of doing good for children in need, cloud my judgment. You must think me a foolish child," she lamented.

Grant sat beside her on the grass. "If I were to think you foolish for coming West in search of adventure, I'd have to think everyone I know a fool, including myself. I'm just sorry you were hurt. It was obvious back at the fort that you were smitten with the man you believed you were coming to marry."

"Thank you, Grant. You have been so kind to me, over and over again today. I'm not sure where I would have been if you hadn't come to save me. I didn't realize Billy wasn't who he claimed to be until it was too late."

"We should get you back to the boarding house. I'll have some men help me deal with Billy's remains once you're taken care of, and then the law can handle your sister-in-law."

Annie gasped, "Charles and the children! They'll be devastated."

"I have a feeling they'd have been devastated if she'd succeeded in having you murdered, Annie. Mrs. Smith made her choice. She should deal with the consequences."

Annie could only nod. When Grant stood and offered her his hand, she accepted it and rose to her feet. "I'm afraid Smelly's horse and mule are rather too spooked for me to entrust with your life at the moment. If you won't be offended, I would be much more comfortable tying them to a tree and putting you on the back of my horse."

"Whatever you think is best. I'm quite certain you know more about horses than I do," she said.

Grant quickly secured the horse and mule before climbing onto his horse and helping Annie up behind him. "We'll have to go back across the pass. Close your eyes and don't look down. I know you must be pretty spooked

yourself. We'll take it nice and slow, and I'll tell you when we've reached the other side.”

Annie did as he suggested. Grant spoke to her in a low voice as they traversed the pass. “Almost there,” he whispered. “Just a bit longer and we'll be clear. There you go. We're back on a good path. You can open your eyes, Annie. You did well. For a city girl who just went through such an ordeal, you are holding your own very nicely.”

“Thank you for making me feel safe. I wasn't sure I could go back across. Are you sure he's dead? If he's injured, we should-”

“He's dead. There's not a doubt in my mind about that. It's the main reason I wanted you to keep your eyes closed. No lady should have to witness such a sight.”

During the journey back to the fort, Grant didn't allow more than a few moments of silence to pass between them without offering reassurance that all would be fine. Annie even started to believe his words, and she thanked God for providing a rescuer before she even knew she was in need of one.

CHAPTER 12



*I*t was late in the evening when Kitty arrived at the office of the investigator she had hired. Normally, she would never be alone in this part of town after dark, but after receiving a message from his messenger, she had not hesitated to make the trip. She knocked anxiously on his door. Mr. Collins opened it and urged her inside. She promptly took a seat opposite him at his desk.

“Your messenger said you had urgent news for me, Mr. Collins,” she said as soon as she was seated.

“I do, Miss Banks. I’m sorry it has taken this long for me to get back to you, and I apologize for the late hour. Charlotte Smith is a woman with considerable influence. She hid this secret well, but I finally got the break in the case that I needed just a few hours ago,” he said.

“Well, don't keep me in suspense, Mr. Collins. What is the connection between Charlotte and Billy Jones?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

“Charlotte Smith was born Charlotte Norton. She is the oldest child of her father John, but her mother was widowed before marrying John Norton. She had a son from her previous marriage. His name is Billy Jones, and he currently lives in Oregon.”

“Charlotte had her brother place the ad, telling him what to write to attract

Annie, then had him propose marriage?” Kitty asked, aghast that the woman had gone to such lengths to be rid of Annie.

“That was my initial impression, but you mentioned your concerns about the rapid arrival of letters from Oregon. The speed of delivery concerned me too, and so I sent an associate to the Times, where he battled somewhat to convince anyone to talk. He finally found a young intern who had the information we needed and enough of a conscience left to be willing to tell the truth.

“Mrs. Smith paid a great deal of money to ensure your friend's letters were never forwarded to Oregon. They were hand delivered to Mrs. Smith herself. She corresponded with your friend in her brother's stead. It is unlikely we have enough evidence to convince a judge to bring charges against the likes of Mrs. Smith, but this matter needs to be addressed swiftly. You do understand the urgency I felt when I summoned you, Miss Banks?”

“I do,” Kitty said quickly. “I’m afraid Annie may be in serious danger. I will take this information to Charles personally. Thank you for your help, Mr. Collins.”

Kitty exited the office without further ado, with the proof Mr. Collins had provided, and made her way back to the Upper West Side. She needed to find out exactly why Charlotte had pulled this ruse and then she needed to send a telegram to Fort Astoria to warn Annie. She had always disliked Charlotte, but she never would have expected the woman to go to these lengths to get Annie out of the way.

Arriving at the Smith residence, Kitty was met with an even more shocking sight. Before she’d even made it up the walk, the door to the house opened and two officers exited the building, leading Charlotte away. Charlotte looked frazzled, while Charles stood back in shock and disgust. She was screaming for the officers to unhand her. “It’s all a misunderstanding,” she yelled. “Charles, you can’t possibly believe I’d ever hurt your sister. Tell me you believe me!”

Kitty walked up to the officers. “Officers, I believe I have something here that will help with your case. I have just discovered a connection between Charlotte and Billy Jones. They are in fact brother and sister.” Kitty handed her file to an officer.

“Thank you, ma’am. We will take this into evidence,” the older of the two officers said. “Little lady, you are going away for a very long time.”

Once the officers had secured Charlotte in the police wagon and departed, a very distraught Charles opened the door a little wider and ushered Kitty inside. “I am so sorry, Charles. I had my suspicions about Charlotte after finding an empty envelope bearing Billy Jones’s name, but I needed proof that something was afoot before I confronted her. How did the police get involved? Did you carry out your own investigation?”

Charles didn’t speak right away. Instead, he walked into the parlor with Kitty following a few steps behind. He slunk down into the first chair and put his hand on his head, rubbing his temple, “A letter from Charlotte was discovered in Jones’s home. She-” he stopped and sucked in a deep breath, “She sent Annie out West and instructed her brother to kill her. Thanks to the stranger who found the letter, Annie is safe, but she very easily could have been killed and my wife was behind it. I married a woman capable of having my own sister murdered, Kitty. Can you imagine the horror my sister has gone through? What if the discovery had come too late? We could have lost Annie forever.”

Kitty put her hand on Charles’s shoulder, as much to steady herself after the news as to comfort him. She was relieved that Annie was safe, but she was also mortified that this had happened. How could she have encouraged her friend to travel so far by herself? She should have insisted on traveling with her or, at the very least, investigated Billy Jones thoroughly before this entire situation got out of hand.

“Have you heard from Annie?” Kitty asked.

“Not yet. The police officers said the telegram came from the local

sheriff. All I know is that she is safe at the fort, and the man who she thought was to be her husband is dead.”

“What do we do now?” Kitty asked.

“I’ll send a telegram to Annie and arrange for her to come home. Then we will make sure Charlotte gets what’s coming to her,” Charles said, a newfound confidence in his voice. “I appreciate your efforts, Kitty. Thank you for following up on your suspicions. You are a good friend to Annie and to our family. If you’ll excuse me, I need to see to the children. Their nannies whisked them away as quickly as possible, but I’m sure they have questions. I think it’s best the answers come from their father.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



The morning sun was already fairly high in the sky and filtering its light into Annie's boarding house room when she awoke late the following morning. After such a frightful day and such a devastating revelation, Annie hadn't expected to be able to rest at all but sleep eventually claimed her. She woke up aching. A sensation she had grown accustomed to during her long trip westwards, only now she recognized how the wild ride she'd been forced to endure through the Oregon wilderness was only partly to blame. Her heart ached for Charles. She knew he would be hurt when he realized what Charlotte had done. She thought of Benjamin and sweet little Katherine who would now grow up without their mother.

As she looked around the sparsely furnished room, she found herself feeling a new emotion. She was more thankful than she had ever been in her life. She had survived. Now, she just needed to figure out what to do with her second chance at life. Hastily, Annie washed her face in the basin and dressed for the day before walking down the stairs to the sitting room. She was surprised to see Mr. Jenkins and Grant in deep conversation. She hadn't expected to see Grant again so soon, and she couldn't help feeling pleased by his presence.

Grant noticed Annie before she had time to speak. "Morning, Annie."

"Grant, I didn't expect to see you today," she said.

“It was late when we finished dealing with the...” he paused, “... situation. I have to get back to the ranch and check on my livestock, but I wanted to check on you first.”

“Thank you, Grant. My head is clearer after a night's sleep. It is time for me to make some arrangements now. I was about to check whether I could send a telegram to my brother. Can you point me in the direction of the telegraph office?”

“I can do better than that. I'll walk you there myself,” he said, a small smile of relief etching his features. “If you're hungry, we could stop for a bite to eat.”

“I am quite famished. I didn't have much of an appetite last night.”

“We'll eat first and then I'll help you send that telegram.”

Annie nodded and the two made their way to the eatery. He offered his arm and she accepted, linking her own arm into his, as they crossed the street together. It was somewhat odd how comfortable she felt with Grant. She would never have accepted such a gesture from a gentleman back home out of fear he might get the wrong impression, but she reasoned that linking arms was a very small thing considering the companionship they had shared before when he escorted her back into town.

Conversation flowed easily between Annie and Grant as they chatted over breakfast. Grant spoke about his ranch, and Annie shared tales about some of the rallies she and Kitty had attended. He listened intently as Annie talked about how far the suffrage movement had spread.

“I don't see a reason why a woman should be kept from voting,” Grant said. “It seems to me that women make up about half the population of the country, so that's twice as many chances to get the right people into office.”

“I'm glad you feel that way, Grant. You'd be surprised how many men think women aren't intelligent enough or well enough informed to even have opinions on politics.”

“You seem pretty smart to me, and since I've been out her for the past few

years while you've been in a more civilized part of the country, I guess you probably know more about what's happening back East than I do."

"I would have thought I was fairly intelligent until yesterday. Now, I'm not so sure. I was pretty easily fooled," Annie said, looking down at her plate.

"I don't see it that way. Your sister-in-law used her knowledge of you against you. I'm not sure very many people are suspicious enough to presume anyone would do what she did. I don't think I'd want to spend much time around anyone who immediately jumped to that type of conclusion, anyway."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," she said softly, raising her eyes to meet his gaze. Annie was struck by how handsome Grant was and it startled her slightly that she could even notice that after the recent events. He couldn't have been much older than her, but he seemed so wise. Maybe she had fallen into Charlotte's trap, but it didn't make her a fool.

They were almost finished with their meal when two boys walked inside. By Annie's estimation, they were probably no more than thirteen or fourteen, and they looked rather on the scrawny side. Their clothes were worn and a few sizes too small, and the two boys were obviously related. They shared the same brown eyes, and the younger of the two seemed to follow the lead of the older.

The boys hadn't even had a chance to speak before the man behind the counter shook his head at them and frowned. "No charity today, boys. If you don't have money, you don't eat," he said firmly.

The boys looked at each other and made to exit the building. Annie looked at Grant and frowned. Grant seemed to understand her unspoken question. "Orphans," he said. "We have a few children around here who started off for Oregon with their families and ended the journey alone. Others were orphaned after arriving. It isn't easy to get started, and some folks who come West find it more difficult than others. While neighbors may try to help newcomers get settled, they don't always realize when a family is struggling. Without proper food and shelter, sickness comes and not everyone gets

better. It isn't easy on children who outlive their parents."

"How do they survive?" Annie asked.

"Some of the families take in one or two and feed them in exchange for labor. Others, like those boys I suspect, just try to find enough odd jobs to get by."

Annie stood up without saying another word to Grant and walked out onto the street. The boys were still standing on the road. "Young men, my name is Annie Smith. What are your names?"

"I'm James, and this is my brother Henry," the older boy said.

"Can I buy you something to eat?" she asked.

"We have to get back to work, ma'am. We were just hoping to get a biscuit or two to carry with us. We can't stay or we'll be in for a switching," James said.

Annie grimaced. This wouldn't do at all. "I tell you what, I'll get something for you to take on your way. When your day is done, I would like for you to stop by the boarding house to see me. Is that acceptable?"

The boys looked at each other. Henry nodded his curly brown head, and James stood a little taller and looked Annie in the eyes. "My brother and I would appreciate that very much," James said.

Once back inside, Annie instructed the owner to fix them something to eat and bring her the bill. Walking back to the table, she felt Grant's eyes on her. She looked up to see him trying to hide a smile. "That isn't something we see much of in Astoria," he said. "I don't think Old Man Talbert knew what to make of you feeding those boys."

"Well, they were hungry. What was I supposed to do?" she asked, prepared to defend her actions if necessary.

"Feeding them seems logical to me, but we don't see much charity around here," Grant said. "I should have thought to do it myself. I've been there. After my folks died, it seemed like the orphanage never fed me quite enough to satisfy my hunger. You're a good person, Annie. I'm sorry your trip out

West didn't end the way you expected. I guess we should see about getting you home after we send that telegram to your brother."

Annie looked back over at the boys. She thought about the orphanage back in New York. Charlotte had been right about one thing. These young men would have been fed and educated in the city. There were many well to do families who could afford to ensure the city's orphanages were well supplied. Here, they probably didn't even have a consistent place to lay their heads at night. "I do need to make sure Charles knows I am safe, but what if I don't go back East? I came to work with the orphans of Oregon. Billy may not have been the man I expected, but he wasn't my only reason for being here. Grant, is it a terribly silly idea for me to think I could stay and help these children?"

"You'd stay after what you've been through?"

"The danger has passed," she said. "If I were to have Charles sell my town house, I could get a plot of land. I'll admit, I don't know much about ranching, but surely I could hire a responsible foreman to look after things for me. I could build a place to live and take care of children like James and Henry, teach them the skills they need to survive and make sure they have a broad enough education that they could do well wherever they choose to live in the future."

"If this is what you want to do, Annie, I'll be happy to help all I can," Grant offered. "If I were to be honest, I wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing you go."

"It's settled then, I'm going to stay. I appreciate your offer to help. Volunteering at an orphanage is a far cry from starting one. Oh Grant, yesterday was the most frightening experience of my life. I couldn't understand why God would have allowed me to come all this way only to be deceived. I didn't know what to do, especially considering Charlotte's deceit. I assumed I would go home, but I knew life in the city would never be the same. Now, the idea of staying and doing something meaningful with my life

is renewing my strength. This is why I'm here. This is the adventure I was looking for all along.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14



The next few months passed quickly for Annie. It hadn't been easy to convince Charles that her decision to remain in Oregon was the right one. He and Kitty had tried very hard to convince her to return to New York. Annie understood their concerns. She knew they must have been terribly shaken by Charlotte's deception, and her brother and her dearest friend loved her. Of course, they wanted her to come home so they could see for themselves that she was safe. Annie almost changed her mind and went home just to please them, but she couldn't imagine leaving the orphans without a safe place to grow to adulthood.

Annie explained the plight of the children to Charles, and he sold their parents' town house. With the money and Grant's help, Annie bought her plot of land and let the citizens of Astoria know her plans. The land bordered Grant's property, and he helped oversee the older boys who had come into her care as they built a house for Annie and the children to call home.

Annie was grateful to be out of the boarding house and in her own home. The new house was nothing like her town house. While the town house had felt too large and empty to truly be a home, her new house always felt full. She'd made sure it was large enough to accommodate her needs, but it didn't have the elaborate decorations she'd been accustomed to her entire life. Instead, it was simply decorated, like other houses in the area, and Annie was

very satisfied with the way it had turned out.

At the moment, several children lived on the ranch full-time, and Annie knew the number would grow once word got around that they were welcome. James was the oldest of the group, and the youngest was a nine-year-old little girl named Lila, who followed Annie where ever she went, and loved hearing stories about Annie's life in New York. Lila, with her head of red hair and her big, green eyes, kept Annie entertained and she loved learning. Some of the older children were more resistant to continuing their education, but Annie was firm about the importance of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The children thrived in her care.

After considering all her options, Annie decided to adapt her new property into a training ranch. Grant helped her find trustworthy men to run the ranch itself. Besides building her house, they had already built two bunkhouses for the workers and older boys to call home, and the timber mill would be finished soon enough. The young men in her care would be able to learn the basics of ranching, farming, and the lumber business under the guidance of men who would teach them with kindness instead of under threat. Annie would teach the young women about running a household and a home. Already, several of the girls were becoming very adept at stitching by hand, and Annie made sure to use those moments just as she had with the girls in New York, as an opportunity to teach them how young women should behave.

Grant made almost daily trips to the house after he finished his work, and Annie found herself growing more and more fond of him with each passing day. She was grateful for his willingness to help with her endeavor, and she enjoyed his company.

Annie and Lila were removing the laundry from the line when Grant arrived earlier than expected. She smiled as he engaged the little girl in conversation while she finished her work. "You look different today, Mr. Grant," Lila said. "Did someone die?"

“Why would you ask that?” Grant asked.

“Well, you sure are dressed up. Usually, people only wear their best clothes when someone dies or when they go to church. Since it isn’t Sunday, I figured somebody must have died.”

Grant laughed, and Annie found herself joining in. “Can’t a man just dress nicely when he visits his neighbor?”

“Lila, can you take these clothes into the house? I’ll be in shortly, and we’ll put them away,” Annie said, deciding to rescue Grant from further questioning.

Once they were alone, Annie smiled at Grant. “Lila is right about one thing. You clean up quite nicely, Grant. One would think you had plans to visit a lady.”

“Maybe I do, Annie,” Grant said. “Would you like to take a walk with me?”

“I would be honored.”

Annie felt nervous as they strolled along her property. She had suspected that Grant’s feelings for her had grown over the past months, and she hoped his arrival in smart clothing meant he was ready to ask her to court. She already knew she would say yes.

They finally came to an old oak tree, still in view of the house, and sat beneath its branches. “Annie, when you stepped off that stage coach, I had no idea how much it was going to change my life. You were probably the prettiest thing I’d ever seen in my life, and you sure didn’t look like you belonged in a place like this. I was a little disappointed when I realized you were engaged, but I wasn’t surprised. A woman like you could probably have her pick of men.”

“I guess I didn’t pick very well, or you wouldn’t have had to go to the trouble of saving me,” Annie said softly.

“That wasn’t your fault. What Charlotte and Smelly tried to do to you was vile, and I’m just really grateful they didn’t succeed. Most women would

have taken off for home as soon as the dust settled after your experience. But not you. You stayed and built a life. Not only that, you've made a difference in the lives of these children. I've heard what people are saying about you at the fort. They are as impressed as I am. I figure it's just a matter of time before every single man in Astoria shows up at your door and tries to woo you, so I was thinking maybe I better make my intentions clear before one of them beat me to it."

Annie smiled. "And just what are your intentions, Grant?"

"I care about you, Annie, and I care a lot more about you than I ever thought I'd care about anyone. I respect that you are an independent woman who could probably take care of these children and build this ranch alone, but if you were to consider not doing this alone, I hope you'd consider me a good partner," Grant said.

Annie could tell he was slightly flustered, and she found it amusing. "You are proposing a business arrangement?" Annie asked with just a hint of teasing in her tone.

"No, I am not suggesting a business arrangement at all, Annie. I'm-" he paused and shook his head. "This is harder than I thought it would be, or maybe I've been alone with my animals for a little too long. I'm trying to ask you to marry me. Would you do me the honor of being my wife, Annie Smith?"

Annie took in a deep breath. She'd assumed he was going to ask to court her, not marry her. "Grant, are you sure it isn't too soon?"

"Things move a lot faster here in the West. I'd have probably proposed even sooner if I hadn't figured you needed some time to recover. We've gotten to know each other pretty well since you arrived, and I've fallen in love with you. If you don't feel the same-"

"I do. I love you, too. I thought I was in love after a few letters from someone who wasn't who he claimed to be, and I was willing to drop everything to be with him. You have shown me who you are over and over

again over these past months, and I feel like I really do know you. I would love to marry you, Grant.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



Annie took a deep breath as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. She was back in the boarding house she had initially called home, getting ready for the most important day of her life. Her wedding day. Kitty had brought Annie a new dress from New York, and Annie was pleased with how well it fitted. She was so grateful her friend had made the trip to be her maid of honor.

Charles and his children had come along as well. He had come to meet the man who had won his sister's heart and stayed to give her away. Grant and Charles seemed to get along well, and Charles approved of the man who had not only saved her life but now intended to share it. Annie only wished her parents could have met Grant. She knew they would have loved him. She also knew they would be very proud of the life she was building in the West.

Annie's heart was full, thinking how different it would have been had Billy not turned out to be a criminal. She would have married him without the benefit of having her loved ones at her side. This was so much better, and Annie had no doubts whatsoever as she prepared to marry Grant. He really was all she ever dreamed of and she could not wait to be his wife.

Grant was already waiting for Annie and Kitty at the fort's small chapel. Without a doubt, all the children who called her ranch home were already there waiting for her. All that was needed were a few finishing touches before

she walked to the chapel with Kitty, Charles, Benjamin, and Katherine.

Benjamin and Katherine had clung to their aunt after arriving a few days before, so Annie had insisted they be allowed to stay and accompany the bridal party. She knew it had been difficult for them to learn of their mother's crimes, but they seemed fairly content. Charles had always been a more consistent presence in their lives than Charlotte, and he had made sure to spend more time with the children after their mother's arrest. While the nannies remained on his payroll, he no longer used them as much as his wife had in the past. Annie was grateful that her nephew and niece were getting the support they needed from their father.

Kitty's voice interrupted Annie's thoughts. "You look so beautiful, Annie."

"Thank you, Kitty. The dress is perfect. I don't know how to thank you for choosing it for me."

"I'm just glad I am not going to have to miss my best friend's wedding. I was so worried when I learned Charlotte had been writing to Billy Jones. I only wish I had thought to hire an investigator sooner. You could have died, Annie, and it would have been partially my fault for pushing you to write that first letter."

"If I hadn't written that letter, I'd still be in New York, living an unfulfilled life. I'd still be going to dinner parties for no reason other than to fulfill obligations, and I would be considerably less happy than I am now. Things happened as they did for a reason, and I have no regrets. I finally feel like I have a purpose, Kitty, and I have Grant. I would do it all again just so that we could be standing here right now," Annie said, hugging her friend tightly.

"You do seem so happy here, and I'm amazed by what you've accomplished. I'm so happy to be able to call you my friend."

"I don't know that I could have done it without Grant. He has been with me every step of the way. Even before either of us could have known we

would fall in love, Grant was there, constantly offering his assistance and expertise.”

Charles knocked before entering the room. He gave his sister a nod of approval. “Grant will be the envy of every man in Astoria,” he said after appraising his sister. “I know I wasn’t very supportive of your decision to come to this part of the country, and I was even less supportive of you staying here alone, but the West suits you, Annie.”

“I love it here.”

“You also love the man you are marrying,” Charles said, “and I am very happy for you. Now, if you are ready, we should probably get you to the church before your husband-to-be convinces himself you aren’t coming.”

“I doubt he’s worried,” Annie said. “He knows I am as committed as he is, but I won’t argue. I’m ready to go.”

They made the short trip to the chapel, and Annie and Grant exchanged their vows. After Grant had kissed his bride, Annie turned to face the small congregation, her fingers laced in Grant’s. She couldn’t contain the joy that was bubbling inside of her, because she knew her greatest adventure was just beginning.

CLEMENTINE'S CHOICE



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



OceanofPDF.com

CHICAGO - MAY 1881

“*H*er fever won’t break,” Clementine called out from her sister’s bed. She hoped that Nathan Woodward would hear her and for once in his life do something worthwhile.

Like call for the doctor.

Clementine dabbed a cold cloth over her sister’s forehead, wishing there was more she could do. “Come on. Jessica, you’re going to be all right. I know you are.” She glanced at the baby in the crib beside the bed and bit back her tears. “You have to be, please, God, let her be all right.”

Jessica moaned and shook her head, her eyes already fading as if she had given up the fight. “Clementine, I’ve made my peace. It’s my time...”

“No! You can’t give up! You have Annie to take care of, you can’t give up!” Clementine said as she brushed the tears from her face. “Nathan! Call the doctor!”

“It’s no use... you heard what he said... there’s nothing he can do...” Jessica smiled weakly. “It’s my time...”

Clementine knew what the doctor had said, she had been right beside him when he’d come to see her yesterday, and the day before, and the day before. But that didn’t mean Clementine had to accept it.

“I can’t lose you, Jessie,” Clementine sniffed.

Jessica reached for her hand and held it tightly. “You’ll never lose me. You know I’ll always be with you,” her smile was weak but heartfelt.

Clementine shook her head trying to fight past the pain and the fear of losing her only sister. Jessica wasn’t just the only family she had left; Jessica was her everything. After Clementine’s mother passed away during childbirth, it had been Jessica who had raised Clementine.

After their mother had passed, her father refused to have anything to do

with Clementine. He had blamed her for her mother's death. Instead of taking care of his two daughters, their father had spent the rest of his miserable life taking care of his unquenchable thirst.

Jessica was eight years older than Clementine; since Clementine could remember, Jessica had protected her against her father's abuse and the rough life they endured as children. When Jessica had announced she was to be married to a handsome lumber mill worker, the sisters had both believed their fates were about to change.

Neither realized that Nathan Woodward was just as abusive and insatiably thirsty as their late father. But with nowhere to go and no money of their own, both Clementine and Jessica were dependent on Nathan's goodwill.

Poor Jessica had been the subject of his abuse on more than one occasion as well.

The baby who had been born just a few days ago, had been their light in the darkness their lives had become. Not only had they hoped that Nathan would change his ways once he became a father, but both women had promised to give that child a better life than the ones they had suffered through.

The pregnancy had been uneventful and the excitement of the baby's arrival tangible in everything that Clementine and Jessica did. Clothes were sewed, blankets knitted and preparations made.

But no one, not even Nathan, could've foreseen what would've happened on the day his daughter was born. Everything had gone perfectly well during the birth. Annie was born late afternoon, a sturdy healthy baby girl.

But it was after Annie's first cries filled the air that Clementine and the midwife realized something was wrong. The complications that had followed had caused too much blood loss and the infection that had developed mere hours after Annie's birth.

The doctor had attended to her with medicine and whatever measure he

had at his disposal, but he'd made it clear that the best he could do was to make Jessica comfortable. The laudanum helped with the pain, but it didn't break the fever that her sister had been fighting ever since.

It was clear the fight was almost over...

"Should I call Nathan..." Clementine offered half-heartedly. Nathan had given her sister nothing but trouble since the day they were married, but he was still the father of her daughter.

"No... Leave him be," Jessica said weakly. "I need you to promise me you'll take care of Annie, Clementine?" Jessica asked, her hand squeezing Clementine's.

"Of course," Clementine said without hesitation.

"Clementine, I need you to raise her as your own, love her as your own. Promise me you'll never leave her with Nathan..." Jessica insisted.

Clementine brushed away her tears. "I promise, no harm will ever come to Annie. She's mine and I'm hers, I promise..."

"Thank you," Jessica flinched with pain. "More... medicine..."

"You've already had enough," Clementine argued even as she reached for the Laudanum.

"I love you, sister, always." Jessica smiled weakly.

Before Clementine could even medicate her for the pain, Clementine let out her last breath. The room went quiet, even the baby stopped crying as if knowing something heart-wrenching had just happened.

Clementine lay her head on her sister's chest and wept. She wept until she had no more tears to cry. It could've been seconds or minutes, she would never know.

But when Annie's cries began to fill the air, Clementine knew her sister no longer needed her.

Her niece needed her.

She picked up the baby, only two days old, and held her close. "It's the two of us now, Annie, I promise I'll always take care of you."

As she stood by her sister's bed, Clementine prayed that the Lord would give her the strength and the courage she needed to raise her niece. She knew that as a single mother it wasn't going to be an easy task, especially with Nathan hardly ever home, and drunk on the rare occasions he was home.

"You called?" Nathan asked stumbling into the room a short while later.

Clementine bit back her anger at his delayed response and simply glanced at the bed. "It's over."

"I see," Nathan said coldly. "You take care of the lil' one," Nathan slurred before he grabbed his hat and walked out the front door.

Clementine didn't have to ask where he was going, she already knew his thirst was greater than his grief over the wife he had just lost.

CHAPTER 2



OceanofPDF.com

CHICAGO – NOVEMBER 1881

Clementine felt her heart begin to pound as the door opened. She didn't turn to greet Nathan, instead, she continued to stir the pot on the stove.

His heavy footsteps thudded on the floor, a clear indication he hadn't come straight home from work having stopped by the gambling den first. Clementine offered a quiet prayer of thanks that Annie was fast asleep because she wasn't sure how Nathan was going to take her news.

For six months she had done what her sister had asked. She had cared for Annie as if she were her own. She would never go back on the promise she had made Jessica; she would honor her promise to care for Annie for as long as she lived.

But that didn't mean she had to live with a man who was no relation to her and hardly ever looked at his daughter.

When Annie turned six months old, Clementine had realized that she could either accept that Nathan's drunk habits and missed shifts at the lumber mill were her future or she could change both her future and Annie's.

In secret, she had set about applying for positions around Chicago. She had applied for everything from a cleaner, a baker, a nanny, and even as a sorter at the lumber mill, and for a month she had heard nothing.

Until this morning.

The letter had come in the mail with the news that she had been appointed as a seamstress at one of the textile fabrics on the other side of town. The wages were meager, but they would be enough for Clementine to support herself and Annie.

Away from Nathan Woodward.

Clementine knew that she was taking an impossible chance to ask Nathan

for his daughter; in fact, she feared the very words she was about to speak. She had seen how abusive and aggressive Nathan could be when he was sober, she knew it would be even worse when he was drunk.

But she had promised Jessica that she would care for Annie, that she would give Annie a better life than the one they'd had. For that promise, she drew in a deep breath and summoned her courage before she turned to Nathan.

"I need to talk to you," Clementine said simply.

"Then talk," Nathan slurred, falling into his favorite seat. "If it's about money, you can stop right there. My back was ailin' me this mornin'. Couldn't work a full shift."

Clementine bit her tongue. Now wasn't the time to remind Nathan that his back was hurting this morning because he had slept on the floor after passing out the night before.

"It's not about money. It's about Annie," Clementine said firmly. "I've found work as a seamstress in one of the factories. I get a stipend to live in a tenement building close to the factory. The wages aren't much, but they're enough."

"Good riddance!" Nathan chuckled. "About time you got out from under my feet. Your sister's been gone for months, you're nothin' of mine."

Clementine nodded. She'd expected a comment along those lines. "I know and I'll be forever grateful that you've been patient this long. There is something I'd like to ask you... something you might not approve of."

"Spit it out, woman! I ain't got all night. Got some folks I gotta meet," Nathan barked impatiently.

"I don't have any family of my own, I'd like to... I'd like to take Annie with me." Clementine held her breath waiting for his shouting, abuse, and insults to begin.

Nathan frowned at her as if she'd just turned into a toad. "You want to take the baby?"

“Yes. I promise I’ll care for her as if she were my own. You can come and visit her as often as you like...” Clementine said, trying to soften the request.

Nathan slammed his fist on the table. “This is the best news yet! ‘Course you can have ‘er. She’s nothin’ but a nuisance; killed her own mother.” His voice was laced with acid.

“She...” Clementine stopped herself from arguing when she realized what he’d said. “I can take Annie?”

“Please do. When do you leave?” Nathan asked with a cocked brow.

Clementine had planned on leaving in the morning, but she quickly made a split-second decision. “Now, if it’s all right by you.”

“Right by me,” Nathan stood up with a grin a mile a wide. “Take care.”

He stood up and stumbled towards the front door. He missed a step and almost fell but caught the door in time. Clementine watched, flabbergasted, as he opened the door and stumbled out into the street as if he didn’t have a single care in the world.

He didn’t even stop to say goodbye or to look in at his daughter.

Relief washed over Clementine as the door closed behind Nathan. Her heart broke for Annie, realizing that Nathan had never cared for his daughter at all.

Clementine shook away all the emotions clouding her mind. She didn’t want to chance being here when Nathan returned, fearing he would change his mind. In a matter of minutes, she had packed all their belongings into a couple of carpet bags.

She went into Nathan’s room to find her sister’s wedding ring. It would be all Annie would ever have of her mother. Then she lifted the baby into her arms and set off into the night.

She didn’t know where they would sleep that night, but even if they slept under a bridge, that would be all fine by her.

Because tonight was the first night of their new lives.

A life wherein which there was no cause to avoid a drunkard, and no pleading for money for meals.

A life where Clementine could make her own choices and find a way to give Annie everything she deserved.

“I promise, Jessie,” Annie whispered as she held the baby tightly against her chest. “We’ll be just fine, by the grace of God.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3



OceanofPDF.com

CHICAGO – MAY 1882

“*T*here came a letter for you,” Mary Anderson said as soon as Clementine stepped into the tenement after her shift.

“Hello, thank you.” Clementine set down her things and moved toward her niece. Annie had her first birthday just a couple of weeks before and although she was crawling all over the floors of the moldy tenement apartment, she had yet to learn how to walk. “Where’s my favorite girl?”

She scooped Annie into her arms and was rewarded with bubbles of laughter.

“She’s a sweetheart,” Mary said reaching for her purse. “Have a good evening, you two.”

“Thank you for looking after her,” Clementine smiled at her friend.

“My pleasure. Besides, the extra money is going towards my *going west* fund.” Mary laughed before she turned and left.

Clementine chuckled shaking her head as she set Annie down.

It was hard to believe that it was already more than six months since she’d last seen Nathan Woodward. Over those first few weeks, she had feared every day that he would pitch up to claim Annie. But after all the months, Nathan had yet to make contact with his daughter.

Clementine had quickly realized that she would need more than a seamstress’s wage, even with the stipend for the tenement apartment, if she was going to give Annie a better life. The work hours were terrible and the working conditions poor. When Clementine was home, she was either exhausted or sick, thanks to all the sick people who surrounded her on a daily basis.

She had met Mary at the factory and they had quickly become good friends. Mary, a hopeless seamstress, was fired within weeks. Clementine had

pitied her and taken her in until she could find a job.

But when Mary had found work as a bartender in a gambling house, they had worked out an agreement for Mary to stay. An agreement which means that Mary no longer had to pay rent and Clementine no longer had to pay for childcare for Annie during the day.

The arrangement had been working perfectly over the last four months. But just like Mary, Clementine was also dreaming of a life out West.

It had all started when they learned of a girl at the factory who had become a mail-order bride. At first, Clementine had considered becoming a mail-order bride herself, but her experience with both her father and Nathan caused her to fear that she might be matched with a drunkard as a husband.

Instead, she had looked in earnest for gainful employment out West. She could only afford to buy a newspaper once a month, seeing it as a gamble every month. She'd sit for hours reading all the advertisements, hoping for one for which she could apply.

She had yet to receive a response from any of the advertisers whose positions she had applied for.

She didn't have a *going West* fund like Mary, but she did plan to build a new life for herself and Annie out West one day. Every night she prayed for the Lord to open a door, to give her an opportunity, to lead her towards the future Annie deserved.

Lost in thoughts about her own and Mary's dreams, Clementine opened the letter that had arrived for her. Her heart skipped a beat as she read the return address. Excitement and anticipation rushed through her veins as she started to read the letter.

DEAR MISS JEFFERSON,

MY HUSBAND and I were both pleased to read your application for the position as our daughter's nanny. We are sorry about the loss of your sister, but we were excited to learn that you have her one-year-old daughter in your care.

As my husband works long hours as an important businessman in Santa Fe and I am predominantly occupied with social events, we feel that you will be a perfect fit as caretaker for our three-year-old daughter, Elsa.

Your niece would be good company for our Elsa and we honestly hope that you accept our offer.

We hereby officially offer you the position as our live-in nanny. You will be responsible for the care of our daughter Elsa, as well as minor housekeeping tasks. Your hours will be discussed on arrival, but I assure you that you will have at least one day to yourself in every week.

To ensure you are close to Elsa when she needs you during the night, your room will be adjacent to hers. Of course, your niece will share your room.

The offer includes room, board, your transport to Santa Fe, as well as...

AS CLEMENTINE CONTINUED TO READ, tears began to pool in her eyes. Over and above offering her room and board, the Smiths were willing to pay for their expenses and their train tickets West, and they even included a postal order to pay for new clothes for herself and Annie.

It was almost too good to be true.

The wages were more than she earned at the factory, only she didn't need to put them towards living expenses, as the Smiths would keep her and Annie.

Clementine read the letter over and over again, unable to comprehend how blessed she was to have been given such a wonderful position. A smile curved her mouth as she picked up a pen to write to the Smith family.

DEAR MRS. SMITH,

I HEREBY GLADLY ACCEPT YOUR offer.

ANNIE CRAWLED towards her and stood up against her knee. “Mama!”

Clementine smiled at Annie. She hadn’t taught Annie to say Mama and yet it had somehow just happened. Annie might be her niece, but she was the only mother Annie had ever known.

“Yes, Annie, mama. Mama is going to take you on the greatest adventure of your life. An adventure out West.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



OceanofPDF.com

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN MISSOURI & KANSAS- JUNE 1882

Night had just started to fall as the train raced towards the last beams of the sun. The engine driver was tired, but he wasn't paid to sleep. He was paid to reach his destinations on time and if the train didn't arrive on time, penalties were to be paid.

With his hand on the lever, he kept his eyes on the tracks. Sometimes it still fascinated him that just ten short years ago he had been a dockworker and now he was the driver for the famous transcontinental railway.

Ten years ago, half of these rails hadn't even been laid, and now he knew them like the back of his hand. The three-day journey from Chicago to Santa Fe was one he had been driving for the last two years. Every time there were more passengers on board.

As someone who had both lived in the east and saw the promise of the west, the driver understood why so many trains headed eastwards with few passengers while the trains headed west were usually full to the brim.

"Thank you," the driver thanked the engineer who offered him a small flask before disappearing to the back of the train. The small flask was all the engine driver had to sustain him during the long night ahead.

By tomorrow afternoon he would be in Santa Fe and if he made good time, he might even be pleasantly surprised with a small bonus or a night in fashionable lodgings. But first, he had to get the train over the plains, through the canyons, and over the bridges, and make sure his passengers arrived safely at their destination.

He took a sip of the flask, its liquid scorching his throat before the heat spread through his belly. It wasn't the best quality bourbon, but it was good enough to keep him awake and to ward off the cold.

He hummed a song as his eyes began to adjust to the darkness, slowing

the train just a little for the twilight. When morning came, he would pick up the pace again, but at night he couldn't see obstructions or problems on the railway as far as he could during the daylight hours.

He had barely removed his hand from the lever when he saw the obstruction. He engaged the brake but experience and common sense had already made it clear that it was too late.

Reaching for the flask, he swallowed the rest of it with one long pull before he closed his eyes and prayed. "God, save them passengers."

CLEMENTINE WAS startled awake by a loud screeching. Annie was fast asleep in her arms, but a single glance out the window revealed sparks shooting upwards from the railway line. Before Clementine could assess what was happening, she felt the first jolt of impact as the engine slammed into something ahead.

Instinct had her grabbing her coat and wrapping it around Annie against her chest. The coat was followed by their blankets, and even Clementine's hat, as jolt after jolt kept slamming her back against her seat. Clementine had never been on a train until she boarded this one the day before but she didn't have to be an experienced passenger to know that something was terribly wrong.

Around her, the screams of women and children could be heard as they were startled from their sleep. Men stood up, peering out the windows as they clung on for dear life to anything within reach. The screeching finally stopped as the jolts of impact occurred more frequently.

It was only then that Clementine realized that each jolt was a train car hitting the one in front of it.

How long before their train car would crash into the one in front of it?

She crouched on her seat, covering Annie's body with hers as she recited the Lord's prayer.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Annie began to cry, woken by the noise and the suffocating hold Clementine had on her. Clementine didn't stop praying and raised her voice over Annie's cries.

“Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...”

One by one Clementine heard voices join her in prayer. Tears streamed over her cheeks, wondering if this was the fate she had brought upon Annie. Horrific death in a railway accident.

“Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...”

The train cars in front of theirs were slamming into each other, one by one, each collision causing Clementine's body to slam against the seat. She crouched lower, holding Annie even tighter.

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever...”

Before Clementine and the other passengers could end their prayer with Amen, the strongest impact of all ricocheted through their train car. The cries of mothers and children blended with the shouts of pain from men. Glass shattered, metal crushed, and luggage tumbled through the hold as the train car bounced onto its head and rolled and rolled and rolled....

Clementine closed her eyes and held onto Annie fearing that she might be crushing her in her tight grip, but there was no way she was letting go.

It was as if all hell had broken loose and Clementine could do nothing to stop it but hold her breath and pray that she would be able to draw another when it was all over.

CHAPTER 5



When the train car came to an abrupt stop, so did the screaming, if only for a moment.

Clementine gasped for breath even as she tried to assess her position. She was far from her seat, something hot trickled over her face even as her leg stung with pain. Her head was pounding and her vision blurry, but even through the pain and the confusion, she was already pulling away the blankets and jacket covering Annie.

Annie's face was red from the exertion of crying and her cheeks were wet with tears, but she was completely unscathed.

Relief washed over Clementine as she tried to sit up. The horror before her eyes had her cover Annie's head once again. No person, whether a child or not, should witness what Clementine saw. Passengers were bleeding from the broken glass, some crushed between the metal and the chairs. Blood, tears, and death surrounded Clementine, making her gasp for her breath in gratitude that she and Annie were unharmed.

A bright light shone ahead, and it took Clementine only a moment to realize that it was flames. She carefully came to her feet to find that the train car was lying on its side and to realize that the fire a train car ahead had been as a result of the derailment.

A loud crack from the back of the train car caught Clementine's attention.

A man had managed to open the door and people were rushing for the exit and away from the gruesome horror. Clementine followed them, not even bothering to complain about the shoving and the pushing as everyone tried to escape the death trap that was now their train car.

She didn't stop for her carpetbag or even to help other passengers; her only concern was for her safety and Annie's.

The cool evening air had never felt more welcoming as Clementine stumbled out of the train car. It only took her a moment to realize that what she had witnessed inside the train car was only a speck in the greater scheme of the accident they had just survived.

A blaze of flames in the distance lit up the landscape, giving the survivors a clear view of the cause of the accident.

A rockfall had blocked the railway. A rock almost the size of a small house was on the tracks. There was no way the engine driver could've stopped in time and there was no way for anyone to have foreseen such a horrific end to their journey.

"Here, miss, let me help you..." a man offered to take Clementine's elbow.

She was in too much shock to even argue as she allowed the man to lead her away from the wreckage and the flames as she held onto Annie.

"This one can walk, seems all right," the man called out to another man standing among a gathering of people.

"Put her over there," the other man called back.

Clementine was led to a group of people who seemed to have escaped with just scrapes and bruises. All of them conscious, all of them still dazed by what had just happened.

She opened the blankets and began to soothe Annie's wailing as more and more people were helped out of the train cars. Annie finally settled down and Clementine could hear what was being said around her.

Her group of people weren't too badly injured but would need a little

medical assistance. All the people in the next group were in dire need of medical help. One man had somehow lost a few fingers, while another had lost his foot. Everyone rescued was thanks to a handful of able-bodied men who had undertaken the operation.

The last group, the group Clementine was grateful not to be a part of, was made up of those who were not likely to make it through the night without urgent medical intervention. A few people had been saved from the train car that had caught fire, burnt severely as the fire had raged through the passengers.

Then there were those who didn't make it into a group at all. They were simply left with a scrap of cloth, a discarded shirt, or even a hat placed simply over their faces.

They were the victims who would never reach their destination.

For the next few hours Clementine barely moved. She simply stayed with Annie, praying that help would arrive. A kindly old woman had come to dress the wound on her head and the cut on her leg. She had brought Clementine water and had somehow found milk for Annie. A few yards from Clementine could see the form of a man lying in the dirt. Her heart clenched at the sight of death, making her feel guilty that she had survived.

But then the man's chest moved.

A frown creased Clementine's brow as she kept watching him. A cloth had been spread over his face but he wasn't dead, he was still breathing.

"Help will arrive from Topeka soon," a man announced loudly. "We sent men to fetch help. By my estimation, help will arrive with the light of dawn."

"What happened?" the elderly woman asked, moving from Clementine to the next passenger in need.

"A rockfall of sorts. This area had heavy rains last week, the rockfall must have happened yesterday or the day before. No one knew..." a man said, shaking his head. "I've been a conductor on this route for a year, we've never had any trouble here..."

“The engine driver...” someone called out concerned.

“It’s just me and two other men who survived from the train company....” the man answered. “I’m sure the company will take care of everything. Just be patient until help arrives.”

Clementine frowned. She knew the man was trying to be kind but the train company couldn’t bring back the lives that had been lost.

Clementine’s gaze traveled to the man she had noticed before and she noticed his chest moving again. Would the train company check to make sure that all the passengers thought to be so were indeed dead?

CHAPTER 6



*A*s the first rays of light touched the plains, Clementine wished again for the darkness of night. In the bright light of day the disaster she had survived seemed even more horrific than it had in the darkness. With light cast on the bodies strewn around the train cars, Clementine felt more grateful than ever before that she and Annie had been spared.

Help arrived in the form of wagons, horses, and many men and women from the closest town. Topeka was hours from the scene of the derailment and it was where they were to be taken until further arrangements could be made.

Clementine felt awful for even thinking it, but she had no money to pay another train fare. She pushed the thought far from her mind as people bustled around her to help the injured. But no one had noticed the man still breathing only a few yards from her and Annie.

Clementine gathered Annie and headed to him. With every step, her leg protested with a sharp stab of pain where she had been cut. The cut wasn't deep but it was long and the congealing blood caused every movement to feel like a blade slicing through her skin.

She carefully lowered herself beside the man. Before diverting her attention to the man, she pulled off her coat and set it in on the dirt to place Annie on. The baby gurgled and kicked into the air, grateful to be free from

Clementine's hold.

Clementine's arms ached, only now realizing that she had clung to Annie throughout the night, fearing what might still happen. She knew it was due to shock and fear. She carefully removed the cloth from the man's face, fearing what she would find.

His face seemed unharmed by the accident. He had a cut on the side of his head and a trickle of blood had dried over his temple. She gently laid a hand on his chest, relieved to feel a steady breath.

"Hello?" Clementine asked gently, not wanting to startle him.

He neither moved nor made a sound.

Clementine scanned his body for more injuries but found none. She gently touched his shoulder and spoke again. "Hello?"

Still, he didn't move.

A piece of paper peeked out of his shirt pocket and curiosity had Clementine retrieve it in the hopes of learning more about the unconscious man. It was a deed for a mining claim in Santa Fe made out to Luke Jagers.

Equipped with his name, Clementine tried again. "Luke, Luke, can you hear me?"

The man groaned but he didn't open his eyes or even attempt to move. Clementine wanted to call out for help, but she only had to look into the distance to know that there were people who needed help more urgently than the man who lay unconscious beside her.

Patently, Clementine waited with Luke for help to come. When Annie began to fuss, she offered her the milk the elderly lady had provided, wondering if Mrs. and Mr. Smith would hear of the accident. Her new employment in Santa Fe was her and Annie's chance at a new life. She couldn't let anything, not even a tragic train wreck, derail their future.

As soon as the thought occurred to her, guilt washed over her.

Many people had lost their lives around her and she was already worrying about her future. Some might not even have a future, judging by their

injuries.

“Ma’am, as soon as the next wagon returns, we’ll take you and your family to Topeka,” a man said, stopping briefly beside Clementine.

Clementine nodded. “Thank you.”

“Do you need anything, any injuries that urgently need attending?”

“We can wait,” Clementine said gratefully.

“All right, as I said, the next wagon,” the man repeated before he moved on to the next group of people.

Clementine wasn’t sure how long they waited but the sun was high in the sky when the man returned. “Ma’am, it’s your turn. We’ll be taking you to Topeka. The town doctor will take a look at your injuries and then we’ll take it from there.”

Clementine nodded gratefully and stood up. She scooped Annie into her arms, grateful that she was almost asleep. Hopefully, the wagon would rock her to sleep, too, making the journey to Topeka a little easier.

Only once Clementine and Annie were settled into the wagon, did she realize that two men had also carried Luke Jagers to their wagon. They lifted him onto the wagon and set him down beside Clementine and Annie. “As soon as you reach Topeka, ask the doctor to take a look at him first.”

Clementine nodded. Luke was unconscious and she didn’t mind looking out for him until he was in the care of a doctor.

“That everyone?” the wagon driver called back.

The man knocked on the wagon. “This one is good to go.”

The wagon began to rock its way over the rocky plains towards the town to the east. Clementine couldn’t help but feel as if she was losing ground on their journey westward. She sat quietly on the back of the wagon with fellow survivors, Luke peacefully unaware beside her while Annie softly snored on her lap.

“Probably just knocked him out cold,” a man across from Clementine said, glancing at Luke.

Clementine nodded. “Hopefully.”

“Naw, he’s just knocked out. Seen it a few times in the war. He’ll come to soon enough, just you wait and see,” the man promised with a toothless smile.

Clementine smiled. “Let’s hope so.”

For the rest of the journey to Topeka, Clementine took in the landscape as she thanked the Lord over and over again for keeping her and Annie safe. And when she wasn’t thanking the Lord, she was praying for Luke Jagers to wake up unscathed as well.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 10 JUNE 1882

The wagon stopped in front of a church. The town wasn't big, much smaller than the busy Chicago city that Clementine was used to. The road was dirt, dry and dusty. The buildings lining it not looking much different.

The wind swept through, picking up dust and swirling it in the air before tossing it against the wooden frame of a building across the road. Clementine was tired, hungry, and thirsty, but right now her own needs didn't matter. She needed to think of Annie. Apart from the little milk Annie had drunk that morning, she'd eaten nothing.

Then there was the matter of having a doctor look her over. Although Clementine was sure that Annie hadn't suffered any injuries, thanks to Clementine having wrapped her and held her throughout the collision, she wanted a doctor to confirm her opinion.

As soon as the wagon driver jumped down, three men and two women rushed out of the church. "Who is first?"

"Take them first," the driver said pointing to Clementine. "The wife has a cut on her head, the baby looks all right, but the husband is unconscious."

Everything happened so fast, that Clementine didn't even have a chance to correct them. Two men lifted Luke off the wagon even as a lady reached for Annie and took her from Clementine. Another man helped Clementine off the wagon before helping them into the church.

"Excuse the mess, we don't really have much in the way of a surgery. Doc Jenkins only has two beds in his surgery.... We needed more," the man explained as he led Clementine into the church.

Pews had been moved aside to make way for makeshift beds. There were pails of water, women shuffling between patients, even as one man stood at

the one end with a stethoscope around his neck giving orders.

Doctor Jenkins, Clementine presumed.

The doctor first examined Luke before looking at Clementine with a grateful smile. "I believe he got the wind knocked right out of him. See this cut here? It's right on his temple. He might have a headache for a few days when he comes to, but other than that, he'll be fine." The doctor continued his examination of Luke's abdomen and limbs before he called for a nurse. "We'll need a splint and bandages!"

"Something wrong?" Clementine asked, concerned for the unconscious stranger.

"Yes, it seems your husband broke his arm, right here," the doctor pointed to Luke's forearm. "We'll need to keep him here just to make sure he's all right when he wakes up. In the meantime, we're going to splint his arm."

Clementine nodded. She watched patiently as the doctor and the nurse splinted Luke's broken arm before two men carried him to a bed against the wall of the church.

"Right, next, the baby," the doctor said reaching for Annie.

Clementine couldn't help but be grateful that he made funny noises and pretended to play with Annie while he examined her. She had never seen a man delight in the company of a child in this way. In her experience, men saw children as a nuisance, but Doctor Jenkins seemed enthralled by Annie.

"She's as good as new, Mama, she must have had a guardian angel with her during the accident. The first patient I've seen today without a single scratch," the doctor mused.

Clementine breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank the Lord."

"You're right, we'll thank the Lord for that," Dr. Jenkins agreed. "Hand her over to the nurse so I can take a look at you."

Clementine sat patiently as Dr. Jenkins opened her wounds and cleaned and dressed them afresh. He instructed her to keep dousing them with salt

water twice a day to prevent infection before sending her on her way.

Clementine stood in the middle of the church, uncertain what she was to do next. She had no money for lodgings or food, and their belongings were among the wreckage of the fated train.

“Ma’am, you can head on over to the diner across the road. They’ve got warm stew and tea, and I’m sure they’ll have something for the little one. You can come back here once you’ve been fed and watered,” a kind nurse informed her, seeing Clementine seemed lost.

Clementine did as she was told and carried Annie across the road. Much like the church, the diner hadn’t been prepared for receiving the survivors of the train accident. Four girls bustled between tables, even as more people arrived.

“Honey, you’re in for a wait if you’re looking for a seat. Best come back to the kitchen with me. There’s a table there and a small backyard where the little one can play.”

Clementine almost cried with relief as she followed the waitress towards the kitchen. Two women stood in front of the woodstove managing numerous pots that were all being stirred at once. Another washed dishes, while another kneaded dough for bread.

“You can sit right there, honey, that way you can keep an eye on the little one.” The waitress showed Clementine to a small table by the back door where a small kitchen garden could be seen just beyond it.

Clementine set Annie down and took a seat at the table watching as Annie instantly began to crawl and explore the garden. Right now she didn’t care how dirty Annie might get, all she cared about was that they were alive.

She couldn’t be sure how long she waited, but when the bowl of stew was set down in front of her, Clementine’s stomach growled with urgency.

“Here, I made some oatmeal for the little one and warmed some milk. Let me know if she needs anything else, honey,” the waitress said returning with a small bowl of milky oatmeal.

For the first time since the accident, Clementine allowed herself to cry.
“Thank you.”

“Don’t you cry, hun, we’re happy to help.” The waitress showed an encouraging smile before she disappeared back into the front of the diner.

Clementine sniffed back her tears and went to fetch Annie.

They ate until their plates were empty. Annie explored in the garden for a while longer before Clementine knew it was time to get back to the church. Although she enjoyed sitting in the diner’s kitchen, she knew she needed to start thinking about lodgings for the night.

That and a change of clothes for her and Annie.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 10 JUNE 1882

“Good, I see you’ve both got a little more color in your cheeks.” The nurse welcomed Clementine and Annie back on their return to the church.

“Yes, the ladies at the diner were very kind. They even found some leftovers suitable for Annie,” Clementine said with a smile as she held the sleeping child to her shoulder.

After playing in the kitchen garden for an hour, Annie had been happy to rest her head on Clementine’s shoulder and soon fell asleep.

“We tend to take care of each other here in Topeka,” the nurse confirmed, leading Clementine to a desk. “We have to keep a record of every passenger who survived the accident. The railway company sent a telegram while you were away. They’ll be paying for room and board for you until other arrangements are made. I’ve already sent word to the boarding house that they keep a room for you and the little girl.”

“Thank you, I won’t pretend that a rest would not be very welcome,” Clementine said with relief.

“I’m sure. Before you go, I just need some information from you. Your husband is still unconscious, so would you be so kind as to provide me with his name?” The nurse’s pen hovered over a piece of paper.

Clementine knew that now was the time to come clean about her non-existent relationship with the man she had arrived in Topeka with. But a single glance around the church made her fear the truth. She could see a few women sitting in a corner with their children, looking lost and devastated. Clementine had been on her own with Annie for more than a year now, but somehow admitting that she was a woman traveling alone with a young child made her feel vulnerable.

The nurse might be kind, but that didn't mean all the men in town were. She wasn't sure how long she would be stuck in Topeka and it could only benefit her to have a 'pretend' husband while she was here.

Although he was unconscious, even an unconscious husband offered a type of protection a woman traveling on her own wouldn't have otherwise.

"His name?" the nurse repeated.

"Luke. Luke Jagers," Clementine quickly answered. She prayed silently for God to forgive her the white lie.

"Mrs. Jagers, your name please?" the nurse asked.

Clementine swallowed back the bitterness of the lie and smiled. "I'm Clementine and this is our daughter, Annie."

"And you're traveling to..." the nurse asked with a cocked brow.

"Santa Fe. My husband has a mining claim there." Clementine hated how easily the lies tumbled from her mouth, but after being subjected to the abuse of first her father and then witnessing the abuse Jessica had suffered at the hands of Nathan, she couldn't help but believe that pretending that Luke was her husband was for her protection.

And for Anna's.

Besides, she reasoned, he was unconscious; he wouldn't know any better.

"That's all for now. You can head on over to the boarding house and ask for Dorothy, she'll show you to your room. Dinner and breakfast will be served at the boarding house, and for now, lunch will be served at the diner."

"Thank you." Clementine smiled, truly grateful for the kindness of the people of Topeka. "The... my husband... has he shown any improvement?" Clementine asked, quickly correcting herself. If she wanted to pretend to be Luke's wife, she needed to show the appropriate interest.

"Unfortunately not yet. We've taken care of splinting his arm, but other than that he's still unconscious," the nurse explained. "If anything changes, we'll know where to find you."

Clementine nodded before she turned and walked out of the church. Guilt

washed over her; she was invertedly taken advantage of an injured man. She bit her lip and was about to turn back and tell the nurse the truth when a group of men called to her.

Clementine turned and noticed a few men hanging around outside the saloon. One called out to her, inviting her for a drink. Another called her fresh meat off the railway express.

A chill ran down Clementine's spine. She would simply have to pray harder for forgiveness because although Topeka seemed like a wonderful town, it was clear that the riffraff she had escaped in Chicago, were to be found in Topeka as well.

She noticed a sign for the boarding house and without hesitation rushed in that direction. She ignored the catcalls and kept her head down, holding onto Annie as if they were about to experience another disaster.

When she reached the boarding house, she breathed a sigh of relief as soon as she stepped through the doors.

"Hello there, you poor thing, you look exhausted." Dorothy the proprietress greeted her with a kind smile. "I'm Dorothy."

"I'm Clementine, Clementine... Jagers," Clementine added quickly. "This is my daughter, Annie."

"I'm so sorry to hear about your husband. I'll pray for his speedy recovery. Come, let me show you to your room. It's not the best, it's not big, but it has a bed and if you give me a little time to heat some water, it'll have a bath as well," Dorothy promised.

"Thank you," Clementine said gratefully.

"It's my pleasure. Now stop thanking me and let's get moving. We'll see about finding you some clothes tomorrow, perhaps you'll be lucky, and your own luggage might be salvaged from the train wreck."

Clementine nodded, doubting that would happen.

Dorothy chatted all the way to the room, but Clementine barely heard a single word. All she could think of was sleep.

And the lie she knew would stop her from sleeping all night.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 12 JUNE 1882

“The directors of the railway send their sincerest condolences for all the lives lost in the tragedy on the evening of the ninth of June. It is the greatest tragedy the railway company has ever faced, with the loss of seventy-eight souls.”

Clementine gasped at the number. All around her murmurs picked up even as some began to cry.

All the survivors of the accident had been summoned to attend a meeting in the diner that evening. The railway company had sent a representative to address them and according to Dorothy and the town sheriff, they would want to hear what the representative had to say.

Everyone able was in attendance. The injured who were unable to attend would receive word from the Sheriff and the nurses after the meeting.

“Any surviving family members will be compensated generously for the tragedy and suffering of losing a loved one. The railway company has made it possible for me to make sure that the rest of your journey as well as the next few years will be without financial worry.” The man smiled briefly, his pointy mustache turning up at the corners before he continued to read from the page in front of him.

“Anyone injured in the accident will also be compensated according to their injuries. For those of you without significant injuries at all, a train fare will be provided at a discounted rate on to your original final destination.”

He set his spectacles one side and met the crowd’s curious looks. “I want to make it abundantly clear that the railway will only be compensating room and board for those suffering injuries. If you do not have injuries, unfortunately, your room and board as of yesterday will be for your own account, at a discounted rate. We estimate the railway to be cleared of debris

in another day, by which time you can board the next train heading west.”

Clementine let out a quiet sigh as she bounced Annie on her knee. If she wanted to escape the lie she had told, there was no way she could escape it now. She had no money and no way to pay for her room and board, even at a discounted rate. Never mind the discounted fare to her final destination.

If she came clean about not being Luke’s wife now, that would mean she and Annie would be turned out onto the street without the means to travel the rest of the way West.

Anger bubbled through her, realizing that just because she wasn’t badly injured, the railway company felt they owed her nothing but an apology and a discount for additional expenses incurred through no fault of her own.

She understood that families had lost so much more, but still it irked her that she was expected to pay for her room and board and for a journey for which she had already paid.

“To continue, I’d like to add that for those in the church hospital, or those who have family in the church hospital, your room and board will be for the railway’s account until such time as the patient is discharged. After which you will be entitled to the rest of your journey West on the railway’s account.”

Clementine bit her lip. What choice did this representative leave her? Tell the truth and become destitute or keep up the lie and have a roof over her head and the means to travel onward. Of course, her journey would be delayed until Luke recovered, but at least it would be paid for.

“Any questions?” the man asked with a cocked brow.

A woman stood up, younger than Clementine if she had to guess. “I’m sorry.... I uh... I wasn’t injured but I don’t have funds to pay my room and board or my train fare. I spent all my money on my train fare.”

The man shrugged. “I’m sorry to hear that, Miss, but you must understand that the railway company has suffered many expenses due to an accident not of our making. I’m sure you can find some form of employment in town

where you can work until you have earned enough wages to pay for your way West.”

Clementine cringed at the man’s harsh tone. Her heart broke for the young woman, but at least that woman didn’t have a one-year-old in her care.

The questions continued for another thirty minutes. By the time the meeting was over, Clementine realized she only had one option.

To keep up the lie and ignore the guilt.

She walked out of the diner and headed straight towards the church where quite a few patients remained recovering under the care of the doctor. The patients had been moved to proper beds and each had a small area around their beds offering them a little privacy for visits.

Clementine sat down beside Luke’s bed and sighed heavily. “I’m so sorry, Luke. I hope that one day you can forgive me for using you in this way. Hopefully, you’re a kind man and you’ll understand.”

A tear slipped over her cheek as guilt pushed bile up her throat. She found herself searching his face and wondering about the color of his eyes. His skin was dark, tanned from years of working in the sun. Small lines fanned from the corners of his eyes.

His hair was dark brown, long enough that a light breeze would lift it from his forehead. Clementine didn’t know the man at all, but she had truly become concerned for his health. Would he ever wake up? If he didn’t, would it mean she would be stuck in Topeka forever?

Another tear slipped over her cheek as she reached for his hand. It was large and completely enveloped hers. Callouses were proof of years of hard work.

“Please, Luke, you have to wake up. You have to forgive me. I beg you,” Clementine sniffed.

She felt the sister’s hand on her shoulder and stiffened, not sure how much the nurse had heard.

“He’ll wake up, dear, no reason for him not to. When it comes to a head

injury, sleep is the body's way of healing itself. You'll see. Don't cry, he'll come back to you."

The nurse's footsteps patted away. Relief flooded Clementine as she realized the nurse hadn't heard anything of importance at all.

As far as she was concerned, Clementine was a wife fearing for her husband's wellbeing.

Not a single woman traveling with her niece, praying that her secret wasn't revealed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 15 JUNE 1882

“Why don’t I take Annie with me?” Dorothy offered after breakfast. “I’m going to visit my daughter, and her little one is about the same age. She can play a little while you visit your husband.”

Clementine hesitated for a moment, unsure whether she trusted anyone to take care of Annie. Ever since the day of Annie’s birth, the only other person ever to have cared for her was Mary. “I’m not sure, I wouldn’t want her to burden you. She’s a handful these days.”

“I’ve raised four of my own and three grandchildren, I can assure you I’ll manage. Go on, you’ve barely had a minute to yourself since the accident. Let Annie come with me and then you can have a nice long visit with your husband. Promise him something good enough that he’ll want to wake up.” Dorothy winked making Clementine blush.

“Thank you, it’s very kind of you. I won’t be long,” Clementine assured her.

“Take your time, I’m planning to be a while myself,” Dorothy said scooping Annie up. Over the last few days, Annie had taken to Dorothy as if she were a surrogate grandmother. It warmed Clementine’s heart to see someone other than her show Annie that kind of affection.

“We’re going to have a ball of a time. Go on, I’ve got her,” Dorothy said, all but pushing Clementine out the door.

Clementine made her way to the church noticing that there were fewer patients than the day before. Every day more were discharged and only five patients remained, looking lost in the large church.

“I was wondering if you’d come this morning.” The nurse greeted Clementine with a smile. “I just boiled some water; would you like some tea?”

“That would be wonderful. But only if I can help in some way. I see how much you do here, and I feel guilty for not helping,” Clementine admitted. She didn’t add that her guilt stemmed from her lies.

“If you really want to help, there are sheets to fold and beds to make.” The nurse smiled.

For the next hour, Clementine helped the nurse. She folded towels, made beds, and even washed bedpans without a mutter of complaint.

“You’ve been such a help; I feel guilty for not being able to pay you,” the doctor said when he arrived, pleased at how much Clementine and the nurse had accomplished.

“Not at all, you’re taking such good care of Luke, I should be paying you.”

“The railway is taking care of that,” the nurse reminded her as she accompanied her to Luke’s bedside.

His beard had grown since the accident, giving him a rough look, but, despite his beard and strong features, there was something kind about his face. Or perhaps Clementine just hoped he would be kind because she couldn’t stand the thought of his anger if he woke and learned about the lies she had been telling.

“Tell you what, why don’t I bring you a razor and soap and you can clean him up a bit. A washcloth and a basin won’t be much trouble at all.”

Before Clementine could argue, the nurse rushed away.

A few minutes later Clementine sat with the blade quivering in her hand. She couldn’t refuse to shave the man who was supposed to be her husband without raising suspicion. She had never shaved anyone in her entire life and feared that she might slit his throat with the first slide of the blade.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly stroked the blade over his cheek, leaving his neck and carotid artery for last.

By the fourth stroke, she felt a little more comfortable, confidently sliding the blade down Luke’s cheek to reveal the smooth skin beneath. By the time

she was done, she couldn't help but admire how handsome he was. She took her time washing his hands, his feet, and his face before she finally sat back and admired her work.

How was it possible to care for someone you'd never met, she wondered with awe. But it didn't take long for Clementine to realize that it was not care but rather gratitude for the security her association with him brought.

Guilt washed over her again, but this time instead of looking away and leaving before she blurted out the truth, she leaned forward and brushed a kiss over his cheek. "Thank you and... I'm sorry," she whispered against his ear.

"That's it, dear, tell him you love him. Men love to hear they're needed," the nurse chuckled when she returned to fetch the basin of water.

Clementine smiled. If only the nurse knew how desperately she needed Luke and how she was using him without his knowledge.

For a moment Clementine considered telling the truth, admitting to her lies, and taking whatever punishment was due. But the thought of county jail stopped her short. Were it not for Annie, she wouldn't have hesitated, but she had to think of Annie.

She reached for Luke's hand and held it as she prayed for God's forgiveness and for Luke's recovery.

She might not be able to face the punishment of the law, but when Luke woke up, she would need to face the consequences of her actions and simply hope for his mercy and understanding.

Other than that, she had no real choice available to her.

CHAPTER 11



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 17 JUNE 1882

Clementine slipped on the ring as she had every day since that first night in Topeka, and let out a quiet sigh. “*Dear Lord, please forgive me.*”

It had become her daily prayer and although she doubted the Lord would forgive an ongoing lie, Clementine knew she had no other way to care for herself or for Annie. The doctor, the nurse, Patricia at the boarding house, almost everyone in town believed she was married to Luke Jagers by now. If the truth was to come out...

Clementine pushed that thought far from her mind and glanced at Annie who was still fast asleep. Their days had fallen into a routine in which Clementine would help Patricia out at the inn for a couple of hours before she would visit Luke. She sat at his bedside learning everything she could from the stranger who was yet to regain consciousness. She would help the nurse with a few chores around the makeshift hospital before she and Annie went out for a walk to the pond at the edge of town.

For the first time in her life, Clementine didn't slave her days away. She ate meals someone else cooked, slept in a bed she didn't have to pay for and had all the time in the world to play with Annie.

If only it hadn't been for the lie, Clementine would've considered it a blessed life.

But this wasn't her life. This was merely the lie she was living until she found a way out of it.

A sharp rap at the door had her turning with a concerned look.

“Clementine!” Patricia's voice called from the other side of the door. “Clementine, come quick!”

Clementine rushed for the door and plucked it open to see Patricia

standing on the other side, wide-eyed. “What happened?”

Patricia clapped her hands with glee. “He’s awake! The doctor just sent word.”

A smile split Clementine’s face in two even as dread filled her like lead. If Luke was awake, that meant he would soon reveal her deception.

“What are you waiting for? Go on, go see your husband. I’ll take care of the lil’ one,” Patricia encouraged her with a smile.

Clementine grabbed a shawl from the dresser and smiled briefly at Patricia before rushing down the hall. A few minutes later she walked into the church to see the doctor and the nurse both waiting for her at Luke’s bedside. Only four other patients remained in their care. It was hard to believe that just a week ago the hospital had been filled with makeshift beds.

“Here she is.” The nurse greeted Clementine with a smile.

“He’s awake?” Clementine asked anxiously.

“Yes,” the doctor said with a smile. “Started coming to during the night, but finally woke up this morning.”

“And is he…” Clementine didn’t know how to ask whether Luke had suffered any lasting effects after being unconscious for a week.

“Talk to him and find out,” the doctor encouraged her with a smile.

Clementine stepped closer to Luke’s bed, twirling the ring on her finger, fearing that in a matter of seconds her world would come tumbling down like the house of cards that she had thrown up.

“Luke, thank heavens you’re awake,” Clementine said, touching his hand.

The man whose face she had come to memorize opened his eyes. The warmest shade of brown with specks of gold surrounded his pupil. A frown creased his brow as he searched her face for familiarity. Clementine already knew he wouldn’t find it. It wasn’t his ring on her finger and she had never taken his last name.

“Luke, it’s your wife. Clementine,” the nurse encouraged when Luke said nothing.

“Luke?” Clementine’s voice quivered with trepidation, but for those around her, it must have sounded like emotion.

Luke shook his head. “Who are you?”

Clementine felt her heart stop, knowing that the Sheriff would be called at any second. Annie would be taken away and she wouldn’t be able to keep the promise she had made her sister before she passed away.

Before Clementine could answer, the doctor touched her elbow and led her to one side. “I know you must be concerned, but don’t be. I’ve heard of cases where patients suffer forgetfulness after a head injury. It’s not common, but it has been noted.”

Clementine frowned. She had thought the doctor was going to question her relationship with Luke not assure her that Luke had simply forgotten about her. “Oh... I see.”

“The best thing you can do is to be patient with him. Talk to him about Annie, about the plans you had for the future, and I’m sure in time his memory will return.” The doctor smiled at her with encouragement.

Clementine nodded before the doctor led her back to Luke’s bedside. “How are you feeling?”

“Who are you?” Luke asked, looking very confused.

“Your wife, Luke, Clementine,” Clementine lied through her teeth.

“It seems your injuries have caused some memory loss, Luke, it’s completely normal. Clementine is your wife, and you have a daughter named Annie. Patience and rest are the only remedy now, it’s best you be patient with yourself and allow your brain to heal,” the doctor explained before he and the nurse left Luke and Clementine to enjoy some privacy.

“You’re my wife?” Luke asked, flabbergasted.

Clementine smiled crookedly. “I know, I’m just as surprised.” She wasn’t teasing, but clearly Luke had taken it as such.

A chuckle escaped him before he flinched in pain. “My head aches.”

Clementine lay a cool hand over his forehead and searched his gaze. “Is

that better?”

Luke let out a sigh of relief. “It is, thank you.” A frown creased his brow again. “I still can’t believe I have such a pretty wife.”

Clementine’s nerves gave way to a light giggle. At least her fake husband was pleased by her appearance.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 20 JUNE 1882

Clementine watched as Annie clambered onto Luke's lap, babbling to him in baby talk. If there had been one thing she had feared about the reasons the doctor had given for Luke's memory loss, it had been that Luke would be uncomfortable with Annie.

And yet, since the first moment Annie and Luke laid eyes on each other, it had been love at first sight. Her niece adored the hard-looking man with the brown eyes and Luke simply doted on the little blonde girl with her innocent, big, blue eyes.

He was yet to show her any warmth or affection, but he had been perfectly kind to her on every visit since he had come to. Now that Luke was awake, Annie and Clementine visited him for hours on end. Clementine had wished that she wasn't living a lie the day before when Annie had fallen asleep on Luke's shoulder as if he really was her father.

Clementine had never known that men could be so affectionate to children, so patient and so indulgent of their personalities. Not only had her father never shown her that type of affection, Nathan had never bothered to show any such affection to Annie who was his own flesh and blood.

For the first time in her life, Annie knew what it felt like to have a father.

That was Clementine's greatest reward and also her biggest regret for the lie she had told.

Because when the truth was revealed, Annie would lose Luke and have to learn that it was just the two of them again.

"Annie, would you like to go for a walk?" the nurse asked, joining them.

"She's fine right here, aren't you, sweet girl?" Luke asked, ruffling Annie's hair.

Annie rewarded him with a gurgle of laughter before she climbed off his

lap and took three steps toward the nurse.

Clementine gasped with delight until Annie's hand was in the nurse's. "Annie, you walked!"

Annie laughed happily as she carefully hobbled at the nurse's side.

"Was that the first time?" Luke asked with a hopeful look.

"Yes, her very first time. Until now she's walked only holding onto things, or holding my hand, but never on her own..." Clementine said as emotion crept into her voice.

Luke reached for her hand and smiled. "I'm glad we could experience it together. I wouldn't have wanted to miss that." He let out a sigh and shook his head. "It feels as if I've already missed too much."

"Your memory will return," Clementine assured him quietly; it was what the doctor had instructed her to do to keep him positive.

"I know, but I just wish I could remember how we fell in love. Our wedding, Annie's birth... our plans for the West..." Luke trailed off.

Clementine didn't want to tell any more lies than she already had, but she couldn't just keep quiet. "We were going to Santa Fe because you secured a claim to mine the new gold vein."

"Mining, yes that's right. I remember something about panning gold in a stream..." Luke said vaguely.

"I found a job as a nanny in Santa Fe to keep us afloat while you mined for enough gold for us to start our own homestead," Clementine expanded a little more.

"Do you remember the train accident?" Luke asked suddenly.

Clementine nodded. "I'd rather forget it. It was horrible..."

"Tell me... please. I know it must have been terrifying, but the doctor told me how Annie was the only one to make it through the ordeal without so much as a single scrape."

Clementine drew in a deep breath before she began to recount her memory of that horrific night. She left out the part about him being a

stranger, or how they had presumed him to be dead at first. “Then we arrived and Topeka, and the rest you know.”

“You wrapped her in blankets and coats and crouched over her? That was a very brave thing to do...” Luke trailed off. “Why didn’t I help?”

Clementine shrugged trying to think of a quick excuse. “You were trying to help the others; you were so brave.”

Luke nodded. “I wish I could remember...”

“It will take time,” Clementine said as Luke reached for her hand again.

His finger trailed over her ring, and he met her gaze. “Tell me about the day I put this ring on your finger.”

Clementine quickly withdrew her hand. “I think you’ve had me tell enough stories for one day. You should rest.”

“Please don’t go,” Luke requested in a way that made Clementine’s head spin. She didn’t know this man from Adam and yet after living a lie for the last week and now having to get to know him, she found herself falling for him.

He seemed kind and friendly, generous, and brave... all the factors she’d never experienced in a man.

“We’ll come back later... I promise,” Clementine offered with a smile. “You know Annie won’t settle down tonight if we don’t.”

Luke smiled at her, his eyes tired. “I love you, Clementine...”

It was the first time he’d uttered those words. Although he thought he’d said it a million times before, the words slipped off his tongue as if he meant them.

Clementine smiled, biting back the tears. Somehow, she had come to wish that the lie she had been living could be the truth. Luke would make a good husband and a wonderful father.

But this wasn’t true; it was all a farce.

“We’ll see you later, get some rest,” Clementine said before she left his side.

She took a moment outside the church to steady her racing heart and quivering knees before she went in search of the nurse and Annie who she knew would not be too far away. But before she did, she promised herself that she couldn't keep living this lie. She was already hurting Luke with her lies, and now Annie would be hurt as well.

That wasn't even considering the fact that she would be heartbroken when Luke turned his back on her.

For the last few days, Clementine had an experience she had never expected to have in her whole life.

She had experienced what it felt like to be loved, to be cared for, and, most of all, to be part of a family.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13



OceanofPDF.com

TOPEKA – 22 JUNE 1882

Luke Jagger sat up in bed and glanced at the clock on the far end of the wall. It was already eleven in the morning and Clementine and Annie had yet to visit.

He let out a quiet sigh before lying back on the pillows.

He had so many questions, but no one could answer them.

The doctor couldn't, that was for certain.

How was it possible for him to remember the worst parts of his life but to have forgotten the best? He remembered his life as a child on the wrong side of New York. He remembered his father's fists, his mother's soft pleas, but he couldn't remember Clementine.

He remembered going for days without food because his father preferred his drink to providing for his family, but he couldn't remember the taste of his wife's food?

Luke could vaguely recall reading about the gold claims in the West, but he couldn't recall applying for one. It was as if his memories were interspersed – some present, some old - and yet none related to his recent past.

He couldn't help but feel as if he was lacking in some way, not being able to remember falling in love with Clementine. He felt like a bad father because he couldn't recall Annie's birth or the joy it had brought.

And yet, the doctor simply kept telling him to be patient.

He had been patient since the train accident, how much longer did he need to be patient? He was tired of feeling incompetent and weak and, more than anything, he was tired of not recalling his memories.

It was as if God had played a mean trick on him. A trick that left only the bad but wiped the good from his mind.

Another sigh escaped him as he rolled over on his bed.

Only Luke and one other patient remained in the makeshift hospital inside the church. Luke was no longer in need of medical attention, and the doctor could not tell him what he had forgotten.

The other remaining patient had suffered severe burns in the train derailment and most of his body was covered in scabs and his flesh was swollen, red, and angry as a result.

Luke couldn't help but feel that he no longer belonged here. But where did he belong, then? Did he belong with the family he couldn't remember?

Before he could answer his own question, he heard Annie's voice at the entrance of the church. He sat up and, without even realizing it, his mouth curved into a smile.

It was hard to believe that such a beautiful child belonged to him. She had her mother's golden hair and large blue eyes. In every single way, she reminded him of an angel.

An angel God had blessed him with.

"Hello there," Clementine greeted him awkwardly.

Luke couldn't even blame her because he felt just as awkward around her. They were supposed to be married and yet Luke couldn't remember them being a couple at all. But when he looked into her eyes, he felt something. He felt a sense of home, a connection he'd never experienced before.

Although he couldn't remember meeting her or falling in love with her, at least he had that.

He couldn't be angry because she kept her distance, or because she acted a little unfamiliar. After all, he didn't have a single memory of their life together.

"Hello there, yourself," Luke said, sitting up.

He shifted his position just in time as Annie clambered onto the bed and into his lap. Without saying a word, she examined his face with a beaming smile. It warmed his heart to see how easily affection came to his daughter.

“What’ve you been up to?” he asked searching his daughter’s face.

Annie was only capable of a few words and so Clementine answered on her behalf. “She had a busy morning, didn’t you, Annie?” Clementine said taking a seat in the chair the nurse had left for her. “We had pancakes for breakfast and then we took a walk to the pond before we went to visit with Patricia’s granddaughter.”

“Patricia?” Luke asked. Just another person he didn’t remember, probably.

Clementine smiled with a bright-eyed look. “She’s the proprietor at the boarding house where we’re staying. Her granddaughter is about Annie’s age. They get along so well.”

“It’s nice for Annie to have a friend here,” Luke said, smiling at his daughter.

“Mrs. Jagers, I’m so glad you’ve arrived. I’ve got good news,” the doctor interrupted, joining them.

“Good news?” Clementine asked, turning to the doctor.

“It is my professional opinion that Luke is of sound mind and healthy enough to be returned to you. With your permission, I’ll be sending a telegram to the railway company to say that he will be ready to travel in two days.”

“Two days?” Clementine asked, wide-eyed.

“Yes, in two days you can board the train heading west.”

Luke noticed something akin to fear in Clementine’s eyes before he felt relief wash over him. “Finally,” Luke exclaimed with relief. “Hopefully, once I’m out of this hospital, I can recall the memories I’ve lost.”

The doctor nodded. “I hope so. I can’t guarantee they’ll come back, but I can tell you that settling back into your life is the best remedy for now.”

“That’s... good,” Clementine said hesitantly.

“You can make your arrangements for the day after tomorrow. I’ll let the railway company know that your family is ready for travel,” the doctor said

with a smile before he left them alone.

Clementine and Luke's eyes met. Luke felt the familiar connection but, having nothing but a void in place of the memories of his life with Clementine, it felt like only the connection existed. "We can go to Santa Fe."

Clementine nodded. "We can go to Santa Fe." She glanced at Annie and before Luke knew it, Clementine had snatched Annie off his lap. "I've got to take her for her nap. I'll be back tomorrow."

Luke wasn't sure why Clementine seemed out of sorts, but he smiled at his wife. "Soon I'll remember everything," he said with hope in his voice.

Clementine smiled at him with a terse grin. "Soon."

Luke watched his wife and daughter leave the church before lying back on his pillows. For the first time, he didn't pray for his memories to return; instead, he prayed his wife would be patient until they did.

CHAPTER 14



OceanofPDF.com

A FEW MILES BEFORE SANTA FE – 24 JUNE 1882

Elementine couldn't do it.

She simply could not keep up the lie she had created. It was bad enough that Luke believed her lies in Topeka, but as Santa Fe came into view, she realized that it was time for her to come clean.

God only forgave those who confessed their sins.

The Almighty might know of her sins, but He wouldn't forgive her if she kept living the lie.

She turned to Luke and felt her heart skip a beat. Was it wrong of her to want a man like Luke for a husband? Was it wrong to want such a kind man as a father for Annie? How could the Lord blame her for living this lie that had given her the most security she had ever experienced in her life?

She could be wrong, she realized. Luke could be a stammering drunk when he wasn't recovering from a train accident. He could be abusive, demeaning, and rude.

But none of those attributes seemed to fit the man who now lay fast asleep beside her on the train. He seemed gentle and generous and, most of all, he seemed kind.

How could he not be when Annie was sprawled over his lap and his chest like a monkey clinging on for dear life? It just didn't make sense, but that didn't make it right to keep the truth from him.

She glanced at the ring she had slipped onto her finger out of desperation and knew it was wrong. With a deep breath, she carefully slipped the ring off and tucked it safely into her purse before she turned back to Luke.

"Luke?" she asked quietly, careful not to wake Annie from her deep sleep.

They had boarded the train in Santa Fe early that morning and now as the

sun was making its descent in the East, she knew it would be a matter of hours before she reached the destination she had in mind since she first boarded the train in Chicago.

He stirred in his sleep, but he didn't open his eyes. Instead, his hand began to mechanically rub Annie's back as if to make sure she was still resting and feeling comforted by his presence.

Clementine blinked back the tears, knowing that she was going to miss him, but Annie was going to miss him even more.

"Luke, I need to talk to you," she whispered again, touching his shoulder. Luke opened his eyes, still bleary from sleep. "Have we arrived?"

Clementine shook her head. "Almost. There's something I need to tell you..." she trailed off knowing that she was about to rip away the security she and Annie had enjoyed over the past few weeks.

"What? Is something wrong?" Luke asked, blinking his eyes after waking.

"I'm not your wife," Clementine said the words without hesitation. The moment they tumbled from her mouth she felt guilt and fear wash over her.

"What? What are you talking about?" Luke asked, confused.

Clementine shook her head before the tears she had tried to hold back began to stream over her cheeks. "I'm not your wife. I never was...."

"I don't understand. The doctor, you... the memories... just because I don't remember doesn't mean it isn't true," Luke insisted reaching for her hand.

Clementine snatched it away. "You don't remember... because it isn't true... it never was..."

She couldn't stop the tears now. They flowed steadily over her cheeks. Every regret washed over her like a tidal wave as she began to tell Luke of the night of the accident. She stopped once or twice to brush away the tears until she told him all about the happenings until the day he had come to.

"So you lied your way into my life?" Luke snapped with a narrowed look.

“I... didn’t know what to do. I had to think of Annie. With the conditions the railways had set out... I couldn’t stay in Topeka; I had no money. I couldn’t... I know you won’t ever forgive me... but please... don’t be angry at Annie.”

Luke shook his head, clearly disappointed and angry. “How can I blame a child? It isn’t her fault that she has a guardian with poor judgment. A guardian prone to lies and deceit.” The words hissed through his teeth.

“I’m sorry, I’m so very sorry. I didn’t know what else to do. They just accepted that we were a family. Before I realized it, it had gone too far. If I had told them the truth... I couldn’t pay for the boarding house... for the train fare... I’m sorry,” Clementine said shaking her head as she tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

Luke hadn’t stopped rubbing Annie’s back. His affection for Annie was clear, but his anger and disapproval of Clementine were equally as clear in the cold gaze he directed her way. “I’m not forgiving you. I will keep up this farce until we arrive in Santa Fe. But then we’re going our different ways. I never want to see or hear from you again.”

Clementine nodded. “You’re not going to tell the sheriff?”

“No. Because I’m thinking of Annie, not of you. Will she be safe where you’re going to work?”

“Yes, the Smith family has a nice home. The husband is an important businessman and his wife is involved in the community. She will have their daughter Elsa to play with as well,” Clementine explained.

“Then our paths will lead in different directions when this train stops. I don’t think you’ll ever understand the confusion you’ve caused me.”

“For that, I apologize with all my heart. Thank you for everything, Mr. Jagers. For the use of your name, your kind treatment of Annie...”

“I’m done talking...” Luke snapped turning his head away from her and closing his eyes.

Clementine quietly wept in her seat until the train finally pulled into Santa

Fe. She wasn't sure if hers were tears of regret or sadness over the prospect of never seeing Luke Jagers again.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



OceanofPDF.com

SANTA FE – 24 JUNE 1882

Her back was aching and her legs were weak but that didn't even compare to the heartbreak Clementine was feeling as she stepped up to the front door of the Smith family home.

Two weeks ago she would've been excited, anticipating the life that awaited her and Annie in a new city. But all she could feel now was regret, guilt, and despair. For the rest of her life, she knew she wouldn't forget Annie's cries as Luke walked away from them at the train station.

Annie had never really known Nathan, but how she had cried for Luke had pierced Clementine's heart in a way she knew would torment her for the rest of her life. Her lie hadn't only caught up with her and caused Luke to look at her as the intruder that she was, it had broken but Annie's heart.

Her niece had come to love the man, and she had come to look forward to his attention and his admiration.

Now she would never experience that again.

Clementine tried to console herself as the little one lay fast asleep on her shoulder with the fact that Annie had at least known the feeling of having a father for a few days. For a few days she had realized that someone other than Clementine could love her, someone else could appreciate her baby babble and applaud her for attempting to walk.

But all that was over now.

It was time for Clementine to focus on the future. A future without Luke.

Clementine knocked on the door and held her breath as she waited for someone to answer. She silently prayed that the Smiths hadn't found another nanny when she had failed to arrive on time. If they had... Clementine didn't even allow herself to think of that possibility.

The Smith family was all she and Annie had.

She was broke, tired, hungry, and heartbroken, and if the Smith family didn't welcome her into their home tonight, Clementine didn't even want to consider the alternative.

The walk from the train station had been long. Longer still because she had to carry Annie *and* their bags most of the way.

Clementine heard footsteps approaching from beyond the closed door and held her breath until the door opened.

"Yes, can I help you?" the woman greeted, dressed as she was in the latest fashion with rouge on her cheeks and a firm but dismissive smile on her mouth.

"I'm Clementine. Clementine Jefferson?" Clementine said by way of introduction.

The woman's eyes widened for a moment. "From Chicago?"

"Yes, ma'am." Clementine nodded. "We were involved in a rail accident on our journey here and the train... we were held up in Topeka..."

The woman waved her hand in the air. "My goodness, you were in *that* accident? We read about it but we didn't think... it doesn't matter. Come in, come in. I'm Mrs. Smith."

Mrs. Smith fussed over Clementine and Annie for what felt like an hour before she finally showed Clementine to her room. Clementine didn't know what she had expected, but it certainly was not the luxury or the lavishness of the bedroom Mrs. Smith had prepared for her.

The room was larger than all the homes combined that Clementine had lived in before. A large four-poster bed stood by the window, while a smaller child's bed stood to one side.

"We weren't sure when you were coming... but now that you're here, let me show you around."

The cupboard had been emptied, but Clementine already knew that all her and Annie's possessions would not manage to fill even a portion of it. The windows could open out onto the street, letting in the warm evening air. The

room was wonderful, so far removed from anywhere Clementine had slept in the past.

“Why don’t you and Annie settle in and then join us for dinner. You can meet Elsa then,” Mrs. Smith said with a kind smile.

Clementine smiled gratefully. “Thank you.”

She knew that she had to be grateful, excited even about the new life that awaited her and Annie, and yet Clementine could hardly summon any enthusiasm at all.

Mechanically she unpacked their belongings, turned down their beds, and saw to it that she and Annie each enjoyed a good wash. But still her mood didn’t improve.

By the time they descended the staircase to meet the Smith family for dinner, Clementine wondered if it ever would.

All she could think about was Luke and the disappointment on his face when she’d told him the truth. For a moment she wondered if she shouldn’t have just kept mum.

She quickly pushed the thought aside, knowing that it wasn’t the answer.

It wouldn’t be fair to Annie or Luke for Clementine to pursue her own happiness at the expense of the truth. It was merely a matter of needing to move on. It would take her time to forget the handsome man she had fallen for in Topeka. It would take even longer for her to forgive herself for causing Annie and Luke such emotional distress, but until then she would smile and be the best nanny the Smith family could ever have wanted.

Besides, that was why they hired her.

She summoned her courage and stepped into the dining room where she could hear voices. With a smile and a bright-eyed look she joined them

“Good evening, Mrs. and Mrs. Smith. You must be Elsa?” Her voice didn’t portray her sadness or her heartbreak.

For now, everyone including Annie believed she was overjoyed to be the newly appointed nanny to the Smith family.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



OceanofPDF.com

SANTA FE – 1 JULY 1882

Santa Fe was a bustling city in the New Mexico Territory. It had the same lively spirit as Chicago, but with less rain and a wonderfully hot summer. Clementine couldn't help but enjoy both the city and her new home.

The Smith family had made her and Annie feel welcome from the very first day and although Clementine was their employee, the Smiths treated her and Annie like members of the family.

The work, although Clementine didn't think of it as work, was just as enjoyable. Between caring for the girls, taking them on walks, and fixing meals here and there, Clementine had almost no time to herself. But she enjoyed being occupied, because not only did it mean the Smiths trusted her with their daughter, it also meant she had less time to think about Luke.

Ever since saying goodbye to him at the train station, Clementine couldn't seem to get him out of her mind. Everything reminded her of him and, at the unlikeliest of times, she would think of him. It was as if he had found a way into her heart and her mind, and she had no idea how to kick him out.

But then, if she was honest, she didn't want to kick him out. Because forgetting Luke would mean forgetting how wonderful he'd been with Annie. How wonderful it had been to be his pretend wife.

If only it hadn't been pretend.

The regret haunted her. She wished that she had been honest, that she and Luke hadn't met in the web of deception she had spun, that they had met as two passengers fated to be in the same accident. Perhaps then he would've fallen in love with her as well.

But Clementine had enough experience with dreams to know that they

didn't come true. Instead, they remained close but always out of reach.

That was what Luke had become to her. He had become a dream that was beyond her reach, regardless of how much she prayed that things could've been different.

She let out a quiet sigh of regret as she kept an eye on the girls at play close by. Although Elsa was older than Annie, the two girls got along like a house on fire. For some reason, Clementine had expected Elsa as a spoiled only child to be selfish and demanding. But Elsa had pleasantly surprised her by wanting to share her toys with Annie.

A picnic in the park had become almost routine for Clementine and the girls. Every afternoon when the heat of the day had receded, Clementine would take the girls to a park close to their home. Annie would wobble and giggle behind Elsa, who did everything in her power to teach Annie to talk and run.

With no hindrances, for those few minutes a day, Clementine could sit and watch them play. She didn't have to caution Annie against the stairs or keep her curious hands from exploring the different items on display in the Smith home.

A smile curved her mouth as Elsa took Annie's hand and led her to Clementine. "Can we stay a little longer?"

Clementine laughed. "I didn't say we were leaving just yet."

"Thank you, Clementine, we're having such good fun," Elsa said with careful pronunciation.

Mrs. Smith had revealed to Clementine that although Elsa had not had a nanny in the past, she did have an English tutor who came by the house twice a week. Clementine wasn't sure that a three-year-old needed a tutor, but it hadn't been her place to say as much.

Clementine reached for the newspaper she had brought along. Mr. Smith had the daily newspaper delivered to their home every day. Once he was finished reading it, he left it in the study for anyone who was interested.

Clementine had never enjoyed reading newspapers, but it afforded her the opportunity to get to know her new town.

The front page of the day's newspaper had an article about the gold mining boom in the town of Santa Fe and its surrounds. Clementine turned to the article and learned about a town by the name of Trickled Fortune. As she read about the numerous claims that had been granted, her mind once again turned to Luke.

Was his claim in Trickled Fortune? Had he discovered gold yet?

Did he think about them at all?

For a moment she wondered if she shouldn't have kept the truth to herself. But she quickly realized that wouldn't have been fair to Annie or Luke.

She had done the right thing by confessing her dishonesty, she just couldn't understand how it felt so wrong.

Santa Fe had been the light at the end of her dark tunnel, a new chance at a new life for both her and Annie and yet Clementine found herself struggling to find joy.

She folded the newspaper and set it aside. For the first time, she wished she had never met Luke. Because she knew that if she hadn't met Luke, she couldn't have missed him.

And she missed him dearly.

CHAPTER 17



OceanofPDF.com

TRICKLED FORTUNE – 12 JULY 1882

When Luke had obtained a claim to mine just outside Santa Fe, he had dreamed of panning enough gold to last him a lifetime.

But just like the small town, it was named after, the stream that trickled through Trickled Fortune barely had smithereens of gold trickling into his pan. He was yet to make that fortune he had dreamed of.

All around Santa Fe mining towns were growing larger by the day. Gold, lead, silver, and even turquoise deposits had been found in the area and everyone, including Luke, had come to find their fortune.

His claim didn't allow him to pan much of the stream, only a demarcated area of about one mile long. What little gold Luke had found in the couple of weeks he'd been in Trickled Fortune had barely been enough to pay for the mining supplies he needed and to set up camp.

All he needed was one big nugget, maybe two smaller ones, and he would be well on his way to making a life for himself. As he stood in the stream with the cold water rushing up to his knees, Luke dunked the pan into the water and scooped up some of the sediment from the river. He lifted his pan and carefully shook it, allowing the sand and smaller particles of sediment to sift through.

As he tapped the sieve against the palm of his left hand, Luke found his thoughts turning to Clementine and Annie. This was the norm ever since he had said goodbye to them in Santa Fe. He couldn't help but feel bad about leaving them standing there the way he had.

Luke knew they weren't his responsibility; they were nothing to him and yet he found himself thinking about them more often than not. He saw Clementine's pretty face in his mind's eye and heard her soft voice, and he remembered Annie's bubbling infant laughter and how it had brought a smile

to his face.

When she had told him it had all been a fabrication to benefit her and Annie when they arrived in Topeka and how she had used his name to secure them room and board, he had been outraged. He had felt used and betrayed. For a time he had believed that he had forgotten a crucial part of his life. He had spent nights awake, trying to recall the memories only to learn they had never existed in the first place.

It was his anger that had him walk away from that train station in Santa Fe without once looking back.

But as the time passed, Luke began to understand why Clementine had done what she did. She was a single woman traveling alone out West with a young child in her care. Luke could understand how terrified she must have been.

And when he considered the railway company's conditions for reimbursement, it made him understand all the more. Without money, Clementine would've been destitute. Sure, she might have found employment in Topeka to pay her way, but what about Annie? Who would've looked after Annie while Clementine worked to pay their fare onwards to a destination for which they had used the last of her money already?

He let out a sigh when the sieve came up empty once again.

His back was protesting spending most of his days bent over, but he scooped the sieve into the water and brought it back with more deposits from the river bank. As he began to repeat the process, he came to the unexpected realization that Clementine's had no part in the situation she found herself in and carried no blame for any of it.

It was only by God's grace that she and Annie were not injured in the accident. Who gave the railway company the right to discriminate against women and children just because they hadn't been injured? It was as if the railway company had punished the survivors of that horrific accident.

Looking back now, Luke wished that she had told him when he'd woken

up. He would've helped her, wouldn't he?

But then, he couldn't even answer that question for himself.

Would he have willingly pretended that a strange woman and child belonged to him? Would he have offered to pay for their room and board just because she asked?

Luke liked to think of himself as a generous man, but in all honesty, he knew he would've turned her away. It shamed him to realize that about himself.

In a way, he couldn't help but appreciate now how Clementine had done them all a favor. She had made certain that she and Annie were safe and fed, and she had secured the train fare for them to travel to Santa Fe. But then, Luke sighed, he would've managed to secure that train fare without her lies because of his injuries.

The pan came up empty once again.

Luke stretched his back before he leaned over and scooped more sediment from the river. Clementine's face and Annie's smile came to mind.

Why was he constantly thinking about them?

Was it because he still felt betrayed and used? Was it because his anger was still simmering beneath the surface?

His heart stopped when he realized those were not the reasons at all. It was because he missed them.

He missed Clementine's concerned look and kind smile. He missed the idea of having a Mrs. Jagers by his side. He missed Annie's clambering and babbling. He missed their visits in the church.

He missed them.

He missed being part of a family.

A heavy sigh escaped him as he realized that although lies and deceit had brought Annie and Clementine into his life, it had been his choice to let them go.

Regret washed over him, making his stomach coil with despair.

He missed them and, despite knowing that he would manage to track them down if he asked around in Santa Fe, Luke realized he had nothing to offer them.

He didn't have a home, money, or even a future to offer Clementine and Annie. How could he go after them with nothing to his name but a claim to a stream that seemed to hold nothing but specks of gold and dirty river sand?

Clementine and Annie deserved a home. They deserved a life free of worry. Free of fretting about where their next meal would come from. They deserved someone who cared for them, someone who could provide for them.

And Luke couldn't give them that.

Angry at himself for not realizing it sooner, Luke threw the sieving pan towards the riverbank. It landed just clear of the water.

With a sigh, he trudged through the water to retrieve it. Destroying his mining equipment would not bring him Annie or Clementine. A frown creased Luke's brow as he spotted a shiny glint in the sieve.

He stepped closer and felt his jaw drop even as his heart stopped beating. "Well, I'll be...."

CHAPTER 18



OceanofPDF.com

SANTA FE – 25 JULY 1882

Clementine smiled as she watched Elsa and Annie playing together with their dolls. The late morning sun filtered in through the windows of Elsa's bedroom, creating a warm halo of safety and comfort in the room.

The housekeeper entered the room with a curious smile on her face. "Senorita, there's a very handsome man asking for you at the door."

Clementine frowned at the Mexican housekeeper. Ever since her arrival, the housekeeper had been nothing but kind to Clementine, but now she had a teasing glint in her eyes.

"A man?" Clementine asked, baffled. "But I don't know anyone in Santa Fe?"

"Mamacita, if a good-looking man is asking after you, you put on your smile and pinch your cheeks and go to him to find out why."

Clementine shook her head. "As I said, I don't know anyone. And I need to watch the girls. Annie has taken to exploring everything with her mouth instead of her hands."

"I'll watch them, you go on."

Clementine stood up from her seat at the window and headed downstairs. The wooden floors were polished to a mirror finish and the scent of lavender oil hung in the air as she moved to the front door. It never failed to amaze her how blessed she was to be living in such a beautiful house.

But it didn't feel like home.

She walked through the informal living room and wondered when she had felt at home. She hadn't felt at home with her parents. Nathan's house had never felt like home. The apartment she had shared with Mary had always felt temporary.

Then there was Topeka.

A sigh escaped her, pushing the town far from her mind. That had been the first time in her life she had felt as if she belonged. Not in the boarding house, but with Luke.

She opened the door and blinked unbelievably, certain that her eyes were deceiving her. Her heart had kicked up into a racing beat, sending a rush of adrenalin through her veins as she tried to focus on the figure before her. “Luke?”

He took off his western hat and smiled at her. “Clementine?”

“What... why... how did you find me?” Clementine struggled to find the words to hide her surprise. She failed.

Luke chuckled before he shrugged. “You mentioned you were going to work for the Smith family. Turns out there’s only one Smith family with a nanny in town. And this is it.”

Clementine shook her head still struggling to fathom what he was doing there. Suddenly she remembered the room and board as well as the train fare she had procured using his name. “I’ll pay you back, I promise... I don’t know when, but I will. Just please... don’t... don’t let them take me away from Annie. She’s all I have and I’m all she has.”

Luke frowned and then looked at her curiously. “You think I’m here to make good on the expenses you saved using my name? That didn’t even occur to me.”

“Then why are you here?” Clementine asked, confused.

Luke sighed. “Can I come in or do you want to have this conversation on the doorstep? Next thing you know the whole street would be gossiping about the men that come by to visit with the Smith’s nanny.”

Clementine all but dragged Luke through the doorway before shutting the door. “Thank you, I didn’t even think about that.”

“Didn’t think so,” Luke said sliding his fingers over the brim of his hat. “The thing is, I owe you an apology.”

“You owe me an apology?” Clementine asked with a frown. Nothing he was saying was making any sense.

“When you told me what you had done, I felt betrayed... I felt used. I didn’t even consider your reasons and I’m sorry about that.”

“I never should’ve lied,” Clementine admitted with the wisdom of hindsight.

“Yes, you should’ve. Otherwise you and Annie probably still would’ve been stuck in Topeka. I took some time to realize that. It also took me some time to realize that you didn’t have to visit me every day but you did,” Luke pointed out. “Were you holding up appearances or was there another reason?” he sounded doubtful.

Clementine couldn’t help but feel as if this question was a test. One she wanted to pass. She searched his hazel eyes and finally sighed. “At first, yes, it was for appearances.” She paused, trying to find the right words. “But then... although you were asleep, I began to care. I watched as your scars healed and found myself wondering what type of man you would be.”

“And did you get the answer you were looking for?”

Clementine felt her mouth curve into a small smile. “You were wonderful with Annie; that told me everything I needed to know. It was nice to have a man pay her attention. Her father never... he wasn’t very involved.”

“It’s easy to love her, she’s got such a bright personality. How is she?” Luke asked glancing around to see if she was close by.

“She’s well. She’s made friends with the little girl I’m watching, Elsa. And she has her own bed,” Clementine said, pleased. It might not mean much to most people, but for her and Annie who’d always shared a bed, it was a wonderful luxury.

“And how are you?” Luke asked holding her gaze.

Clementine felt the same flutter in her tummy he had caused in the past. There was a connection she felt with Luke she didn’t understand. Perhaps that was why she couldn’t seem to get him out of her mind.

“I’m fine.” She frowned, searching his gaze with curiosity. “Luke, did you only find me to apologize?”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19



Luke knew that if he wanted to have Clementine and Annie in his life again, it was time for him to be honest and stop asking questions about their health and comfort. “Actually... I came to tell you that I was wrong. I shouldn’t have walked away from you at the train station.”

“I don’t blame you for doing that,” Clementine admitted.

Luke nodded. “I know you don’t, but I blame myself. I blame myself because for the short time I thought we were a family, I was the happiest I’d ever been. Looking back now I don’t think I was just angry because you lied to me, I was angry that it was a lie and not reality.”

Clementine’s eyes widened with surprise. “But... what?”

“I know, it took me a month to figure this all out myself, but I finally managed,” Luke admitted with a crooked grin. “What I’m trying to say, Clementine, is that I miss you. I miss Annie. I miss our little fake family.”

Clementine laughed softly. “Fake family – that’s an appropriate description.”

“I don’t care about the description; I just care about trying to find out why I can’t stop thinking about you. It doesn’t make sense; we hardly know each other and yet I think about you and Annie all the time.”

“You do?” Clementine asked with a hopeful look in her blue eyes.

“I do. Have you... Have you thought about me at all?” Luke hated that he

sounded desperate, almost lost.

Clementine smiled. “I did, quite often. I wondered where you were, if you’d managed to start working your claim, if you had a home, if you had found gold. But most of all I thought about how angry you were at the train station. I’m so sorry that I lied.”

“That’s behind us now,” Luke said firmly. “As I said before, I understand now why you did it. If I were in your position, I might have done the very same thing. To answer your questions, I’m living on the riverbank of Trickled Fortune. The town is a fifteen-minute ride away by horse, and thirty by wagon. I started working my claim as soon as I arrived, but I only had my first luck a couple of weeks ago.”

“You found gold?” Clementine asked with a happy smile.

“I did. Enough to pay for lumber to build a cabin and to afford a wagon,” Luke admitted with not a little pride. The cabin was a work in progress since he only worked on it when he wasn’t panning the river, but in time it would be home.

“That’s wonderful, Luke. I’m so happy for you.” Clementine’s smile was warm and it made Luke’s heart swell in his chest. This was what he missed. He missed talking to her. He missed her encouragement. And most of all, he missed her presence.

“So am I. It might be a while before I find gold again, but for now, I’m on a steady footing,” Luke admitted. “That’s why I only came to see you now. I couldn’t come until I was certain that life was going to work out for me in Trickled Fortune. Now that it has, I plan to make a home there for myself. A home on the banks of the river.”

“That sounds lovely.”

Luke shuffled in place feeling a little nervous. “I can’t help but think that we were on that train together for a reason, Clementine. If you hadn’t saved my life, they would’ve left me there for dead. In a way, you saved me, and then my name saved you. It feels like it was meant to be for us to meet, and

the way I walked away... I think that was the biggest mistake I've ever made."

"What do you mean?" Clementine asked hesitantly.

"I mean that I think we were meant to meet on that train. We were meant to find each other, regardless of how it happened. I don't think we should move on, Clementine, at least I don't want to. I miss you and I miss Annie..." Luke summoned a deep breath before he continued. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'd like to see you again. Perhaps find out if there is something more than just a train accident followed by deceit between us. If there could be more..."

Clementine's face paled and Luke couldn't help but feel as if he had misread the entire situation. He took a step back and shook his head. "If I'm being too forward, I apologize. I won't bother you again."

Clementine shook her head and moved towards him. Her eyes were glistening with emotion. "You didn't misread anything and you're not too forward. I've been hoping for just this since the day you left us on the platform. I miss you too, Luke."

Luke felt his heart skip a happy beat as a smile curved his mouth. "So you wouldn't mind me calling on you? On your off days, of course."

Clementine smiled broadly. "I'd like that very much. My next day off is this Saturday."

Luke slipped his hat onto his head and winked at her. "Then I'll be seeing you and Annie on Saturday. It was good to see you, Clementine."

Clementine nodded. "It was really good to see you, too."

After saying goodbye, Luke no longer felt as if he was walking down the street, but rather that he was floating on air. He didn't know what it was about Clementine, but something about her lightened his heart and gave him hope.

More hope for the future than he'd ever experienced before.

He hadn't even felt this hopeful when he received the notice of his mining

claim.

Besides, a future with Clementine and Annie was much more fortunate than any discovery of gold could ever be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20



OceanofPDF.com

SANTA FE – 29 JULY 1882

*M*r. and Mrs. Smith were both surprised to learn that Clementine and Annie had plans for Saturday. Up until then, Clementine had spent her free days around the house, perhaps taking Annie for a walk to the park in the afternoon.

But today she had plans; real plans with Luke.

She had been looking forward to today ever since his visit on Tuesday morning. She couldn't help but feel as if God was giving her a second chance. A second chance to get to know Luke. A second chance to experience that wonderful feeling of being a part of something.

A family.

Clementine knew that seeing him today didn't mean their future together was secured, but it gave her hope of such a possibility. She had dressed Annie in a pretty dress that Elsa had outgrown. Mrs. Smith had been kind enough to give Annie all Elsa's old clothes, most of which were still brand new.

Annie looked adorable in the pink dress with its white collar. Clementine knew the pink bow in her hair might not stay there for long, but for now she looked good enough to eat.

As for herself, she had worn her best dress and had taken the time to braid her hair in the way her sister had always done for her. A look in the mirror had anticipation and hope rush through her body like a bolt of lightning.

A bible verse came to mind; one that had carried her and Jessica through so many hard times in the past. One that always gave them hope for the future.

Jeremiah 29:11 'For I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and not to harm you.'

A smile curved her mouth as she closed her eyes in prayer. *“Lord thank you for all my blessings, thank you for Annie. I ask of you today Lord to bless my meeting with Luke. If he is part of the plans you have for my future Lord, please give me a sign. I beg of you Lord, help me open my heart to the possibilities. Amen.”*

Filled with love, light, and hope, Clementine scooped Annie up and set off for the park.

She had barely entered the park when she spotted Luke waiting for her, leaning against a tree. His smile was crooked as if he didn't want to reveal his excitement at seeing them, but his eyes betrayed him. It warmed Clementine's heart to know that he was just as excited about their meeting today as she was.

Annie pointed to Luke and began to squeal with delight. Laughing, Clementine set her down and allowed her to toddle and run towards Luke.

Luke met her halfway, scooping her up before swinging her in a circle. Annie's laughter sounded wonderfully innocent and happy in the morning air. Clementine couldn't help but laugh when Luke blew raspberries on Annie's cheek making her laugh even louder.

“Someone is happy to see you,” Clementine commented as she joined them.

Luke turned his attention to Clementine, and he smiled at her. He'd only done it once in the past and experiencing it now, without any lies between them, made the effect so much more powerful. “Just as I am happy to see you.”

He reached for her hand and without hesitation, Clementine slipped her hand into his as they began their walk through the park. He held Annie as if he didn't want to let her go. When they finally reached a bench, he set Annie down to explore before he took a seat and gestured for Clementine to join him.

“Here, I brought you this. I thought you might be curious.” Luke handed

her a folded piece of paper.

Clementine opened it and felt her mouth curve into a wide smile realizing it was a ragged drawing of his cabin. “Is it done yet?”

“Yep, mostly. Still need to finish a few things, but it’s almost there,” Luke said with a smile. “My own little cabin in the woods.”

“I can imagine it must be peaceful. My favorite place would be the porch in summer and right here by the fireplace in winter,” Clementine said pointing to the areas of the plan.

Luke nodded. “I designed it that way. You can watch the sunset from the porch in summer.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Clementine admitted.

She felt hope grow in her chest that perhaps one day she might just do that.

“Will your family come and stay?” Clementine asked curiously. What other reason would there be for a bachelor to build a cabin with three bedrooms?

Luke shook his head. “I don’t have a family. My brother passed from fever as a boy. My father never returned from the war and my mother passed away from the flu a few years ago. It’s just me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Clementine said empathetically.

“How about your family?” Clementine shrugged. “No one left. Although... I might be struck down for saying it, but my father... there isn’t much to miss about him.”

Luke frowned and shook his head in sympathy. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m just sorry he loved his bottle more than he loved me,” Clementine admitted. She’d never told anyone about her childhood. It felt intimate to reveal such details about her childhood to Luke.

“A drink now and then can be pleasant, but as soon as the bottle begins to take control, it changes people,” Luke said quietly. “That’s why I don’t drink... ever.”

Clementine turned to him with a surprised look. Secretly she had always hoped to find a man who didn't drink. After seeing what it had done to her father and Nathan, Clementine never wanted to live with that fear again. Was this the sign she had been asking for from God?

Luke frowned when she didn't respond. "Is that a problem?"

Clementine reached for his hand and squeezed it. "That's one of the best things about you."

Luke chuckled. "Then I take it I can call on you again?"

Clementine blushed. "I'd like that very much."

He sat with her for a few more minutes before going off to play with Annie. As Clementine watched him play with her niece, she knew that if she had lost her heart to Luke in Topeka, she didn't ever want it back.

CHAPTER 21



OceanofPDF.com

SANTA FE – 20 AUGUST 1882

“It seems like she’s really enjoying that cake?” Luke laughed as Annie took another bite of the chocolate cake, smearing her face with it all the more.

He especially liked that Clementine didn’t fuss over Annie getting herself dirty, allowing the little girl to delight in the treat instead.

“It’s the first time she’s eating cake, I think she’s just found her sweet tooth,” Clementine said with a bubble of laughter. “It’s all your fault. Now she’ll be crying for cake whenever I give her vegetables.”

Luke shrugged. “A child needs to have a sweet tooth. I still have mine, otherwise, I wouldn’t have liked you so much.”

Clementine smiled as a blush colored her cheeks. “Are you saying I’m sweet?”

“Sweet enough to make a man’s heartache from missing you.” Luke smiled at her from across the table.

Ever since that first visit in July, he had called on her at least once a week. Clementine arranged that he only visit on her days off. Usually, they would go to the park, but today Luke insisted on taking them out to lunch.

The restaurant was pleasant, serving hearty meals as well as sweet delicacies. It was a treat for Clementine to dine in such an establishment, although Luke didn’t realize it was her first time.

“I can’t believe we just saw each other a week ago, it feels like it’s been weeks,” Clementine admitted.

Her newly found connection with Luke was stronger than ever. Even Mrs. Smith had commented on Clementine’s glow. She had even hinted at how sad she would be to lose Clementine when she left.

Although she and Luke hadn’t spoken about their future, Clementine

couldn't help but hope that it would be a shared one.

"I know. If it feels that long for us, I can't imagine how long it must have been for Annie." Luke chuckled as Annie stuffed another piece of cake into her mouth.

"I wish Jessica could see her now. She would've doted on her," Clementine said with a hint of sadness.

"Jessica was your sister?" Luke asked turning to Clementine.

"Yes, she was like a mother to me. Losing her was hard, but at least I have Annie to remind me of her," Clementine admitted with a smile.

"Does Annie take after her aunt?" Luke asked curiously.

Clementine's brow furrowed with a frown. "I didn't tell you?"

Luke shook his head, "Tell me what?"

Clementine sighed. "Oh my goodness, I honestly thought you knew. I thought... it doesn't matter. Annie isn't mine. My sister passed after giving birth to her."

"But her father..." Luke trailed off, confused.

"Didn't want her. I stayed with Jessica and Nathan after my parents passed away. When Jessica passed, I stayed for Annie. I promised Jessica that I would always care for Annie. When she was six months old, I realized that I didn't promise to stay with Nathan. He took to the bottle after Jessica passed..."

"So you took Annie?" Luke asked gently.

"Yes. He didn't even argue." Clementine sighed heavily.

Luke felt anger rush through him at the thought of Annie's father not wanting her. He searched Clementine's gaze and understood now more than ever before why she had deceived him in Topeka. Up until this moment, he had honestly believed that Annie was the result of a failed relationship, he never realized that she wasn't Clementine's daughter.

"It's admirable that you took her. A woman... alone with a baby... it's not an easy life to live," Luke said with admiration for the woman he had

fallen in love with.

He realized now more than ever before that it was God's plan for his life for him to meet Clementine and Annie. They might not be family but somehow, they simply belonged.

"I love her as if she were my own, but one day, when she's old enough I'll tell her about her mama," Clementine said smiling lovingly at Annie.

Luke felt his chest expand with love. If he had any doubts about whether or not his future lay with Clementine, they were gone now. He reached for her hand across the table and gently pressed a kiss to it. "Can I ask you a very important question?"

Clementine's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Can I take you to my cabin next week? I'll make sure you're back in Santa Fe before dark, but I'd really like to show you what I've done," Luke explained. Before he took the final step in securing their future together, he needed to see Clementine in his cabin.

Clementine laughed. "You'll be dead tired from driving back and forth. And with the wagon, it will take you twice the time."

"I'll be fine. Is that a yes?" Luke asked hopefully.

Clementine glanced at the chocolate-covered little girl and laughed. "She's covered in chocolate. She'll need a bath and a change of clothes."

Luke laughed but he was still waiting for Clementine's answer. As if feeling the weight of his gaze on her she turned to him with a content smile. "I'd like very much to see your cabin, Luke."

Luke's smile split his face in two. "I can't wait."

CHAPTER 22



OceanofPDF.com

EN ROUTE TO TRICKLED FORTUNE – 27 AUGUST 1882

“*A*t least I learned one thing today,” Clementine said, smiling at Luke who was holding the reins. “A wagon ride works like a charm to get Annie to sleep.”

Luke smiled at her, making her heart skip a beat. Every time she saw him, she found him more handsome than before. She wasn’t sure if it was because she had gotten to know him better, or if it was that he was truly the most wonderful man she’d ever met. “Glad we could be of assistance.”

Clementine looked around her and let out a quiet sigh. “It’s so beautiful here. No buildings, no roads, just pure untouched wildness.”

“I’m glad you like it. Wait till you see the spot where I built the cabin, it’s even prettier,” Luke declared with pride.

Clementine laughed. He’d been going on about how wonderful his cabin was ever since he had collected her and Annie in Santa Fe earlier that morning. “When we finally reach it, I’ll be the judge of that.”

Luke smiled. “We’re almost there. I don’t want to go too fast with Annie.”

Clementine’s heart warmed, realizing he was driving slower than usual for Annie’s sake. It was these small things that assured her of his goodness. “Is there a church?”

Luke turned to her with a nod. “In town, yes, a small church. Smaller than the one in Topeka.”

“Have you been?” Clementine asked curiously. She wouldn’t judge Luke if he hadn’t attended a service, but she did hope that he was as much a believer as she was.

“Every Sunday since arriving in Trickled Fortune. Some might think it strange, but I believe that listening to God’s good word rejuvenates your

strength for the week to come,” Luke explained.

Clementine nodded with a smile. “I feel exactly the same way.”

“There it is.” Luke pointed to something in the distance.

All Clementine could see was the tip of a chimney on the other side of a small hill. “I can only see the chimney.”

Luke laughed. “Patience is a virtue.”

Clementine held her breath as they reached the top of the hill. When the cabin, the river, and the wilderness came into view, it simply snatched her breath away. It was truly beautiful.

On both sides of the river were large trees with undergrowth so promising, Clementine just knew there would be berries if she searched. The stream was clear and broad. But it was the cabin nestled against the back of the woods that truly caught her eye.

Smoke bubbled from the chimney, even as the porch invited her closer. It was charming, sturdy, and just big enough for a small family. She could see the outhouse to one side and a shed to the other side.

Beside the shed was what looked like a small kitchen garden.

She turned to Luke with a surprised look. “You’ve barely been here two months... you did all this?”

Luke nodded. “It was hard work, but worth it. The garden still needs work, and in time I’d like a barn for the horses, but for now, they have the lean-to.”

Clementine shook her head. “Luke, this is just as wonderful as you described. Oh! And look, there in the distance is a meadow.”

“Yes. We might take a walk there later. There are pretty flowers that I’m sure will enchant Anna,” Luke agreed as he carefully navigated the horse and wagon down the hill towards the homestead.

When they reached the bottom, Annie woke up as if she knew they had arrived at their destination. “Done?” she asked.

Clementine laughed. “Done.”

Luke indulged them by taking them on a tour of the cabin, the lean-to, the garden, and the shed before he took them down to the river.

Clementine shook her head with baffled amazement. “There’s gold in this river?”

Luke nodded. “Hard to believe now, but the cabin is proof of it. That first month I didn’t think I was ever going to find something, but so far I’ve been very lucky.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you. This is truly a beautiful home, a beautiful place to build a life,” Clementine said breathing in the fresh air.

Luke smiled at her, but he seemed a little nervous. “Actually, Clementine...”

Clementine’s breath caught when Luke got down on one knee. “Luke?”

Luke reached for her hand and searched her gaze. “Build a life with me here. You and me and Annie, let’s be a family, a real family.”

Clementine’s throat constricted with emotion as she searched his eyes. This was everything she had always dreamed of and more. “Are you sure?” she asked, afraid that she was imagining Luke’s proposal.

Luke nodded. “Nothing has ever felt more right than having you and Annie in my life. We were brought together for a reason, and I truly believe that we’re meant to stay together. Regardless of the accident, the lies, my injuries, and everything else that has happened, I want to spend my life with you. I want us to be a family, perhaps have a few siblings for Annie to play with. I want you to stop working in Santa Fe and instead help me build a life for us here. Say yes, Clementine. Marry me?”

Clementine felt the tears slip over her cheeks. They were hot and wet and filled with joy and promise. She began to nod before she could even form the words. “Yes, yes.”

Luke scooped her into an embrace with Annie still perched on her hip, before he leaned in and brushed a soft kiss over her lips. For all the challenges Clementine had to face in the past, this reward was worth every

single one of them.

A life with Luke.

He leaned back and brushed a kiss across Annie's head before smiling at her. "Do you want to call me papa?"

Annie giggled before she surprised them both. "Mama and Papa."

With their laughter mingling, their family was finally formed with a bright and promising future ahead of them, just like God had promised in His word.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE



OceanofPDF.com

“*T*hat’s it, Annie, shoulders back, knees pinched,” Luke called out to his daughter.

After four years, Clementine knew that Annie was Luke’s daughter in every way that mattered. He was the father she never had. He protected her, cared for her, provided for her, and, most importantly, he loved her as if she were his own.

“Look, Mama, I can ride,” Annie called back to Clementine as she trotted past on the horse.

Clementine’s heart skipped a beat with a sudden moment of fear just as it did whenever Annie tried something new. The fear of her daughter getting hurt was ever-present. The same trepidation felt by all mothers, as Clementine knew.

Over the last few weeks, Luke had taken the time every day to teach Annie how to ride. At first, Clementine had been hesitant, insisting Annie was too young. But as she watched Annie trot in circles in the yard, she knew that Annie wasn’t her baby girl anymore.

She was growing up so fast; too fast, in Clementine’s opinion. She only had to look at Dustin to know that they all grew up too fast. At the age of three, Dustin was content playing in the dirt with his wooden horse, not at all interested in the fact that his sister was riding a horse.

Clementine’s eyes met Luke’s and for a moment she felt overwhelming contentment and love. They had been so blessed that Clementine had a hard time listing all her blessings when she offered up her prayers at night.

She and Luke had been married in the small church in Trickled Fortune just two weeks after he had proposed. It had been an intimate ceremony in which they had declared their love for each other and promised to spend the

rest of their lives cherishing it.

Her pregnancy had come as a surprise to both her and Luke barely six months after the wedding, but they were both pleased that Annie would have a sibling with whom to play. Shortly before Dustin's birth, a large downpour further up the river had caused a flush of gold to wash up practically on their doorstep. Luke had sieved night and day until they had a lifetime's worth of gold nuggets.

But instead of spending it whimsically, Luke had made a decision that changed their lives for good.

"The gold won't always be there," he had reminded Clementine before he told her of his plans. He had used a portion of the money to procure a herd of horses.

Their herd had grown steadily over time and Luke handled and trained the horses himself, selling them for a pretty penny at the auctions in Santa Fe. He still panned the river now and then, but more for the love of it than in desperation to find gold.

Clementine already knew that one day Dustin would pan the river, just like his father, for the love of it.

But their love for horses would be greater by far, she realized as her mouth curved into a smile. Clementine was still a little careful around the large, graceful beasts, but Annie was a natural just like Luke.

"Mama, come ride with me," Annie called out when she trotted past again.

Before Clementine could answer, Luke answered for her. "Mama can't ride now, but soon."

"Why not? Is the baby going to bounce out?" Annie asked with the innocence of a child.

Clementine laughed, glancing down at the belly that had swollen with child over the past nine months. "No, honey, but the baby might get hurt."

"When's baby coming? It's been forever!" Dustin complained from his

spot in the dirt.

Clementine nodded. "It has felt like forever," she agreed.

"Soon," Luke answered his son. "Very soon. Maybe even this week."

"Will Mama foal like Princess?" Annie asked curiously as she brought the horse to a stop on her own.

Clementine and Luke laughed at their daughter's comparison.

"No, honey. Mama isn't a horse. She gives birth, she doesn't foal," Luke explained. "When she does, she might yell a little, it's very sore. Remember when Dustin was born?"

Annie frowned as she joined Clementine and Luke beside Dustin playing in the dirt. "No, I only remember his chubby red face."

Clementine began to laugh when a sharp pain shot through her body. "Hopefully this time you'll remember," she said taking a deep breath.

"Will you tell me when it happens? I don't want to hear you yell," Annie said with a frown.

"Me neither," Dustin said before whinnying for his toy horse as he maneuvered it in the dirt.

"Then you'd better ask Papa to take you to Aunt Bessie's," Clementine said referring to their neighbor who lived only a couple of miles away.

"We will," Annie said in agreement.

Clementine shook her head. "You had better ask Papa to take you to aunt Bessie's *now*."

Luke turned to Clementine with a concerned look. "Now?"

"Now." Clementine nodded.

Annie grabbed her brother's hand and the two hit the ground running for the wagon as if Clementine was about to start screaming like a banshee at any moment. "Come, Papa, hurry!"

Luke smiled at his daughter with a shake of his head before he turned to Clementine. "Let me help you inside first."

Clementine shook her head. "No, walking helps for the pain. You go on,

nothing is going to happen before you get back.”

Luke framed her face and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “Have I told you how amazing you are?”

“Luke, I’m in pain, I’m hardly paying attention,” Clementine grimaced as another contraction gripped her like a vice.

“Then pay attention. You’re wonderful. The best mother and wife I could’ve asked for, ever.”

Clementine nodded through the pain. “Wonderful, now go be a good father and take your children to Bessie.”

Luke laughed. “I’ll do that. I bet you it’s another boy.”

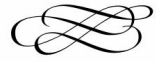
Clementine smiled tersely. “I bet you it’s a girl.”

“What’s on the table?” Luke asked.

Clementine shrugged. “Either way, a lifetime with you.”

Luke held her gaze with a loving smile. “The best bet ever.”

FINDING A BRIDE FOR THE COWBOY



OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



2 January 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Most of the region was covered in snow, some suffering beneath a suffocating blanket of ice. But in San Antonio that wasn't the case. If the locals who had worked the vast plains for generations were to be believed, San Antonians only saw snow once in a lifetime, if they were lucky.

Although the evenings were cold, sometimes even below freezing, the days were temperate and almost pleasant. Laundry wasn't interrupted by thunder showers as it was prone to be in the summer months; the ranch wasn't covered in mud, making it hard to work the cattle. No, the ground was hard, cold and thirsty. The cattle walked slower as if saving their energy for the heavy grazing months of spring and summer.

But on a ranch just outside of San Antonio two women sat on a porch overlooking the large herd of cattle grazing in the distance. Although they knew more about cattle than some ranchers did, they didn't bother with the cattle at all. They preferred spending their days inside, making their cabin a welcoming home and taking care of their mother. It wasn't that they didn't

like the outdoors or that they preferred making tea and cooking supper, it was more a matter of leaving the cattle to their brother who lived and breathed ranching every day of his life.

Both women were young, their resemblance uncanny. The one preferred gardening where the other would not think twice about having to fix a shingle on the roof or a broken slat on the porch. They were far removed from the polished parlors of the east and spoke with the twang that came with the country on which they had been raised. Their dresses had seen better days and although they were home educated, neither enjoyed reading.

The sun tea they had steeped that morning was served in two glasses as they took a brief reprieve from the household chores.

Bonnie Evans sipped on her tea, her emerald green gaze never missing a thing. Although she was only twenty one, she had a maturity most women yearned for. Her beauty, though understated, could make even a blind man look twice.

“There he goes again,” Bonnie said with a heavy sigh. “Does he ever stop?”

Cassidy Evans shook her head as she followed her sister’s gaze. Although she was only three years older than Bonnie, Cassidy had become the matriarch of the family over the last few years. Their father had contracted consumption two years before and had subsequently passed away leaving the responsibility of the ranch on their brother’s shoulders. Cassidy had noticed the change in her brother’s demeanor, the fine lines that began fanning from the corners of his eyes from spending too much time in the sun. Regardless of their offers to help, Carson insisted on taking care of the cattle himself.

Today it wasn’t Carson who put a look of worry in Cassidy’s gaze, however, it was their mother. Daphne Evans had taken the death of her husband particularly badly. Only months after his passing, she had taken to bed with lung fever. Although the doctor insisted the condition had healed, it seemed as if their mother was deteriorating with the passing of every month.

Just last week she had insisted that Cassidy and Bonnie take her back to the doctor. Although the doctor offered laudanum for her pain, Daphne refused. He revealed to Cassidy in confidence that he could find nothing wrong with their mother. It was a sickness of the mind, which quite simply stole the will to live.

“He won’t stop,” Cassidy said in a heavy voice. “Because he needs to take care of us.”

Daphne huffed. “I just wish there was something we could do. It’s as if a dark cloud has settled over our ranch and no matter how much we try, it just ain’t givin’ way.”

Cassidy nodded in agreement. “Ma isn’t getting up today. Says her back is achin’.”

“Cassidy, we have to do sumtin’. Ma’s given up; Carson is working himself into a stupor. Something’s gotta give or we’re all goin’ to end up six feet under. Cause of death: unhappiness,” Bonnie said with dramatic flair.

Cassidy couldn’t help but grin at her younger sister. Bonnie’s always had a flair for being overly dramatic. “It’s not that bad.”

“It ain’t? Either you’ve stolen blinders from the horses or you just ain’t seein’ straight. Carson hasn’t smiled in months and Ma is just waitin’ to die. You and I are bound to become spinsters if a miracle doesn’t drop a husband in our laps, and there’s talk of snow this year. The world’s comin’ to an end and I don’t even have no one to share it with,” Daphne said, outraged.

Cassidy turned to her sister with a frown. “What do you suggest we do? We took Ma to the doctor. We’ve asked Carson to slow down. I don’t see there is anythin’ we can do.”

Bonnie frowned before a mischievous glint shone in her bright green eyes. “I know exactly what we can do. You remember what Ma said last week on our way back from town? That she’ll be dust before her son takes a wife?”

Cassidy nodded. Their mother had been nagging about the next

generation ever since their father passed away. “Yep, I remember. What are you sayin’?”

Bonnie leaned closer. She glanced at Carson sitting atop his stallion as he rode the fence line before she turned back to Cassidy. “Let’s find Carson a wife. Just think about it. Ma will be excited about the weddin’ and hopefully find hope in the thought of havin’ grandchildren. And if we find him the right wife, he might just remember how to smile.”

Cassidy laughed, shaking her head. “Bonnie, I think you’d best get inside. You’ve had enough winter sun for one mornin’, you’re starting to spew nonsense.”

“No,” Bonnie insisted. “Carson doesn’t have time to find a wife because he’s too busy takin’ care of us. We can be real sly about it. He doesn’t have to know. Come on, Cassidy, do you have a better plan?”

Cassidy thought for a moment before letting out a resigned sigh. “We can try. But I won’t be foolin’ him none, Bonnie. Carson is stubborn, he’ll shove us on the nose about buttin’ into his business.”

Bonnie’s smile brightened. “No, he won’t, not if he falls in love first.”

Cassidy laughed, “You’re bein’ hopeful, but at least that’s better than not havin’ any hope at all.”

“Exactly. Come on, let’s start makin’ a list of potential women in town.”

“Now?” Cassidy asked. “I’ve got to get the laundry down and make sure Ma takes her bath.”

“That can wait,” Bonnie insisted. “We got important business we need to tend to. The business of makin’ this ranch a happy one again.”

Cassidy couldn’t help but chuckle at her sister’s insistence. Judging by the look in Bonnie’s eyes they were about to plan the next war. She could already see strategy forming in her little sister’s mind. “Alright, we can try, but like I said, Carson is stubborn like Pa used to be. He might just marry us off out of anger.”

“He won’t marry us off,” Bonnie said, shaking her head. “If he wanted to

get rid of us he would've done so long time ago. He loves us, he just doesn't know how to show it."

Cassidy followed Bonnie inside, but she couldn't help but be doubtful about their plan. But at least Bonnie was smiling, and it would give her something to do instead of worrying about her mother's mystery illness.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



2 January 1882, Boston, Massachusetts

Boston was covered in a thick blanket of white snow. Outside, the wind had fingers of ice reaching through every coat, crack and door. In the better part of town where brownstone houses lined the street and men hurried to work wearing suits, the trees were standing guard, their branches empty and eerie as if reaching out towards each other.

But inside a brownstone lay a woman who knew she wouldn't see another summer, another sunrise or another dawn. The drapes were drawn, casting the room in darkness although it was morning and the sun was casting its rays outside the windows. After fighting against the illness that was slowly stealing her life over the last few months, she no longer noticed much.

But Elizabeth Mason did notice how her strength seemed to have disappeared this morning. Her chest hurt and every draw of breath felt like a million daggers stabbing through her lungs. The doctor had said consumption could be fatal, but not for a woman of her class.

Her hands smoothed over the thick furs that covered her bedspread. Her eyes glanced around the expensive furnishings of the room. The beautiful

mantle over the fireplace and the artwork she had carefully shipped from Ireland to grace her new home. Turning on her side she noticed her jewelry box and a wry smile curved her mouth. Neither her diamonds, her pearls or even her wealth could save her now.

A tear slipped over her cheek knowing that today would be her last. She had woken up that morning knowing that today would be the day that she proceeded to St. Peter's gates. Today would be the last time she looked into her daughter's sapphire blue eyes. She closed her eyes and remembered the country of her birth.

Ireland had been a beautiful emerald isle with towering cliffs and ancient castles. So much history, so much legacy, her family legacy, was weaved into the fabric of Ireland. But the great famine had changed it all. Not their ancestral castle nor their connections with the great clans could protect the McGregor's from the famine or the economic repercussions it brought.

When her father insisted she travel to the new world where she would be free of famine and persecution for her faith, Elizabeth had refused. Her life was on the emerald isle, as was her love. Daniel McFadden had been her first love. His blue eyes had caught her attention when she was a wee girl of twelve. They had suffered through the famine together. When the famine ended, they had married in a small chapel, speaking their vows and promising love until death do they part. Little had she known Daniel would pass away only two years later in a gruesome battle over land.

The famine had caused people to become unreasonable; the poor hated the rich and rebelled against their wealth. Widowed at the age of twenty five, Elizabeth had found herself to be with child. That was when her father stepped in again. He had secured a marriage for Elizabeth to Damien Taylor. A man of healthy means who was headed to the new world.

Elizabeth had boarded the ship and left her Daniel and her home behind, to secure a better life for her unborn child. Anna-Sophia had been born on American soil, and Damien had accepted her as his own. Together they had

built a new life in Boston. But now, on her death bed, Elizabeth wished she could have given her daughter the legacy of Ireland that she carried inside her. Now a grown woman of twenty two years, Anna-Sophia had become a beautiful woman. Elizabeth wished she could live long enough to see her daughter married, to bounce a grandchild on her knee, but she knew that day would never come.

The door squeaked open and Elizabeth rolled onto her side to see Anna-Sophia standing at the door. “Mother, how are you feeling?”

Elizabeth worked her way through a fitting cough before she finally managed to speak. “Call your father, I need to talk to both of you.”

When Anna-Sophia hesitated, Elizabeth sighed. “Please Annie, it can’t wait.”

Over the last few weeks Elizabeth had picked up on the tension between her daughter and her husband. Although it worried her, she was certain it was all due to her illness.

A short while later Annie and Damien stepped into the room. Damien rushed to her side. His hair was no longer black, but now peppered with white. The age had affected them both. There wasn’t a single doubt in Elizabeth’s mind that Damien would wed again. He was handsome, rich and of good social standing. It was her daughter’s future that concerned her.

“You called for me, my darling?” Damien asked pressing a kiss to her hand.

Elizabeth nodded. “I have a few things to say, please just listen. Both of you.”

Damien and Annie both nodded, concern and empathy etched on their faces.

“Damien, I know my time is drawing to a close. I need to know that when I go you’ll take care of Annie. I need to know you’ll care for her as you have done all these years.”

Damien glanced at Annie and quickly nodded. “Of course. I’ve always

treated her as my own, I won't stop. We're a family."

Elizabeth didn't like the way he said that but turned to her daughter. "Annie, I want you to know how much I love you. You're the light in my life, your father's daughter in every way. I know he would have been proud of you. I've taught you all I could, but there is one more thing I need to give you." Elizabeth coughed weakly and reached for the jewelry box on the bedside table. "My brooch and necklace, it's yours."

Annie shook her head as tears streamed over her cheeks. "Mother, I can't. These are your family jewels. The diamond brooch: your grandmother received it as a gift from a king. The pearl necklace.... No, I can't possibly."

"They're your family jewels now. It's all you'll ever have of the McGregor's, of your Irish ancestry. Take them and find happiness. Find love, Annie." Elizabeth didn't add that she wanted her daughter to find the type of love she had shared with Daniel. Although she had grown to care for Damien and appreciated him, she had never loved him in the way she had loved Daniel.

"I will, Mother, I will. Rest now, you'll feel better later." Annie wept holding the jewelry box to her chest.

Elizabeth glanced at Damien and smiled even as she felt a terrible tiredness come over her. Her eyes drifted closed as if they were attached to weights. She drew in a heavy breath, but before she could expel it, her heart stopped.

Finally the pain was gone, the longing for Daniel and the biting cold all faded away as Elizabeth Mason passed away peacefully on a cold winter's morning in Boston.

CHAPTER 3



8 January 1882, San Antonio, Texas

*A*lthough neither Bonnie nor Cassidy were avid horse-women, their father had taught them to drive the wagon. So this morning they had used their combined skills and headed to San Antonio under the guise of purchasing a few items for the house from the mercantile store. Although they did need flour and a supply of sugar wouldn't be amiss, that wasn't the real reason for their trip into town.

After almost a week of debating how they would find Carson a wife, the sisters had finally decided that a closer look at the available women in town would be their best option. They started the morning by stopping at the telegram office before moving onto the boarding house. From the boarding house they stopped by the hotel, the newspaper office and the school, using the excuse of wishing everyone a happy new year.

By the time noon rolled around they had laid eyes on every available woman in town, and it was time for them to decide who they would pair with their handsome brother. They indulged in tea on the new balcony of the hotel overlooking the thorough fare as Bonnie pulled out a list they had made over

the last few days.

“Right, so let’s start at the top. Dolly Anderson?” Bonnie asked with a frown. “I’m sorry, but we can’t do that to Carson. Dolly has barely any teeth in her head, and over and above that, I’m sure she smelt of drink.”

Cassidy nodded. “She did. Right, Dolly’s out of the count. Who’s next?”

“Emma Wilson,” Bonnie said, holding the pen over the poor girl’s name, ready to scrap it off their list as well.

“Too old and I heard a rumor she’s been goin’ around with that outlaw that’s been hanging about at the saloon. Next?” Cassidy said, sipping on her tea.

“Lakota Thompson. I have nothing against her mother’s checkered past, but what if we have little bandit young’uns hunting down the cattle?” Bonnie asked with horror.

Cassidy couldn’t help but laugh. “I doubt Carson’s own kids would dare hunt his cattle, but Dolly mentioned that Lakota is engaged to the leader of the bandits her mother was entangled with.”

“Oh,” Bonnie said dejectedly as she scratched the pretty girl’s name from the list. “Then we have Liza, the schoolmarm. She’s pretty and nice. Maybe Carson will like her?” Bonnie asked hopefully.

Cassidy cocked a brow, quickly glanced around the balcony to make sure no one was within earshot and then emitted a high-pitched giggle. “Do you really think Carson will be charmed by that? Every time she laughed I looked around for the pig that was being slaughtered.”

Bonnie snorted as she laughed. Tears spouted from her eyes and she shook her head. “Cassidy, you’re horrible.”

“At least I don’t have anything against Lakota,” Cassidy said primly. “Who’s next?”

“Martha Wilkinson?” Bonnie said with a frown. “She’s as big as a house. Do you even think she’ll fit into our house?”

Cassidy chuckled, shaking her head. “You’re going to be punished. We

both are.”

“No we’re not. We simply want someone nice and endearing for our brother to spend the rest of his life with. We’re not being mean, we’re being considerate.”

Cassidy cocked a brow, indicating her disagreement. “How about Marjorie?”

“Marjorie Tailor? The new girl that just moved to town with the parents from Missouri? Her father is about as Southern as they come. He won’t let his little girl go around with the likes of us.”

“You’re right.” Cassidy let out a sigh. “This is useless, Bonnie. We shouldn’t even have started this to begin with. Carson has to choose his own wife.”

Bonnie shook her head fervently. “Haven’t we just confirmed that there isn’t a single suitable wife in San Antonio? How on earth are we going to abide by Ma’s deathbed wish if we can’t find him a wife? We have to persevere. Do you remember how you nursed that pup after the rattler got him? That was perseverance.”

Cassidy shook her head. “That was dumb luck and a lot of prayer. That dog should’ve died.”

“And yet, he’s still chasin’ chickens to this day. We’ll find Carson a wife; we just shouldn’t lose hope.”

Just then the balcony doors opened, and two women took their seats beside the Evans sisters. Cassidy and Bonnie shared a look before their faces bloomed into broad smiles. “Priscilla, Annabelle, how nice to see you again.”

The women in question turned with smiles ready. “Cassidy, Bonnie, how good to see you again,” Priscilla said with a broad smile. Priscilla was the mayor’s daughter and had just become engaged to the sheriff, but her friend Annabelle was right pretty and still available.

Annabelle greeted them in earnest before she asked, “Are you in town alone today?”

“Yes, we uh...” Cassidy stumbled over the lie.

“We came to do some shopping. Sugar, flour, you know. Thought we might treat ourselves to some tea before headin’ back to the ranch,” Bonnie quickly covered. “How is your brother?”

It was no secret that Bonnie had liked Steven Johnson since their first meeting.

“Very well. That’s why we’re in town. Steven’s getting married tomorrow, thought we might get some new frocks,” Annabelle announced excitedly.

Bonnie frowned, not even trying to hide her disappointment. “To who?”

“A girl from up north. Steven’s been thinkin’ about marriage for a while now. Seems he couldn’t find what he was lookin’ for in San Antonio and went and got himself a mail order bride. She arrives in the morning. Wealthy family, matrimonially inclined and all that. She and Steven simply got on like a house on fire through their letters,” Annabelle said with a broad grin.

Priscilla nodded. “Still can’t believe men order wives from mail catalogues these days. But it’s not the first time I hear of it. I bet Steven is so excited, he can’t help himself.”

Bonnie nodded, clearly disappointed that Steven didn’t look in her direction. “I wish them both well.” She stood up, gathered her list and turned to Cassidy. “We’d best get on.”

Cassidy quickly followed her sister out of the hotel, but when they reached the thorough fare she stopped Bonnie. “Wait, didn’t you hear what Annabelle said?”

“Yep. Steven’s getting married ‘cause he couldn’t find what he was lookin’ for here. Clearly he didn’t look very far,” Bonnie said with a pout.

Cassidy shook her head. “Get over ‘yerself for a minute, would you. We should get one of those for Carson. We place an advert in the matrimonial times and then we can choose which one we’d like to come to San Antonio. It’s like picking the perfect girl from a catalogue.”

Bonnie frowned before her eyes widened and a smile burst through the disappointment. “Cassidy, you’re a genius.”

Before Cassidy could agree, Bonnie rushed across the street to the telegram office. Cassidy followed her with a smile. Apparently they were going to place an advert in the matrimonial times. She checked the change in her purse and decided flour would have to wait. Sending a telegram to Matrimonial Times was more important than baking biscuits.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4



14 January 1882, Boston, Massachusetts

Annie rushed up the stairs, her dress caught on the banister, but she kept running regardless of the sound of fabric ripping. Her heart was racing in her chest a mile a minute, but she didn't stop.

"You come down here, you little brat. You owe me some affection. I've cared for you as my own since the day you were born; it's time you repaid my kindness," Damien yelled as he stumbled up the stairs in a drunken stupor.

Annie stopped for a moment to glance down the staircase, struggling to believe this was really happening. But Damien's red face and bulging eyes were as real as the stench of drink that had followed him to the house earlier that evening.

Tears streamed down her face. "You're my stepfather!"

"We ain't family, Annie-girl. Nothing stopping us from being together in the lovin' way, except for your miserable conscience. Your mother told me to take care of you, whaddya think I'm tryin' to do?"

He stumbled on the stairs and Annie brushed the tears from her face,

shaking her head. “You’re drunk, Damien. Go to bed!”

“I ain’t drunk!” Damien slurred his retort. He shoved himself up and began crawling up the stairs, more determination in his purpose than ever before.

Annie rushed to her room and slammed the door shut. She knew if Damien got through that door tonight he would compromise her, he would hurt her and she would never be able to look herself in the mirror again. She glanced at the bureau beside the door and moved towards it with determination. She shoved it with all her strength, but it barely moved an inch. Knowing it was her only chance to keep Damien out she tried again. It barely shifted. When she heard Damien’s heavy footsteps fall in the hallway outside her room, adrenalin rushed through her veins drowning all the fear. She planted her feet firmly on the ground, put both hands on either side of the bureau and drew in a deep breath before she shoved the bureau with all her might. It moved almost six inches, just reaching the door when Damien began banging on the outside.

Tears were rushing down her cheeks now, but Annie didn’t even notice as she kept pushing the bureau. All that mattered now was making sure Damien didn’t find his way into her room. Once she had secured the bureau, she collapsed in front of it breathless.

All she could think of was how foolish she had been. Ever since her eighteenth birthday Damien had turned down every suitor that knocked at their door. His compliments had become more and more inappropriate, but Annie had always convinced herself that she was imagining things.

When her mother had taken sick she had been certain his affection was merely borne of fear that her mother wouldn’t recover. But on the eve of her mother’s death Damien had said something that had made the hair on the back of Annie’s neck rise. *At least I’ll have a younger wife when she goes.*

At the time Annie had been certain he had someone in mind. She never for a moment considered it could be her. A few hours after her mother’s

death, Damien had already changed. Suddenly he looked at her in a way that made her uncomfortable. Random comments to the lawyer about keeping Annie's inheritance close because she wouldn't be leaving. It had been barely a week since her mother's funeral and already Damien had made it clear that if she wanted a roof over her head, she was to marry him.

Marry her step-father?

The idea was as revolting as boarding a slave ship. Annie had tried to make him see reason, but Damien's drinking was now more out of hand than ever before. Where he had usually indulged in drink a few times a week before retiring to his room to sleep it off, he now indulged every day, all day. The stench of alcohol hung in their home and what was more concerning were the expensive pieces of furniture he removed every day.

Annie wasn't sure what Damien was up to, but she knew that she wouldn't become his wife. She didn't know how she could withstand a man of his social standing without causing harm to herself, but she had to find a way.

"Annie-girl. Open the door, now. I just want to talk. I miss your mother, that's all it is. I'm sorry if I scared you. Please open the door so we can talk," Damien slurred outside her door.

A few weeks ago Annie would have believed him, but Damien had lost that privilege the first time he tried to kiss her on her mouth at her mother's funeral. Thinking back now, Annie knew she should have escaped his tyranny that day. But she'd been overwhelmed with grief.

Running away was her only option now, Annie decided. She moved to her wardrobe where she kept the jewelry box she had inherited that held her mother's brooch and pearl necklace. It was her legacy, all she had left of her mother and the heritage of the McGregors, but it could be her ticket to a new life far from Damien and his obscene affections.

She opened the wardrobe door and a frown creased her brow. One by one she began pulling out her dresses and her undergarments until there was

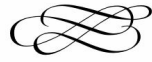
nothing left in the wardrobe, not even the jewelry box. Her throat closed with fear as she realized that Damien had taken it.

A tear slipped over her cheek as she sat down on her bed. Not only was her step-father trying to force her into marriage, but he had taken her only chance of standing up against him.

Annie cried herself to sleep as Damien kept banging on the door, pleading and shouting in turn.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5



20 January 1882, Boston, Massachusetts

For the next week Annie spent every waking moment trying to figure out what was happening around her whilst trying to find a way to escape Damien and his horrible plan of marrying her as soon as the appropriate period of time had passed.

The more she thought about it the easier it was to admit she had never truly loved or liked Damien as a daughter should her father. Damien had always made her skin crawl, and the more she thought about it the more she realized her mother had shielded her from him in many ways.

After that horrid night a week ago Annie now retired to her room at five in the afternoon and pushed and secured the bureau in place to make sure Damien couldn't reach her in his drunken stupor. Every night she prayed for God to send her an answer, a way to leave Damien. A way to find the love her mother had spoken about.

Although Damien had been there on the day of her birth, Annie would always remember the stories her mother had told her about her real father. The Irishman that had stolen her mother's heart and had given her more

happiness and love that any woman could ever ask for. That was the kind of love Annie wanted. Not the drunken affections of a lascivious, incestuous step-father.

Annie didn't know what she was going to do, but even the house staff had started noticing that life within the home wasn't as normal. Not only was the house becoming emptier every day, but Damien spent less and less time at home. Annie remembered a long time ago how her mother and Damien had argued about his gambling. The only conclusion she could come to was that Damien had taken up gambling again and their home was paying the debt.

The drinking didn't help either, as he spent his nights in taverns and came home causing a ruckus every night. Although Annie felt safe in her room, she knew it was only a matter of time before the accepted period of six months' mourning would have passed and Damien would force her to marry him.

She sat by her writing table wishing she had someone to tell about her troubles. Wishing she had someone who would understand, someone who would help her find her way out of the impossible position she found herself in, but Damien had made sure she and her mother didn't associate with the people of the ton. Was it because he feared they would learn too much, that they would learn about his drinking, gambling and fornicating? Unknowingly, they had been kept in a prison of Damien's making all their lives. Of course Annie had the best tutors, clothes and servants that money could buy, but she had no friends. When she heard the front door slam below her, she knew Damien was home.

Fear clutched at her throat knowing he would be banging and shouting at her door at any moment now. Like a little girl Annie rushed to her bed, hoping the covers would provide safety against the terrors of the night. Only the terrors weren't shadows as they were when she was a little girl, the terror was now the man who had promised to take care of her.

Instead he had stolen her inheritance and had become a daily nightmare that Annie didn't know how to deal with. As she slipped beneath the covers

something scrunched beneath her. She jumped out of bed with such a fright that she didn't even hear the first banging of fists on her door. A frown creased her brow as she moved towards the bed and noticed the newspaper spread out on her sheets.

The only person with access to her room was her lady's maid. Why would she have placed a newspaper in her bed? Annie picked up the newspaper and a gasp escaped her even as Damien made a ruckus outside her door.

"July, Annie-girl. July will come and no pastor in town will think it wrong for me to take my step-daughter as my wife." His evil laughter beyond the secured door made Annie cringe even as she read the advertisements over the top of the newspaper.

The Matrimonial Times.

Annie had heard of it before, she and her mother had discussed it once. Women heading west to marry men they had only corresponded with through the mail. A frown creased her brow as she climbed back into bed and took up reading the newspaper.

Was this the answer she had been praying for? Did her lady's maid realize how dire her situation was? Had she consequently secured a copy of the Matrimonial Times as a means of escape for Annie? Annie wasn't sure, but curiosity caused her to open the paper and she began reading even as Damien ran out of steam outside her door.

One advert in specific caught her attention more than all the others.

RANCHER CARSON EVANS seeking wife to share his life.

EIGHT FOOT TWO TALL, yellow hair and blue eyes, Carson Evans is a true rancher in every way. With ample means to provide for a wife, this rancher is

seeking someone matrimonially inclined with whom to enter into correspondence. A gentle giant with a heart of gold and a penchant for cattle and the finer things in life, he can offer a wife a home on a beautiful ranch as well as a quiet life. Carson dreams of being a father and a beloved husband. His generous and kind personality have not only served him well as a rancher, but also as a brother and a son. He shares the ranch with his sisters and his mother and is looking for someone to fill the void in his heart. If you are kind, between the ages of twenty and twenty five, matrimonially inclined, pleasant in features and of able means, Carson hopes to hear from you. Carson is seeking a soul mate to love, a wife to cherish and a mother for his future children. If this gentle giant has drawn your attention, write to him today through the matrimonial times and begin to secure your happily ever after.

ANNIE READ the advertisement over again and couldn't help but admit that the gentle giant had caught her attention. She wasn't sure if she'd like a ranch or a rancher, but right now it was her only real option. She debated until midnight before she finally slipped out of bed and moved to her writing desk. She would write to the rancher and if he wrote back she would decide whether or not becoming a mail order bride would be in her future.

CHAPTER 6



10 February 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Bonnie and Cassidy raced to their bedroom as soon as they arrived home from town. If Carson thought it strange that his sisters had taken to going to town at least once a week, he didn't mention it. Instead he simply asked them to collect whatever he needed from town while they were there.

Bonnie glanced at Cassidy, excitement shining in her gaze. "Five! We got five letters!"

Cassidy nodded. "I know. Just calm down, they might be spinsters and widows. Let's first read them before we get excited."

Bonnie shook her head. "She's in here, I just know she is."

Cassidy laughed. "Come on, let's have the first letter."

They read for the next hour, commenting on spelling and grammar as their mother had insisted all her children were well learned in both. When they had read all the letters, they both looked at each other and reached for the same letter.

"This one," Cassidy said with smile.

“I’ll start writing,” Bonnie said eagerly.

Cassidy laughed. “Just make sure you sound like Carson. I’m going to go check on Ma.”

Just like that an exchange of letters began with the sisters eagerly awaiting the mail every other week whilst back in Boston Annie eagerly did the same.

20 JANUARY 1882

DEAR MR. EVANS

I HOPE this letter finds you in good health. My name is Anna-Sophia Mason and I am twenty two years of age. I am of Irish descent and according to my mother I have the black hair and blue eyes to prove it. I was born in Boston and have lived here all my life. Raised in a home of privilege with private tutors and servants, I now find myself at a crossroads.

My mother passed at the start of this year. My step-father, who was meant to protect me after her passing, has turned into someone I don’t recognize. I’m not telling you this to in any way garner your sympathy, but for you to understand why I have decided to write to you. I’m not unattractive, overweight or incapable of keeping a home. I am quite adept at sewing and have always dreamed of having a family of my own. Although I’m not certain if it is possible to find love through the mail, I believe your advertisement spoke to me.

I have never been on a ranch or in Texas, but I am curious as to the climate. I’m sure you’d be interested to know that although I was raised privileged I’ve never depended on it. I can prepare my own meals and make a

bed despite having a servant to do it for me. I enjoy reading, sewing and as your advertisement stipulated, I am matrimonially inclined.

I apologize if this letter comes across as a little flustered, let it be no reflection on me as a person as it is merely indicating how nervous I am to be writing to a gentleman I do not know.

If you choose to write back I would like to learn more about your ranch, your family and the climate in Texas at this time of year. Boston has snow on most days at this time, while it is freezing on others.

YOURS TRULY,

Annie Mason

10 FEBRUARY 1882

MY DEAREST ANNIE,

I HOPE you don't mind the familiarity with which I initiate this letter, but your writing made me feel as if we have met. When I placed the advertisement I didn't expect to reap any rewards, but it was clear from the first sentence that I was blessed the moment you decided to correspond with me.

I'm sorry to hear about the passing of your mother and your step-father's behavior. Sometimes in life things happen which we cannot explain. Sometimes we just have to accept them, those are the hardest times of all.

I have a herd of about two thousand cattle. My ranch is very large, like most things in Texas. I enjoy nothing more than riding the range on my stallion and watching the sun fall in the west after a long day of working with

the cattle.

The weather in Texas is much different to the weather in Boston, I suppose. The nights are cool, but the days are temperate, requiring at most a light coat. There was one thing you failed to mention in your letter to me, do you believe in the living God? I hope to find a wife who shares my beliefs and will help me teach our children one day of God's grace.

I HOPE to hear from you soon.

*YOURS TRULY,
Carson Evans*

25 FEBRUARY 1882

MY DEAREST CARSON

I DID NOT MIND the familiarity of your letter. I enjoyed reading about your ranch and the cattle. I can't imagine how breathtaking a sunset must be on such a vast landscape. You sound like a kind man; one who I imagine loves his family very much.

I have no siblings but always dreamed of having sisters; you are very blessed to have two and your mother also with you. As for your question about my faith, I do believe. Is it wrong for me to believe that God caused me to respond to your letter?

Since first reading your advertisement I've been eager to hear from you.

Spring is on the way in Boston and the snow is melting, causing a messy sludge of mud in the streets. But I don't concern myself with the dirt or the complaints; I only concern myself with the mail arriving.

I'm not sure whether you're corresponding with other women, but I'd like to assure you that I'm corresponding only with you. I wish you a pleasant week and good health for you and yours. If you have told your family about our correspondence, please forward my greetings to them as well.

YOURS TRULY,

Annie.

FOR THREE MONTHS Cassidy and Bonnie took turns writing to Annie. Both sisters agreed that with every letter they liked Annie more. She seemed like a sweet girl with a good heart who was eager to find love. There wasn't a single doubt in Cassidy and Bonnie's minds that Carson would fall head over heels in love with the girl from Boston.

When May came to an end and they collected another letter from the post office, it was Bonnie who simply sighed with joy.

"She's describing spring in Boston and wishing Carson a happy springtime in Texas. She sounds wonderful, Cassidy. We should propose."

Cassidy almost fell over her own feet as they walked back to the wagon. They had taken to collecting letters from the mail office and responding from the wagon to immediately submit a response.

Cassidy turned to Bonnie with a frown. "We don't even know her!"

"We do. We know more about her than any other girl in town. She's sweet and kind and likes to sew. She tells Carson about her childhood, and her favorite food, and she even wrote about thinking of him when she glanced up at the star-dotted sky. She's in love, Cassidy. It's time."

Cassidy debated for a moment, but she couldn't argue. Unless Annie Evans was a pathological liar, the girl was perfect for Carson. Young, pretty and well-educated – their brother wouldn't find a better match if he had to search for one himself.

She drew in a deep breath. "Fine, but I'm writing the proposal. That last letter where you waxed on about branding and neutering probably terrified the poor girl."

Bonnie chuckled. "I thought that was something Carson would have wanted to share with her."

"I doubt that," Cassidy said moving towards the wagon. "We'll make the proposal simple. A short letter. Oh, what about her costs for coming to Texas? Surely a suitor would send her money?"

Bonnie nodded with a frown before she pulled a bracelet off of her arm. "Pa gave me this when I turned sixteen. I've no use for it now. While I sell this to earn her train fare, you write the best proposal imaginable."

Cassidy nodded. She had sold her bracelet to pay for their father's funeral. It warmed her heart that Bonnie was willing to sell hers for a good cause as well. Now they just had to make sure Annie Evans didn't spend the money and forget all about Carson.

CHAPTER 7



3 June 1882, Boston, Massachusetts

Annie opened the hatch in the dining room carefully, making sure it didn't make the slightest squeak. Over the last few months it had become achingly clear that the servants were in two different camps. Half were in support of Damien, thinking Annie was ungrateful and spoiled. These couldn't understand why she wouldn't want to marry a man like Damien, although if Annie was honest she believed they were on that side of the fence because they feared losing their jobs.

The remaining staff whispered in hushed tones about needing to save Annie and helping her escape whenever Damien began his stumbling, bumbling, drunken ramblings. But since Annie wasn't sure with whom the butler sided, she took careful care when she snooped about the house whenever Damien was out.

When she had asked Damien about her jewelry box, he had simply stated that since she wasn't going anywhere, she could have it after their wedding. Of course Annie had no intention of marrying Damien, although July was looming only weeks away. She had to believe that prayers would work and

that she would find a way out of Boston before Damien dragged her down the aisle kicking and screaming.

The hatch finally gave way and Annie had to be careful not to let her breath catch when she saw her jewelry box safely tucked inside. Damien had just lost the battle, she thought with a smile as she checked its contents. Both the brooch and the necklace were safely tucked into the velvet pouch inside.

Annie closed the hatch just in time as her lady's maid rushed into the dining room. "Miss Evans, this just came for you."

Annie's heart skipped a beat at the sight of the letter. Although she had told no one about her correspondence with Carson Evans, she had a feeling her lady's maid knew about the letters she had safely hidden in her bureau. After tucking the letter into her bodice, making sure no one saw it, Annie headed through the foyer to read it in the privacy of her bedroom. It was then that the front door burst open.

"There you are, you ungrateful little witch!" Damien scowled moving towards her. "You've been hidin' long enough. It's time you understood what's expected of you."

He reeked of drink and his eyes were bloodshot from too little sleep. It only took a glance through their once impressive brownstone to notice that their finances were dwindling as fast as Damien could gamble them away.

Annie's heart jumped into her throat. "Damien, you look tired, perhaps you should lie down." Annie tried to appease him, hoping the coaxing would help him realize he had an audience of servants and the butler.

"You're right. I'm tired," Damien said, grabbing her upper arm in a vice-like grip. "I'm tired of you prancing about this house as if it was yours. You're not the lady of the house and unless your clothes are moved into my room by tomorrow morning, you'll find yourself out on the street."

His laughter was pure evil and for a moment Annie didn't recognize him as the man who had played the part of her step-father for so long. Then again, perhaps he had simply been playing the part all along.

Annie tried to release her arm, but he only tightened his grip. “Damien, you’re hurting me.”

Damien laughed as he shoved her to the ground. “Sometimes a woman needs a hard hand to know her place in life.”

Horror flashed through Annie’s body as memories rushed back of her mother crying. Memories of shouting in the middle of the night. Had he abused her mother? Anger quickly replaced the horror, but Annie made sure it didn’t show.

She turned to her lady’s maid and straightened her dress as she stood up. “You unpack my bureau and wardrobe, Lily. It had best be moved by morning.”

Lily’s eyes were wide with surprise, but she nodded before rushing upstairs.

Damien smiled at her in a way that made her skin crawl. “Good girl. I’ll make arrangements for us to be married in the morning.”

He turned on his heel and stumbled back out the front door. It was as if a symphony of sighs of relief sounded through the foyer. Annie didn’t give them a moment’s thought. Now that she knew the location of the jewelry box, she could leave. She rushed upstairs to find Lily standing in the middle of the room with a frightened expression.

“Annie, you can’t marry him.”

Annie shook her head as she remembered the letter in her bodice. She pulled it out and scanned the words, and a wave of relief washed over her. Tucked in the envelope was enough money for her train fare along with a little spare.

“No, I’m going to marry Carson Evans in Texas. Quick Lily, we need to pack my things. I need to leave before he comes back.”

With lightning speed Lily packed Annie’s belongings into a carpet bag while Annie retrieved her stolen jewelry box. Her heart was racing a mile a minute as she placed the box in her large purse. She quickly scanned the

contents and found her mother's will alongside the brooch and the necklace. Luckily no one could accuse her of stealing the jewels now that she had the last testament as proof, she thought as she rushed upstairs to collect her carpet bag. She had to send a telegram since a letter wouldn't arrive in San Antonio in time, before she could board the train heading south. Right now she didn't care what the servants thought, or that Damien might report her to the sheriff for taking the jewelry box. All she cared about was getting out of Boston before morning dawned.

Lilly gave her a hug and wished her well. Annie looked over the many clothes she would be leaving behind, knowing full well she couldn't take them all. "Lily, take the clothes and find yourself a husband in the West. You deserve better than this."

Annie didn't look back as she rushed out of the brownstone she had called home. There was nothing left there for her. What hadn't been taken for gambling debt had been sold to pay the servants' wages. All that was left in that brownstone were memories, but Annie would take only the good ones with her.

CHAPTER 8



6 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Bonnie and Cassidy were both quiet during the wagon ride back to the ranch. They had been expecting to receive a letter from Annie in answer to the proposal. What they had not expected was the telegram sent four days hence, announcing that she was already on her way.

By the time they stopped the wagon in front of the ranch house, both girls knew that they were soon going to be in hot water. Annie would be arriving at the station in the morrow and, not only had they not yet told their brother what they had done, but they had led the poor girl to San Antonio under false pretenses.

Cassidy climbed out of the wagon and turned to Bonnie who was still clutching the telegram in her hands. “What are we going to do?”

Bonnie shook her head, her wide eyes betraying the guilt she no doubt felt. “I don’t know. I didn’t think she’d come. For some reason, I never thought she’d come. I thought she might ask Carson to travel east to meet her. I never... this is one right pretty mess.”

Cassidy squared her shoulders; now was not the time for regrets and

doubts. Annie Mason would be in San Antonio tomorrow and frankly they didn't have much of a choice. "We need to tell Carson."

Bonnie's eyes widened even more. "Have you gone mad? He'll skin us both and hang us out to dry." She let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know what we're going to do, but we can't tell him. Maybe we can pretend she's a friend coming to visit."

Cassidy guffawed. "We don't have friends in Boston, Bonnie. It's time we faced the music. No more lies. It's time we told Carson."

Bonnie was about to open her mouth when Carson suddenly rounded the barn with a cocked brow. "Tell Carson what?"

Cassidy and Bonnie shared a terrified look, but Cassidy took a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Before I tell you, you need to know we meant no harm."

Carson's brow furrowed into a deeper frown. "Cassidy, what do you mean you meant no harm?" He turned to Bonnie who was staring down at her shoes as if they were the most interesting item in the world.

Cassidy let out a sigh. "It's just that Ma wanted to see you married. We thought about searching in town, but there were no suitable..."

"Search for what?" Carson asked in a deathly low voice.

"A wife," Cassidy said in a small voice.

Before Cassidy could explain, Bonnie rambled out the entire story, beginning with the advertisement they had posted in January, right through to the telegram she was now holding in her hand.

Carson didn't say a word, he merely reached for the telegram and his face turned a frightening shade of red. He carefully read it before finally meeting his sisters' guilty faces. "You thought I'd be happy if you found me a wife?" His voice didn't raise a single notch but the anger in it had never been clearer.

"Carson, please... we were only trying to help?" Cassidy pleaded.

Carson shook his head and crumpled the telegram in his hand. "You went behind my back, lied to me, lied to Ma about your frequent trips into town

and all the while you were corresponding with a mail order bride. It's idleness, that's what this is. You got no good use for your time and so you go cookin' up things you have no business meddling in."

"Carson, she seems really nice. We're certain you're going to like her," Bonnie attempted to pacify him, but Carson was beyond reason.

"Have you ever considered that I might not want to get married? And if I wanted to, I would have found a wife in my own good time. You had no business doin' this. You can explain that to her when she arrives tomorrow and then you can send her back on the first train to wherever she came from."

"Boston," Cassidy offered. "Carson, she can't go back. Didn't you hear what Bonnie said? Her step-father..."

"I don't care. I don't know her. I don't even know what she looks like. She's nothing to me, and you'd better make that clear the moment she steps off that train."

"Carson, maybe if you just gave her a chance..." Bonnie pleaded again.

"No," Carson said firmly. "I don't want her on my ranch, and you can forget about me marryin' some woman I don't know. This is a mess you created; you'll deal with it. I'm done cleanin' up your messes. This time you've gone too far. Stay out of my way!" Carson turned on his heel and strode out of the barn, with anger bouncing off him in waves.

"Oh boy," Bonnie said, sinking onto a bale of hay. "He's real angry."

Cassidy nodded. "We got no choice but to tell her tomorrow when we pick her up."

"Pick her up. Didn't you hear Carson? He doesn't want her here."

"That might be so, but we can't very well leave her standing on the platform. We'll bring her here until we... figure out something else for her. I can't believe this has turned into such a mess."

"It's not a mess," Bonnie insisted brightly. "I look forward to meetin' her."

"It's another mouth to feed," Cassidy said with a resigned sigh.

“I’ll eat less,” Bonnie insisted, although her characteristic positive nature quickly started to fail her for the first time in her life.

Maybe Carson was right, they had gone too far this time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9



7 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

The following morning the tension in the Evans' ranch house was palpable. It was twined around everyone like a rubber band that had been twisted too far and was ready to snap. Cassidy and Bonnie hardly spoke during breakfast and finally their mother could take it no more. She had joined her children for breakfast and Daphne Evans, although ill, was no fool.

“What’s goin’ on between you three?” she asked with a cocked brow.

Carson leaned back and turned to his sisters. “Why don’t you tell Ma about the woman you arranged to come to San Antonio to be my wife? The woman you don’t know from Adam and that will be arrivin’ today? The woman I never even heard of until yesterday?”

Cassidy almost flinched beneath his angry gaze. “Carson...”

“Is this true?” Daphne asked, horrified.

Both girls nodded, their gazes firmly fixed on the untouched food on their plates.

“While you ladies try and figure out a way out of this mess, I’ve got a

ranch to run.” Carson stood up, his chair scraping over the wood floor and he walked outside leaving his mother and sisters alone.

“Everything,” Daphne said firmly. “I want to hear everythin’ right this minute. Why, I haven’t seen your brother so fussed up since those Mexicans stole his cattle a few years back.”

Bonnie turned to Cassidy who simply nodded and began explaining all that they had done. When Cassidy was finally done Daphne shook her head, clearly disappointed and furious at her daughters.

“When I said I wanted to see Carson married, I didn’t mean you should go on a wild goose chase. What’s to happen to this poor girl now?”

“We can try and give her money to go back,” Bonnie suggested in a small voice.

“You will do no such thing. That poor girl already travelled all this way, she must be tired and looking forward to meeting Carson... heavens be... I can’t believe you’ve done this.”

Cassidy sighed. “Ma, we were only tryin’ to help. Carson doesn’t want her on the ranch, and we can’t send her back; her step-father is horrible.”

Daphne, who hadn’t been much involved with the running of the farm or her children over the last two years, suddenly cleared her throat. “Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go into town and you’re going to collect that girl from the train. She has nowhere to go and regardless of how Carson feels about it, this is still my house. You’ll bring her here. Once she knows what’s what, she can stay until she decides what she wants to do. Both of you will plant more vegetables for the kitchen and you’ll help Carson any way you can.”

“Yes ma’am,” Both girls chorused in unison.

A short while later Bonnie and Cassidy rode into town just in time to see the train pull into the station with a flourish of steam. They stopped the wagon and climbed down, sharing a guilty look before heading for the platform. They waited until the platform had cleared, realizing then that

neither of them had ever asked about Annie's appearance.

Standing in the corner was a girl quietly keeping to herself, clutching a purse to her bodice, and with a carpet bag at her feet.

"Do you think that's her?" Bonnie asked hopefully.

Cassidy shrugged. "We'd better find out."

They moved towards the girl, neither sister able to help but be surprised at her beauty. Her jet-black hair was intricately braided into a beautiful up-do and her eyes were ice-blue like the winter sky, her skin pale like cream. She wore a dark blue garment that further pronounced her eyes.

"Excuse me, miss, might you be Anna-Sophia Mason?" Bonnie asked hopefully.

A frown creased the girl's smooth brow. "I am she. Who's asking?"

"I am Bonnie Evans, and this here is my sister, Cassidy Evans. Carson is our brother."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both. Please call me Annie," the girl said with a warm smile.

Cassidy immediately too to her. Regardless of Carson's ire, she felt privileged to know such a kind woman.

"Where is Carson?" Annie asked glancing over their shoulders. "I'm quite nervous to meet him. I'm sure you understand."

"He's busy at the ranch," Bonnie answered quickly. "Asked us to meet you. You'll meet him when we get home."

Annie didn't question her explanation, and Cassidy couldn't decide whether buying themselves a little more time was good or bad. Bonnie grabbed the carpet bag and Cassidy led the way to the wagon. Her heart was racing a mile a minute. Right now Annie seemed like a kind and friendly girl, but she had a feeling once she knew the truth about the letters that had brought her to San Antonio, she might not be as friendly or as kind.

"How was your journey?" Cassidy asked, taking the reins.

"Long and tiring. But I'm glad I came. I never knew how big Texas was

or how pretty,” Annie said glancing over the landscape with a smile.

“Yep, it’s mighty big,” Bonnie answered casually before meeting Cassidy’s gaze.

“Carson mentioned he was a cattle rancher. I’ve never seen a cow up close, or a bull, for that matter.”

Cassidy merely smiled, knowing that right now her brother was even more dangerous than the bull he kept in the pasture behind the house.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10



7 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Annie was completely enamored by the beautiful landscape. Large outcrops of rocks with vast fields and lush green pastures. It was summer, the Texas rainy season, but she never knew it could be this beautiful.

She was tired after her train journey but just the fresh air and the company of Carson's sisters made her feel better already. Cassidy turned onto a smaller dirt road and in the distance Annie could see a log house standing proudly beside a barn. Her tummy fluttered nervously as she took in the sight of her new home. Once, it had been a proud and beautiful home, but had fallen into disrepair, but even that didn't detract from the imposing size or welcoming porch.

At first sight Annie knew that the Evans family must be struggling financially at the moment. Small things like the broken barn door and a few cracked slats on the porch railing hinted at this, but she didn't let that bother her. She'd rather live a simple life with peace and love than a life of extravagance with Damien.

She hadn't looked back since rushing out of the brownstone. With her jewelry box still safely tucked into her purse, she had everything she ever needed and in the next few minutes she would be meeting the wonderful man who had stolen her heart with his letters.

Cassidy stopped the wagon and looked over her shoulder at Bonnie. "I think it's best we do it now."

Bonnie sighed. "Yep. Best get it over with."

Curious, Annie glanced from Bonnie to Cassidy. "Do what?"

Cassidy sighed heavily. "Before we go home there is something we need to confess."

Annie frowned wondering what could be as foreboding as this sounded. "Is something wrong?"

Bonnie began sniffing even as Cassidy explained what they had done with slow, carefully chosen words. When they were finally done Annie's frown has deepened and hot tears burned behind her eyes.

"So you're saying Carson didn't write those letters?"

"No, it was us," Bonnie admitted in tears.

"And he doesn't want me here? I have nowhere else to go!" Annie exclaimed feeling as if her whole dream of a future had just imploded.

"We're real sorry. You're welcome to stay until you decide what you'd like to do. We'd pay for your fare back to Boston if that's what you decide."

Annie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Regardless of whether Carson was furious and had no interest in meeting her and that his sisters had lied and deceived Annie into traveling to the wild frontiers, she still couldn't fathom going back to Boston. If Damien found her...

She shook her head and took a deep breath. "I'll need some time... I don't know... I can't go back to Boston."

"We'll help you," Bonnie offered. "Maybe you can write to another man?"

Annie scoffed. "I think I'm done experimenting with the mail order bride

option.”

“We’re really sorry. We honestly didn’t think he’d be like this,” Cassidy admitted.

Annie cocked a brow. “You lied to him and to me. Did you honestly think it would work? Never mind.” Annie crossed her arms over her chest, feeling betrayed, dejected and more than anything hopeless as Cassidy guided the horse towards the barn.

She climbed out of the wagon and rushed from barn needing fresh air to gather her wits and to figure out the options available to her for the immediate future. It was then that she bumped into something tall and hard. Strong hands clasped her upper arms and steadied her.

Annie stood back and looked up. There was no doubt in her mind that he was just as furious as his sisters had described, but his blue eyes still caused her heart to skip a beat.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t look where I was going.” She fumbled over the words feeling as if the entire predicament was somehow solely her fault. Carson was taller than she expected. His thick hair was the color of sunshine, with sun bleached tips. His hat hung low over his brow as he took his time assessing her just as she was him.

He had a strong chiseled jaw, with a day or two’s growth on his cheeks. In her entire life amongst the socialites and upper class of Boston no man had ever made Annie’s knees grow weak like Carson Evans.

The only thought that crossed her mind was that it was a right shame that he hadn’t written those letters himself. Had he been the correspondent, Annie would probably have rushed into his arms.

CARSON CUSSED IN HIS MIND, but he didn’t utter a word as his eyes trailed over her face. He didn’t know her name, or even where she came from. All he knew was that never in his life had he ever looked into a woman’s eyes

and felt his heart skip a beat as it had done a heartbeat before. She was the prettiest thing this side of the Mason Dixon, of that Carson was sure. He didn't want to be attracted to her or feel guilty for the look of sadness on her face; none of what had happened was his fault. Cassidy and Bonnie were to blame, and he would do well to remind himself as such even as he remembered the feel of her soft skin beneath his fingers.

He wouldn't admit that curiosity had him coming to the barn shortly after he noticed the wagon arriving. He also wouldn't admit to anyone that right now he wanted nothing more to get to know the beautiful girl staring up him with the bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

"Best keep out of my way," Carson said gruffly as his sisters joined them.

"Carson, this is Annie Mason," Cassidy introduced quietly, the shame clear in her voice.

Annie, Carson thought, the name suited her. He didn't look at his sisters but kept his gaze on Annie who hadn't shrunk beneath his angry expression just as he had expected of her.

"I'll get out of your way," Annie said in a firm voice before stepping aside.

As she walked past him the scent of lavender and the freshness of spring floated over him. Carson didn't want to be affected but it was hard not to when she had given him the same cold gruff treatment he had just doled out on her.

His sisters both glared at him before rushing after Annie. When they were finally out of earshot, Carson let out the breath he hadn't been aware he was holding. He had no business liking this Annie-woman. For all he knew she might be a chancer, or a cheat come to steal his ranch right out from under him. He knew the thought might be a little far-fetched, but right now he didn't care. All he cared about was ignoring her and forgetting how her blue eyed gaze had pierced right through the barriers around his heart.

He finished the day's chores, but by the time he headed back to the house

he still couldn't seem to forget the striking beauty of the young girl. He stepped into the cabin and hung up his hat before seeing that his sisters were setting the table. Annie was nowhere to be seen and for a moment he felt regret wash over him that she'd left without him even knowing.

Just then she stepped out of the bedroom. She had probably taken a bath because instead of the dark blue travelling garment in which she had arrived, she now wore a light yellow cotton dress and her hair hung loose down her back in luscious curls. Carson cleared his throat and quickly turned away. He took a seat at the table and didn't say a word as the rest took their seats.

When his mother sat down she held out her hands. "Let's say grace."

Carson closed his eyes and listened to his mother's voice.

"Dear Lord, bless this food and the hands that prepared it. Thank You for this blessing of Annie's company, regardless of the circumstances that brought her to us. May you find forgiveness in Your heart for Bonnie and Cassidy's betrayal and we ask that You please keep the peace under this roof. Amen."

Carson couldn't help but suppress a smile. His mother might be ill and fading before their eyes, but she clearly hadn't lost her fire just yet. He glanced at his sisters who were both squirming in their seats.

"So Annie, tell us about Boston," Daphne invited, turning to their guest.

Annie shrugged. "It's colder than down here. I don't think I've ever been this hot in my entire life."

Daphne chuckled. "The heat has only begun."

Carson didn't say a word all through dinner despite his mother's attempts to make Annie feel at home. Every now and then he would look up at Annie. There was something about her that intrigued him, something that made him want to take a closer look.

But Carson vowed he wouldn't, even if it was just to prove a point to his meddling sisters.

CHAPTER 11



8 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Annie couldn't complain about the hospitality or the food she had received from all the members of the Evans family since her arrival, but she had never felt more unwelcome than when she caught Carson glaring at her with anger evident in his gaze.

She could understand that he was furious at his sisters, but didn't he understand that she wasn't there through any misdeed of her own? She had spent a restless night wishing she could be anywhere but two rooms away from the man who had made it perfectly clear that he didn't want her on his ranch.

Daphne, Bonnie and Cassidy had gone out of their way to make her feel welcome. Bonnie apologized every chance she got, and Cassidy promised she'd find a solution to the problems they had caused for Annie. But what solutions could there possibly be?

She couldn't go back to Boston, she had nowhere else to go, and the idea of corresponding with another man as a mail order bride was just preposterous. If she hadn't learned her lesson after what had just happened,

she never would. Daphne had been kind enough to offer her room and board for as long as she needed in order for her to decide on her next move, but that was the real problem, wasn't it?

What choices did she truly have? She had no money, so she couldn't afford to move into the boarding house in town. Such a small town as this could not possibly afford many work opportunities for a single woman from the city. Even if there were, Annie doubted they would hire a stranger from up north.

For all intent and purpose, she had just escaped one impossible situation only to be in another. From the pan into the fire, so to say. Breakfast was a rather tense affair with Carson barely speaking, and Bonnie being a little too obvious as she tried to compensate for his silence. Daphne wasn't feeling well and had remained in bed, and Cassidy was keeping Daphne company, making sure she ate something for breakfast.

A while after Carson headed out to start his day, Annie knew she needed some fresh air. She stepped out onto the porch and couldn't help but notice how worn it was by time and weather. She stood on the porch looking out over the ranch and drew in a deep breath. Regardless of how hopeless her situation was she couldn't help but appreciate the setting. Far up on a hill she could see cattle grazing in the fields. Her heart simply skipped a beat when she saw a horse darting across the field with Carson on its back. The man looked as powerful as the majestic beast beneath him.

Annie shook her head knowing it was foolish to be attracted to a man who had made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with her. Worse still was the awareness that she couldn't even blame him.

The night before, when the house had grown quiet except for the settling sounds as the temperatures fell, she had read over all the letters again by candlelight. She wanted to be furious with herself for not realizing that she was corresponding with women, but the girls had done it so well that she couldn't even tell now that she knew.

A heavy sigh escaped her when she noticed a gate leading into a paddock. She simply had to clear her mind. She needed fresh air and most of all she needed a little distance from Bonnie and Cassidy. Although both girls were deeply regretful of their actions, Annie alternated between being furious and wanting to thank them for helping her to escape Damien's horrid campaign to make her his wife.

She gathered the skirts of her pastel pink dress and crossed the yard in the direction of the paddock. A slight incline led to a rocky outcrop which Annie decided would make the perfect spot to consider her future. She had her mother's brooch and necklace which she could sell should she have no other alternative. But where would she go, she contemplated silently with a frown as she walked through the field.

Here and there wildflowers bloomed bringing a smile to her face. Annie picked one and inhaled its sweet scent before turning her face upwards to the sun. The rays warmed her skin and for a just a moment she forgot where she was and about the man who didn't want her there.

She let out a contented sigh. "Thank You, Lord, for saving me from Damien. I know You have plans for my future, but can I ask that You reveal them to me. I can't stay here; I can't be here knowing that Carson hates me." Her prayer was suddenly cut short by an overwhelming thundering noise. At first only the curiosity made her turn around.

But it was fear that clutched her heart like a vice and terror that made her eyes widen. Apparently, within seconds Carson would no longer have the unwanted visitor on his ranch, was the only thought that came to mind as Annie realized the cause of the thundering sound.

The largest animal she's ever seen in her life was charging directly at her. Its face was formed into a clear imagine of anger, its shoulders bunched even as its legs kept eating the distance between it and her. If Annie had ever wondered why they called it a raging bull, she now knew the reason. Its fearsome horns would make short work of her. Annie glanced all around her

but realized she was standing almost precisely in the middle of the paddock. There was no way she could outrun the angry beast.

Her heart began to race. She had heard people talk of their life flashing before their eyes when faced with death. For Annie, only thing came to mind and that was how she had travelled all the way from Boston to die on the ranch of a man who didn't even want her there in the first place.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she had to move. She knew she had to do something, but her body was frozen with paralyzing fear. Her heart raced, her breath coming in short bursts as the bull came ever closer.

Suddenly with the bull still charging directly at her and now only a few yards away, Annie felt something wrap around her waist before she was flung into the air. Her first thought was that she had not been aware of a second bull, but when she was flung onto her rear end, face to face with Carson, she didn't know whether to cry out or to fight.

She did neither. She held on for dear life, clamping her arms around his waist with every ounce of strength she had even as she watched the bull race after them from over Carson's shoulder.

"Hang on!" Carson shouted.

Annie was about to ask why when the horse leapt into the air clearing the fence, and for a second they were flying. Just as suddenly the horse's hooves thundered onto the ground and Carson pulled on the reins, bringing the horse to a halt.

Annie still couldn't seem to move. She felt Carson slowly unclamp her hands before meeting her gaze. His eyes were dark, the color of the sky before a midnight storm, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

She heard the bull huff, stomping the ground in anger because his quarry had escaped him, but she didn't look away from Carson's face.

His hand reached up and he gently brushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Are you alright?" his voice was hoarse, but kind.

Annie nodded, her heart still racing, but she wasn't sure now whether it

was caused by the near escape from the bull or the man searching her gaze.

Their eyes held for a moment and the rest of the world disappeared. The bull, the horse breathing heavily beneath them, even the cries of concern coming from Cassidy and Bonnie who had rushed outside when they realized what was going on.

Carson dropped his hand to his side and broke the gaze before he swung himself off the horse. Almost instantly the horse began shuffling, trying to dislodge the weight that remained on its back. Carson reached up and lifted her down to the ground. Annie had never felt as confused about a man as she was right now. The way he looked at her made her heart swell but the words that spilled from his mouth were pure anger.

“Are you crazy? You could have been killed. That bull’s a monster. Why do you think I keep him separate? This is a workin’ ranch. You can’t go around sniffin’ about without knowin’ what’s what. You hear?” Carson all but shouted.

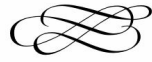
Annie still had enough adrenalin coursing through her veins to keep her from shriveling beneath his anger. She tilted her chin upwards and met him head on. “At least then I would no longer be your problem.”

Carson’s brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

Annie shrugged. “You could have just let that bull take care of me. That way I would be out of your way.”

Before waiting for his answer Annie turned on her heel and walked away. She didn’t thank him for saving her life, because it was clear that he was already regretting it. What Carson also seemed to be forgetting was that she was as much a victim of this situation as he was.

CHAPTER 12



15 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

She'd been on his ranch for a week. For a whole week Carson couldn't seem to turn anywhere without seeing her. She clouded his mind and made him alternate between being furious and feeling guilty for being angry.

It wasn't her fault that she was stuck on this ranch, it was the fault of Bonnie and Cassidy. But Carson couldn't seem to remind himself of that when his heart skipped a beat whenever he looked at her or when his breath simply caught when she smiled at his sisters.

She was a nuisance, another mouth to feed and another burden on his mother's shoulders. A frown creased Carson's brow as he crossed the yard towards the house. Was he imagining it, or had his mother been spending considerably less time in bed since Annie's arrival? He pushed the thought aside, reminding himself that his mother went through periods of improvement as a matter of course, only to deteriorate to a worse condition after every short reprieve.

Regardless of his sisters' promises to find a way to deal with their

mistake, Annie still had no plans to leave, to the best of Carson's knowledge, anyway. He scuffed his boot in the dirt and spat out a wad of chew tobacco before he ascended the porch. Today he was going to change all that. Somewhere in town had to be someone who would hire a girl from Boston.

"I'm headin' to town. Need some maize for the chickens and a few other things. I'll be back later," he called out before grabbing his money bag. As he opened the door, Annie spoke out from behind him.

"Can I join you?"

Carson turned with a heavy frown. "What? I'm goin' to the feed store. I'm not goin' to high tea. You best stay here and inside before you find your death. The rattlers are out," he said by way of warning, but Annie didn't back down.

"If I remember correctly the fabric merchant isn't far from the feed store. I won't be long, but I do need a few things from there," Annie said firmly.

Carson shook his head. "Fabric? What you need fabric for?"

"I'm making dresses for your sisters. They have their childhood dresses we're repurposing, but I need a few things."

"I ain't payin' for no buttons," he warned through clenched teeth.

"You won't have to. I have a little money left that I can use."

"Bonnie, you comin'?" Carson called out, realizing his well laid plans for the day were falling to pieces. With Annie accompanying him, he couldn't exactly ask around for employment opportunities for her.

"No, I gotta do the laundry and Cassidy's takin' care of Ma," Bonnie called back.

Carson let out a huff before calling over his shoulder. "I leave in a few minutes. You ain't on the wagon, you ain't goin'."

Now he had to take the wagon instead of his horse, Carson thought as he crossed to the barn. Apart from being directly rude he didn't have much choice but to let her accompany him.

The ride into town was quiet except for the creaking of the wagon.

Carson stopped by the fabric merchant and helped Annie off, simply because his mother had taught him good manners. Then he headed to the feed store. He dealt with his business quickly and then prepared himself for a long wait, but when he reached the fabric merchant, Annie was already standing outside holding a brown bag.

She jumped into the wagon without saying a word. Carson snapped the reins and started for home.

After a while it was Annie who broke the silence. “If I knew, I never would have come.”

“Why don’t you go back?” Carson bit back.

Annie turned to him with a curious frown. “You’re right. I should go back to the stepfather who raised me as his own daughter and then decided to make me his wife after my mother passed. It’s completely ridiculous of me not to be grateful for his affections.”

Carson’s jaw all but dropped. He pulled on the reins and turned to Annie with a frown. “Your step-father wanted to take you for his wife?”

Annie shrugged but looked away. Carson could see the shadows in her eyes. “Yes.”

He shook his head. “I see now why you can’t go back. Why didn’t you report him?”

“He’s a prominent man in Boston. I don’t know how things work in San Antonio, but in Boston it’s not what you know but who you know. He gambles with the law every night and drinks with the judge. Even had a pastor lined up for the wedding.”

Carson stared off into the distance and realized that Annie really had nowhere else to be. He couldn’t help but feel slightly guilty for not wanting her on his ranch. “I didn’t know...”

“Just like I didn’t know your sisters lied. Don’t worry, Carson, I won’t be a burden to you for long. I just need to figure out my next step. The merchant at the fabric store said I might be able to do some sewing for him from time

to time. You can have the money to pay for my keep.”

“I don’t want your money,” Carson said with a sigh. “Save it for... for whatever.”

Annie shrugged. “It’s still yours.”

He glanced at her and knew that he had underestimated her. She had found work for herself and although Carson knew it wouldn’t pay much, she was still willing to take it on.

He let out a heavy sigh. “Just... stay away from the bull’s paddock. You can help my sisters with their chores while you’re here. You’re welcome to stay until you decide where you’re headed. I won’t give you anymore grief over it.”

There, he said it, although deep down he had a feeling he didn’t want her to leave.

Annie’s eyes widened. “And here I thought you and your bull were cut from the same cloth. Carson, you surprise me.”

Carson couldn’t help but chuckle. “Don’t worry, it won’t happen again. There’s water in the bottle if you’d like some.”

This time Annie laughed. “And yet you just surprised me again. Careful, I might think you’re actually a friendly man instead of a heartless rancher.”

Carson smiled as he took the reins. “Careful, we can’t let word get out.”

Their eyes met and for the first time since Annie arrived Carson allowed himself to enjoy her company. Instead of berating her presence, he learned about her love of sewing, her prowess on the piano, and how, regardless of all that had happened in her life, her love for God was evident in every word she spoke.

When they finally reached the ranch, Carson knew he had to guard his heart closer than ever before, because somewhere between San Antonio and his ranch Annie had slipped beneath his defenses.

CHAPTER 13



25 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

The girls were in the kitchen peeling potatoes while Daphne rested. Bonnie and Cassidy were chatting up a storm about the visitors they expected that night, but Annie didn't join in the idle conversation. Instead her attention was riveted by Carson who was outside grooming his stallion. In the few weeks since her arrival on the Evans ranch Annie had learned a few facts about the ranching life.

Firstly, a stallion was as good as a wild horse. Instinct could take over at any moment and its rider could be catapulted as a result. Carson preferred riding his stallion to the other geldings in the barn. Secondly, Annie had learned to always watch where she was going. A rattler, coyote or even a scorpion could surprise the unsuspecting with a lethal bite or sting if due care was not taken.

Thirdly, she had learned that Carson was the biggest mystery on the Evans ranch. A little more than a week before she had thought she had felt a connection to him. When they had returned home from town they had spoken freely after Annie had broken the ice. For a moment she had seen a different

side of Carson. The side his sisters had lured her with through their letters. But as soon as they lowered over the ridge towards the ranch he had become sullen and withdrawn.

He was as unpredictable as the summer thunder showers that tempered the great Texas plains. Worse still was knowing that if she allowed herself the slightest chance she might just be able to fall in love with him. Something about the way in which he looked at her, about the way in which he cared for his sisters and the loving way in which he spoke to his mother appealed to her. Carson was a good man, of that there wasn't a single doubt in her mind. But the hard fact she had to face was that Carson didn't want to be her man.

A sigh escaped her just as Bonnie cried out beside her. "There they come!"

Annie glanced in the direction in which Bonnie was pointing to see a sizeable herd of cattle crossing the ridge in the distance. Behind them rode three men on horseback, keeping the herd together.

The sight was amazing: nature versus man. Her breath caught without even realizing it. When Carson had mentioned a few days earlier that cattle drivers who were friends of his, would be coming through today and spending the night on the ranch, she had imagined a few men with a few head of cattle. Not the large herd they now drove straight into an empty paddock with the skill she hadn't even imagined ever seeing in her lifetime.

Cassidy laughed. "They come through every year and every year I'm gob smacked by it."

"Where are they taking the cattle?" Annie asked as she placed the potatoes in a pot on the wood stove.

"Auction in Fort Worth. Young steers being sold for beef."

One man waved to the other two before he set off on a gallop on the road towards town, leaving the remaining two men to head for the house.

She watched the men greet each other and when Carson turned to glance at the house with a smile, her heart skipped a beat. When was her heart going

to accept that Carson wasn't interested in her at all?

"Right, the stew just needs to simmer now. Let's go say hello," Cassidy announced after checking on the pot.

Annie followed the sisters outside where the men were catching up.

"Hello, Tom! Hiya, Pinkerton," Bonnie called out with a broad smile.

Carson turned to look at them and Annie felt a blush sweep across her cheeks. Tom and Pinkerton met the girls at the base of the porch.

"Bonnie, you're becoming a woman right before me very eyes," Pinkerton said with a smile. "I still remember when you trailed after me when you were barely knee high."

Bonnie cringed. "Pinkerton, you're seven years older than me, not seventy."

Annie couldn't help but wonder if Bonnie was interested in Pinkerton.

"Bonnie, Cassidy, it only takes one look at you ladies to know why Carson is always ready with his shotgun."

Both men turned to Annie with questioning looks before turning to Carson for an explanation.

Carson took off his hat and dragged a hand through his hair. "This is Annie."

"Annie? It's a pleasure to meet ya. We didn't know you went and got yerself a wife," Tom said, shaking Annie's hand.

Annie and Carson both shook their heads. "We're not... I'm visiting." Annie clarified. "Bonnie and Cassidy. I'm visiting them."

Pinkerton's face lit up. "That's the best news I've heard all year. Is that accent from up north?"

Annie nodded. "It is. Boston, to be precise. Where are you gentlemen from?"

Tom slapped a hand on his knee. "Never been called a gentleman before. Cattle rustler, rancher, ranch hand and even some more inappropriate words at times, but never a gentleman." Tom took Annie's hand and pressed a kiss

to it. "Me lady."

Annie blushed and stepped back.

Carson cast her an angry look. "Shouldn't you check on the stew?"

His demand was the first of many for the rest of the evening. Annie found Tom and Pinkerton's stories delightful, just as Bonnie and Cassidy did, but whenever either man flattered her or asked her a question, Carson would gruffly order her to do something.

By the time they had finished dinner, Annie's temper was slowly starting to simmer. She checked on Daphne as Carson had asked her to and wondered what could be ailing his mother. Although Bonnie mentioned that her mother was ill, no one knew the exact nature of her ailment. Surely she should have recovered from fever of the lung if she suffered it a year before.

She took a seat on one of the big rocks situated around the fire and listened as Tom and Pinkerton told them about fighting off a pack of wolves the night before. "Only lost one steer," Pinkerton concluded proudly.

Bonnie shook her head in amazement. "We nearly lost Annie. She thought to pay the bull a visit. When the bull came charging, it was mere luck that Carson was headed her way and saved her."

Tom chuckled under his breath before smiling broadly at Annie. He was attractive in a rugged sort of way, but his smile didn't make her heart skip a beat in the way that Carson's did. "Can't blame the bull, though, a pretty lady like Annie doesn't come across your path every day."

Annie felt a blush color her cheeks as Pinkerton suddenly spoke at her side. "Say Annie, want to take a walk with me? I haven't had time to appreciate this starry night."

Before Annie could agree Carson got up and glared at her. "Shouldn't you be getting to bed?"

Annie frowned. "Bed? What?"

Carson grabbed her arm and all but dragged her from the group. "Get inside and stay there."

Annie crossed her arms. “You’re nothing to me. You don’t tell me what to do. Why should I go to bed if your sisters are still there?”

“You’re livin’ on my land, my word is law. Get inside,” Carson ordered in a lowered voice, but Annie wouldn’t be intimidated.

“No. I won’t go inside. You’re rude, arrogant and self-important if you think I’m going to jump at your bidding. The whole night you’ve been ordering me around like a servant girl. I’m not your servant or your girl,” she said with her chin jutted out.

For a moment she expected Carson to drag her over his knee such was the fire blazing in his gaze. Annie turned to rejoin the group but Carson all but picked her up and set her down on the porch, blocking her way down. “I told ya to ‘git inside,” he said firmly.

Annie clenched her fists ready to fight her way through, but something in Carson’s eyes made her clench her teeth, spin on her heel and head inside.

She huffed for about an hour before she finally came to the conclusion that he must be ashamed of her. Did she embarrass him in front of his friends? She knew he didn’t like her but surely she wasn’t such bad company. Annie cried herself to sleep wishing she had never come to Texas in the first place. She had dreamed of a new future and instead she had only found lies and a man who had stolen her heart and refused to even look at her twice.

Perhaps marrying Damien would have been a better option after all.

She had no place to go, but perhaps if she sold the brooch and the necklace she could at least get a room in town and try to find work. The last thing that crossed her mind before sleep lulled her under was that she needed to get off the ranch. She had already wasted almost a month of her life and she was no closer to finding the answers for her future. Perhaps it was time she started taking action in the hopes that maybe then everything would fall into place.

A SHORT WHILE later Cassidy and Bonnie retired to their room. As soon as the door was closed furious whispers could be heard. “What was going on with Carson and Annie? He seemed ready to skin her,” Bonnie asked.

Cassidy shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen him that angry before. I know she didn’t do anythin’ wrong.”

“Unless,” Bonnie said with the start of a smile. “Tom and Pinkerton were enjoying her company, weren’t they? Perhaps a little too much.”

Cassidy frowned. “What are you saying?”

Bonnie chuckled softly. “I’m saying, I think our brother who insists he is immune to love, might just have been jealous. Do you think he likes her?”

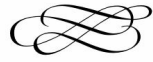
“He barely talks to her,” Cassidy said shaking her head.

“Exactly. Maybe he’s afraid if he talks to her he’ll like her even more,” Bonnie reasoned.

Cassidy laughed. “You’re over tired and spouting nonsense. Get to bed.”

Bonnie did get into bed, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Carson’s behavior over the last few weeks was nothing if not out of character. Her brother had never been in love and perhaps that was why he was acting so strangely. He might still be angry at them for interceding and finding him a wife, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t falling in love. She said a prayer for God to open Carson’s heart and eyes before she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

CHAPTER 14



27 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Carson had spent the rest of the evening enduring a teasing from Tom and Pinkerton. When he had returned to the bonfire it was Tom who called him out. “Afraid we’re gonna steal yer girl?”

Carson had laughed off the comment, not even bothering to reply, but Tom’s words had him lying awake all night. Ever since Annie had arrived on the ranch he had been focused only on the reason for her being there, not once did he allow himself to admit that he liked her.

He had plenty on his mind over the last few weeks and didn’t bother with taking a closer look at Annie. No one knew about the man who had come to see Carson a few months before. Carson had made sure to keep that news and the demand to himself. It had come as a shock to him to learn how much debt his father had racked up before his death. Carson remembered the drought and he also remembered the pained look on his father’s face, but he had thought it was simply due to his father’s ailing health. Never had his father mentioned the loan he had taken with a bank in Fort Worth.

It had taken the bank almost two years to find Carson and the ranch and

now they weren't backing off. He hadn't spent too many nights lying awake about it because he hoped the man from the bank wouldn't return.

Instead he focused on raising the steers and hoping for a good price on the hoof when he took them to auction.

Last night when Tom and Pinkerton had made their interest in Annie clear as daylight, a strange feeling had come over Carson. He had spent the night tossing and turning with images of her smile and her blue eyes haunting him. When his sisters had announced their deception, Carson had been so intent on proving them wrong that he hadn't once considered that Annie might be just what he was looking for in a wife.

It had taken Tom's comment to bring him out of denial. Somewhere between the early morning hours and dawn, Carson finally admitted to himself that he liked Annie. He had tried so hard not to like her and to see her as a nuisance, but Annie had been nothing but a pleasure to have around. Apart from her help with the chores, his mother even seemed to be healthier.

Faced with the feelings he had tried so hard not to allow, Carson still had no idea how he was going to move forward. Perhaps if he stopped being short and gruff with her and actually took the time to get to know her better...

He brushed off the thought and got to work. After seeing Tom and Pinkerton off he had a lot to do. Annie ignored him over breakfast and when he returned for dinner she had already retired to her room. Carson couldn't help but feel guilty for treating her badly the night before. He considered going to talk to her but squashed the idea as soon as it took hold. The last thing he needed now was for his mother and sisters to see him grovel. Instead, he turned in early, knowing it was going to be another long night.

When he woke up the following morning, he heard footsteps in the kitchen. A frown creased his brow, he was always up first. His heart began to race with thoughts of matters being amiss with his mother. He dressed in record time and rushed into the kitchen only to find Annie sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and a look of total defeat.

Carson's heart clenched in his chest as he moved towards her. From the corner of his eyes he saw the carpet bag and purse near the front door and his heart began to race.

"Annie?"

Annie looked up to meet his gaze. "Don't worry, I won't be a burden to you any longer."

"What do you mean?" Carson asked. His heart filled with fear. She couldn't leave, not now that he had realized his strong feelings for her.

Annie stood up and cocked a brow. There was none of the fire in her eyes that Carson had started to look forward to. A smile curved his mouth as he realized that somehow he had fallen in love with Annie. Although they had mostly argued and sparred over the last few weeks, she had snuck beneath his defenses and somehow found a place for herself in his heart.

Annie let out a sigh. "Carson, I know you don't want me here. None of this is your fault and it's wrong of me to expect you to feed and board me, regardless of what your sisters did. If you could just give me a ride into town..."

Carson frowned. "Where will you go?"

Annie shrugged. "I don't know. I'll figure that out somehow." She glanced out the window and Carson realized he was at a crossroads. He couldn't let her leave. Not now that he had realized how he felt about her.

"What if you don't leave?" Carson asked a little hesitantly. He couldn't help but feel nervous as he waited for her reply.

"I'm sure you'll understand that I don't enjoy being a burden any more than you enjoy me being here."

Carson nodded. He wasn't sure of his feelings and perhaps the best thing for Annie to do was to find someone who would love her without hesitation. He had the ranch, the debt and his family to think about. "I'll ready the wagon."

A short while later they were on their way into town. Bonnie, Cassidy and

his mother had been tearful when they said goodbye. It nearly broke Carson's heart but he didn't even know if Annie liked him. She said not a word all the way to town.

By the time they reached the station, Carson couldn't help but notice the sad look in her eyes.

"Thank you," Annie said as she began to climb off.

"Don't go." The words fell from Carson's mouth before he even considered them.

Annie turned to him with a questioning look. "Why? You don't want me on the ranch. Don't ask me to stay out of guilt, Carson. I'll... I'll be alright," she finished with a sigh.

Carson took a deep breath and knew in that moment that he couldn't let her go. He searched her face and couldn't help but wonder how he had fallen in love with her without even realizing it. "I'm not asking out of guilt. I'm asking because I was a fool."

Annie's eyes widened with confusion. "What are you saying?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Carson's mouth. "I'm saying I was a darn fool. Instead of thanking my sisters for finding me a beautiful, smart and witty wife, I tried to prove them wrong. All I managed to do was prove that my stubbornness won't bring me happiness."

Annie didn't speak, but nor did she move.

Carson reached for her hand. "The moment I laid eyes on you I knew you were going to be trouble. When I saved you from the bull, I refused to admit I liked you. But last night it took my friends to make the blinders fall from my eyes. I..." Carson swallowed. He had never said the words before and wasn't sure if he was doing this right. "Annie, I've fallen in love with you. Stay, because I'd like you to be my wife.... That is if you feel the same way."

Annie's eyes were shuttered, not revealing the slightest emotion as she held his gaze. "You've been nothing but rude, angry and irritable with me for weeks. Why should I believe you now?"

Carson shrugged with a foolish grin. “Because I didn’t want to admit Cassidy and Bonnie had done good.”

A small smile played on the corners of her mouth. “You want me to stay?”

“I want you to stay,” Carson agreed. “Maybe if I stop being rude, angry and irritable you might even come to like me.”

Annie’s face lit up with joy as she shook her head. “You big oaf! I’ve liked you from the first time I saw you. Just didn’t figure you needed to know since you were so intent on being rude to me.”

Carson’s heart skipped a beat. “Do you like me enough to be my wife?”

Annie considered for a moment before she finally let out a sigh of joy. “I’d like nothing more.”

CHAPTER 15



27 June 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Annie's heart felt as if it would explode from her chest at any minute and do a dance of happiness. Since the first moment she met Carson she had known the circumstances that had brought her to San Antonio didn't matter; she had lost her heart on him right there and then.

But over the last month she had been certain he didn't share her feelings. She had tried to win him over, but it had become clear to her on the night his friends had stopped by that Carson had never felt the same way. She searched his eyes and saw none of the condescension or anger there that had been aimed at her over the last month.

Her smile cut into her cheeks as she realized that he was indeed the man Cassidy and Bonnie had described in their letters. "Wait, Cassidy and Bonnie?" Annie said.

Carson frowned. "What about them? They're going to be ecstatic. You'd better prepare yourself; they're going to remind us that they brought us together for the rest of our lives."

Annie laughed before shaking her head. "Not if we pull a fast one on

them first.”

“What do you have in mind?” Carson asked with a frown.

Annie smiled as she leaned forward and explained her plan to Carson. By the time they headed back to the ranch neither could stop talking. They were catching up for the month they had lost and dreaming of the future they would share. If Annie had thought her future looked bleak that morning, she now knew it would be as bright as the Texas sun.

When they arrived together on the ranch, both Cassidy and Bonnie rushed out to meet them.

“You’re staying?” Bonnie asked hopefully.

Annie shook her head. “No. The train is only coming tomorrow. Your brother was kind enough to let me stay another night.”

Cassidy and Bonnie both nodded dejectedly and headed back into the house. As soon as they were alone, Carson turned to Annie with a wicked grin. “Do you know how hard it was to keep from smiling?”

Annie giggled. “I do.”

Carson framed her face and leaned closer before he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I can’t believe I almost let you go.”

Annie’s heart swelled in her chest. “You didn’t, and that’s all that matters now.”

They headed into the house, both making sure they wore their angry expressions. It was Carson who asked his mother to join them in the living room for an announcement.

The sisters sat down, hopeful of the news Carson was going to deliver. Daphne glanced at Annie, but Annie didn’t say a word, she just winked. Confusion dawned in Daphne’s eyes as Carson began to speak.

“I’ve decided that this ranch will never be able to feed as many mouths as are gathered here. Ma, you know you’ll always have a home here. But Bonnie, Cassidy, it’s time you found yourselves husbands.”

Cassidy frowned. “It’s not like we haven’t tried, Carson. There is no one.

Surely you don't expect us to marry ranch hands and highwaymen?"

"Besides, we do our share of the chores," Bonnie quickly argued.

Carson shook his head. "I'm takin' a wife and plan on havin' many children."

Smiles lit up throughout the room as Cassidy and Bonnie rushed to Annie. "Is it true?"

Annie couldn't stop the smile that spread on her face. "It's true. We're getting married in a fortnight."

Daphne quietly began to cry. "I knew it. I just knew Carson loved you, he was just too stubborn to admit it."

"That brings me to the matter of finding you both husbands," Carson said in a firm voice. "Annie and I have arranged for both of you to become mail order brides. The advertisements have been placed and will be circulated through the west within a week."

"That's outrageous!" Cassidy exclaimed.

Annie tried her best to keep her smile in check.

"You can't be serious? Carson, we were only trying to help you and it worked. Surely you can't banish us for that?" Bonnie asked with a sullen expression.

Carson shook his head. "It's final. The first proposal you receive, you'll accept."

"Carson!" Daphne exclaimed suddenly. Everyone kept quiet and turned to Daphne who barely ever said a word. "That's a brilliant plan."

Annie wanted to kiss Daphne for playing along.

"I hate you!" Bonnie cried out.

"You wouldn't..." Cassidy said shaking her head.

Carson glanced at Annie who simply nodded. Carson shrugged. "You're right, I wouldn't, but if you ever interfere in my life again, I might."

Silence hung over the room as both sisters considered themselves chastened before Daphne spoke up again. "You girls can start on dinner and

you'll be responsible for the wedding feast as well.”

Laughter floated on the summer's breeze that drifted past the cabin as celebrations could be heard all round. But inside the cabin Annie didn't care about anything, all she cared about was the handsome man looking at her with love in his eyes.

“Annie, care to go for a walk?”

Annie smiled. “I'd like that very much.”

Carson took her hand and led her out of the cabin, and for the first time since leaving Boston, Annie knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16



10 July 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Carson and Cassidy headed into town on the day before the wedding. Cassidy wanted to get a few things for the wedding feast and Carson wanted to check with the preacher about the time of the service.

The last week had brought new life to the ranch. Their mother hardly ever took to bed. Carson wasn't sure if it was the upcoming wedding that had lifted her spirits or if God had finally heard his prayers to heal his mother, but either way, he didn't care. He was just grateful that his mother no longer slept her days away, waiting for the angel of death to come and get her.

Cassidy and Bonnie were in just as high spirits. Annie had been sewing night and day to make new dresses for everyone for the wedding. Carson still couldn't believe he had almost let Annie leave San Antonio just because he was stubborn. Over the last two weeks he had come to know a different side of her, a side that made him fall even deeper in love with her.

For a man who never considered marrying or having children, Carson was now very eager to become a husband. He couldn't wait to have children with Annie or to share the rest of his life with her. He had been so consumed

with joy that he had completely forgotten about the bank in Fort Worth until a man stopped him in the thoroughfare in town.

“Mr. Evans. Glad to find you here, spares me a trip out to your ranch.” The man glanced at Cassidy before turning back to Carson. “Can I speak freely?”

“Carson, who is this man?” Cassidy asked with a confused look. They didn’t know any pompous-suit wearing men.

Carson sighed. “Cassidy, this is Mr. White. Mr. White, my sister, Cassidy.”

“Mr. White?” Cassidy asked, shaking his hand briefly.

“Ah, you’re Carson’s sister, which means this concerns you as well. As I explained to your brother last month, the bank is calling in your father’s debt. It’s been two years since your father passed and we have received no repayments. According to our knowledge your ranch will fetch a handsome price with the cattle industry booming at present.”

Cassidy turned to Carson with a frown. “Carson, what is he talking about?”

Carson let out a sigh. He had tried his best to keep this from his family, but they were going to find out sooner rather than later. “Pa had a loan with the bank during the drought. Since we didn’t know about it, we didn’t pay it. They’re calling it in before we can go to auction.”

“If you’ve waited two years, surely you can wait till the auction, it’s only three months away.”

Mr. White smiled grimly. “We’ve waited long enough. Two weeks, Mr. Evans, then we foreclose on the ranch.”

“Surely we must be able to do something. You can’t just take our ranch!” Cassidy exclaimed not caring who heard her.

Mr. White shrugged and named a ridiculous amount of money. “If you pay that before the two weeks are over we might be able to settle on a payment plan again. But that’s the outstanding payments due to us.”

Cassidy's eyes glassed over at the amount and Carson just sighed. "We'll never be able raise that, you know it."

Mr. White's smile broadened. "I'll see you in two weeks, Mr. Evans. Make sure you're packed."

He climbed into his stagecoach and left Cassidy and Carson in the street, flummoxed by the doom he had just pronounced.

Cassidy turned to Carson shaking her head. "You knew?"

"He came by the ranch last month while you were in town. I didn't want to worry Ma."

"Carson, we're going to lose the ranch."

Carson nodded. "We've got two weeks. Just don't tell Bonnie, Ma or Annie before the wedding."

Cassidy shook her head. "Carson, you can't keep this from them."

"Just till after the wedding. We'll figure somethin' out," Carson assured his sister, but he didn't have the faintest idea where to start. Two years of debt payments were impossible to repay in two weeks. He had two sisters and a mother and after tomorrow he would also have a wife to take care of and nowhere to raise his steers for the auction.

They drove back to the ranch in silence.

CHAPTER 17



11 July 1882, San Antonio, Texas

Annie stood in front of the church and drew in a deep breath. She wore the white dress Cassidy had helped her sew, and on it was her mother's brooch and around her neck she wore her mother's necklace. She hadn't felt this close to her mother since the morning her mother had gifted her the jewelry on her death bed. Carson and Daphne were already inside the chapel, but Annie waited outside for their signal along with her bridesmaids, Cassidy and Bonnie.

It was the happiest day of her life and yet this morning a dark cloud had settled over her. She had gone to find Cassidy only to find the sisters in deep hushed conversation. It had taken them a moment before they revealed the cause of their worry to Annie.

She had finally found the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Carson was exactly the man she had dreamed of marrying, and she knew she would never regret coming to San Antonio. In fact she had thanked Cassidy and Bonnie for acting on their brother's behalf numerous times over the last two weeks. They were as happy as could be and today they would be

married, but in two weeks they would be homeless.

Annie swallowed past the lump in her throat as the preacher opened the large ornate wooden doors to the chapel. "We're ready."

Annie smiled knowing she was doing the right thing, but she couldn't help but feel that her life was doomed. Why did it seem the bad luck followed her wherever she went? The girls had insisted Carson shouldn't know they had told her about his financial troubles, but it weighed heavily on her mind.

She reached for the pearl necklace and took a deep breath as she started down the aisle. A quick glance over shoulder at Cassidy and Bonnie warmed her heart. They might have interfered and fooled her by luring her to San Antonio, but she had never been more grateful to them. Cassidy wore a pale purple dress that suited her complexion perfectly. Bonnie wore a light blue dress of the same style which she insisted she would keep forever. Although they weren't family yet, Cassidy and Bonnie already felt like the sisters she had never had.

Annie turned back and glanced towards the front of the church. Although there was a heavy cloud over the joy of their wedding day, Annie's heart swelled with love.

Carson stood at the front of the church with the preacher by his side. He had bought a new suit for the occasion and he had never looked more handsome that he did right now. The smile on his face revealed the love he had declared for her that morning in front of the train station. Annie's heart fluttered in her chest knowing that God would help them find a way, when suddenly a thought occurred to her.

For the first time Annie really smiled on her wedding day, because she had a plan to save the ranch and her future with Carson. The ceremony was short, but so heartfelt that Daphne dabbed at her eyes numerous times as the preacher read words from the scripture about love and two souls becoming one.

By the time the preacher announced them man and wife, Annie was giddy

with excitement to share her plan with Carson. They walked out of the church as husband and wife and as soon as they stopped outside, Annie knew it was time to tell her new husband that she could save the ranch.

“I can’t believe we’re married,” Carson said looking at her lovingly.

Annie smiled broadly. “Neither can I. Carson...” Annie glanced at Cassidy and Bonnie who stood beside their mother. “I know you didn’t want me to know, at least not yet, but I know about the bank in Fort Worth calling in their loan.”

Carson’s eyes darkened as he looked to Cassidy. “I asked you not to ruin this day.”

Annie shook her head. “It’s not ruined. In fact, it’s saved.” She undid the clasp on the necklace and took off the brooch before handing them to Carson. “Our future is on the ranch. It’s where your father wanted you to raise your family. Use this to save the ranch.”

Carson took a step back. “Annie, you told me yourself that’s all you have left of your mother.”

Annie smiled and stepped forward, dropping them in his hands. “Carson, my mother wanted me to be happy. You make me happy. I have no doubt that she would have agreed if selling these could secure our future, I should do it.”

Cassidy and Bonnie stepped closer and looked at Annie. “Are you sure?” Cassidy asked.

Annie nodded. “I am.”

“Annie, we can’t expect you to pay our debts,” Daphne said from beside her.

“I agree. We got ourselves into this mess and we’ll find a way out. Even if that means we lose the ranch,” Carson insisted.

Annie shook her head before she stepped forward and framed Carson’s face. “Carson, we’re married now. What’s mine is yours. If you won’t sell them, just point me in the direction of the closest merchant and I’ll sell them

myself.”

Carson let out a heavy sigh before giving Annie a smacking kiss. “I knew you were too good to be true.”

Annie laughed. “That might be so, but I promise you I do have my flaws.”

Carson shook his head. “I doubt that very much because right now you’re my hero.”

“Come, let’s take it to old Simon over at the general store. He’ll give us a good price for them,” Bonnie piped up. “He’s been a friend of the family for years.”

Together, the Evans family headed to the general store. Wedding celebrations could wait. Right now they had a ranch to save and a means to do it.

CHAPTER 18



12 July 1882, San Antonio, Texas

*I*ndeed, old Simon was a very good friend of the family. Good enough to tell Carson that he could not afford jewelry of that caliber. After much debate and back and forth on how they could use the jewels to save the ranch, Simon finally offered up an idea. He had a friend on the East Coast who traded in jewelry of high quality. He promised to send his friend a telegram to ask whether he might be in a position to sell it on their behalf. In the meantime he urged Annie to produce the will as proof that she owned the jewels.

They had returned to the ranch and enjoyed a small wedding feast, but everyone was clearly preoccupied wondering whether Simon would be able to help them sell the jewels that would save the ranch. Cassidy and Bonnie moved Annie's belongings into Carson's room, while the newlywed couple watched the sunset from the porch.

"I hope Simon can help us in time," Annie said with a heavy sigh. "Cassidy said you had two weeks?"

"That's what Mr. White said. If Simon's friend can help, we can maybe

arrange for the jewels to go East with a mail-rider.”

“Will it get there in time? What if it doesn’t sell in time?” Annie asked.

Carson reached for her hand and squeezed it tightly. “Annie, God always has a plan. I firmly believe that although my sisters played their part, you were sent here by God. I also believe that God will help us find a way out of this mess.”

It was their wedding night but neither felt celebratory as they sat on the porch and worried about the ranch.

“Tomorrow morning we can take the will to Simon. Hopefully he would have heard back from his friend on the East Coast by then,” Carson offered when he realized Annie’s mind was still on saving the ranch.

Annie nodded. “I hope so.”

Bonnie joined them on the porch and handed a jewelry box over to Annie. “Here, I thought you might want to put this away yourself.”

Annie smiled. “Thank you. It seems you’re in a quite a rush to get your room back,” she teased Bonnie.

Bonnie shrugged. “No, but I think moving your things is the least we can do. Especially if you can save the ranch.”

“We’re going to save the ranch together,” Annie said with an encouraging smile as she accepted the jewelry box. She took off the necklace and the brooch that Simon insisted she keep until he heard from his friend on the East Coast, and she opened the jewelry box.

She carefully placed them inside on the velvet innards with a heavy sigh.

Carson turned to her with a curious look. “What’s that scrap of paper?”

Annie shrugged, taking it out. “It’s just the will confirming the jewels are mine.” She handed it to Carson to read.

“What else was in the box?” Carson asked with a frown when he returned the will to her.

Annie shook her head. “Nothing. Just the brooch and the necklace. Why?”

Carson shrugged. “No reason. It’s just the will states that the contents of the jewelry box belong to you. I just thought there might have been something more.”

Annie frowned and opened the will to read it again. She had never really read it carefully since her mother’s death. Indeed, Carson was right. It stated that the contents of the jewelry box belonged to Annie. “It was only the brooch and the necklace. But maybe Damien...” she trailed off when Carson reached for the box with a curious look.

“Annie, who fixed the box?”

“No one, it was never broken,” Annie said, wondering what Carson was on about. She didn’t care about the few cracks and worn through patches of velvet. It had been the last gift from her mother before her death, and although she couldn’t pass the contents down to her children, she could keep the box for her daughter.

“Look here,” Carson said touched a corner of the box where the velvet and the smooth wood met. “It looks like it’s been glued.”

“It was probably glued,” Annie said a little irritably.

A smile curved Carson’s mouth as he turned the box this way and that before carefully lifting the corner of the velvet.

“Carson, you’re ruining it!” Annie cried out but Carson didn’t stop. He reached underneath the corner and Annie heard a click. “Now you broke it!” Annie’s voice cracked with anger.

Carson shook his head. “I didn’t break it, Annie, I found the latch for the concealed base.”

“There is no concealed base,” Annie insisted when before her very eyes Carson carefully lifted the jewelry box to reveal a hidden compartment which Annie had never known about. “What... I....” Annie fumbled, baffled.

Carson smiled at her. “Here, why don’t you take a look what’s inside?”

Annie reached for the box and very carefully opened the secret compartment. Her breath caught in her throat at the contents. “Carson, look!”

She carefully took out the contents and held them out to Carson.

Carson's eyes widened with surprise. "Annie, did you know about this money?"

"I didn't even know about the compartment, never mind the money," Annie said as Carson began counting. "How much is it?"

Carson laughed, shaking his head. "Annie, there's more than three times what we have to pay the bank in three weeks."

Annie frowned. "That can't be." She took the money from Carson and began counting. True enough the amount he mentioned was correct. "Thank you, Mother," she cried out to the starry sky above.

Carson chuckled. "Thank You, Lord."

"We'll pay the bank and we can repair the cabin and we can buy you that mare you've been talking of to breed with your stallion."

Carson smiled at her with so much love and relief. "Annie, it's your money you should keep some of it."

Annie shook her head. "I have everything I need right here."

"You know I was watching you that day," Carson suddenly said with a grin.

"What day?" Annie asked with a frown.

"The day you walked into the bull's paddock. I was on the ridge and knew you were in trouble. For a moment I considered just letting him get to you but then something changed my mind. I watched you stand in the meadow picking spring blooms and holding your face to the sun as if appreciating every breath you took. I knew then I was in trouble."

Annie chuckled. "Not as much trouble as I was in when I heard the bull charging at me."

"Yep, it was a close call. But we made it. I have no doubt we're going to have more close calls in future, but at least we'll have each other." Carson slipped an arm around her shoulder, the jewelry box with its contents nestled in her lap.

“We will. Carson, do you think we can put a roof on the porch?” Annie asked leaning into his embrace.

“A porch roof? What an absurd suggestion. Why would you want a roof, then you can’t see the stars and feel the breeze?” Carson said, clearly baffled.

Annie laughed as she turned to him. “Because then I can sit here, rain or shine and dream about our future together.”

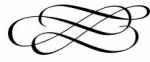
“The porch will have a roof!” Carson announced. “Come on, Mrs. Evans, let’s go see what my sisters have done this time.”

Annie laughed as she followed Carson into the house. Somehow she had just saved the ranch, contributed towards their future and found the love of her life. Even Daphne hadn’t taken to bed in more than a week and although no one mentioned it, it seemed she had made a miraculous recovery.

A contented sigh escaped her as she stepped inside. It was good to know she had found the place where she wanted to spend the rest of her life. The place where she would raise her children, the place where she would grow old with the man she loved. She turned to Carson with a smile. “Should we tell your sisters?”

Carson shook his head as he scooped her up. “No. It’s time we celebrated our wedding and stopped thinking about the ranch.”

EPILOGUE



4 July 1885, San Antonio, Texas

Annie sat beneath the covered porch, sipping sun tea with Daphne by her side. It was a beautiful summer's day and what made the day more special was that both Cassidy and Bonnie would soon be coming to visit.

Beside the barn she could see Carson teaching their daughter, Dakota, how to ride and her heart swelled. Dakota had been born a little more than ten months after their wedding day. Annie had been so certain that Carson would be disappointed that their first born wasn't a little boy, but he had been over the moon to have a little girl. A smile curved Annie's mouth as she watched her husband and daughter when Daphne suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

"They should be here any moment now. How are you feeling?" Daphne asked. Somehow, not even the doctor was sure how Daphne had made her miraculous recovery. She was in better health than ever before and played an active part in raising her granddaughter.

Annie frowned as she glanced at her mother in law. "What do you mean?"

“I mean,” Daphne began with a cocked brow. “How are you feeling this morning? You might be able to fool Carson, but not me. I know you haven’t been eating in the mornings. I also noticed you’ve been joining Dakota for her afternoon nap.”

Annie gasped. “You know?”

Daphne laughed. “A woman always knows. How far along are you?”

“Not long,” Annie said shaking her head. “A month, maybe more. I haven’t told Carson yet.”

“Why on earth haven’t you told him? That man would be overjoyed to know you’re with child again.”

Annie cocked a brow. “Really, you can’t imagine why I haven’t told him yet? He all but wrapped me up in cotton wool the last time. I was hoping for a few more weeks of being a normal wife and mother before Carson forced me to rest.”

“He cares,” Daphne said with a warm smile. “Do you know what my biggest fear was when they girls told me what they had done?”

“No?” Annie didn’t even notice her hand was now resting on her stomach.

“That Carson couldn’t love. He’d never been an affectionate person, not even as a boy. I was so afraid that he’d never find a wife, a family. But then you came along. He was terrible to be around those first few weeks. I kept wondering if it was because he couldn’t stand you or because he didn’t know how to show you that he cared.”

Annie laughed. “We’ve spoken about it a lot over the years. Luckily he saw the light.”

“You brought him light. You’ve made my son so happy and if it hadn’t been for your encouragement, my girls would both have become spinsters.”

“They wrote to their husbands all on their own,” Annie clarified.

Daphne nodded. “I know that. But it was your happiness with Carson that made them decide to become mail order brides. I’m just glad they found

husbands in Texas. I couldn't stand not seeing them for long stretches."

Cassidy had married a merchant in a small town not far from San Antonio and Bonnie had fallen in love with a rancher. Both were married now. Although Cassidy already had her first child, Bonnie was still hoping to be blessed with a baby.

"Everything happens for a reason," Annie said with a smile. "I still can't believe that a little more than three years ago I was in Boston, terrified of Damien forcing me to marry him."

"And now you've got a little girl with another babe on the way. I don't think I ever thanked you."

Annie clucked her tongue. "Daphne, if you thank me one more time for saving the ranch..."

Daphne laughed. "Not for saving the ranch. For insisting on a covered porch. I always loved the porch. But in summer the sun scalded you and in winter you froze. This is the best thing you've done since you arrived on the ranch."

Just then Dakota rushed up the porch and straight into her grandmother's waiting arms. "Oh and this, I like what you've done with this one as well," Daphne said winking at Annie who merely smiled.

"Grandma, can we make a cake for when Aunt Bonnie and Aunt Cassidy come?" Dakota asked eagerly.

Daphne stood up and smiled at Annie. "We're going to bake a cake. Why don't you tell Carson your news?"

Annie smiled as Daphne led her daughter into the house. Carson was short on Dakota's heels. He stepped onto the porch and briefly kissed Annie's cheek before taking a seat beside her. "That filly is going to be my prize mare," he said glancing at the foal and its mother in the field yonder.

Annie laughed. "You said that with the last filly as well."

"What can I say, my wife brought me the best mare in Texas," Carson said with a warm smile for Annie before he turned his gaze back to the horses

playing in the fields.

With the sale of his first foal, Carson had bought another mare and was now not only a cattle rancher, but a horse breeder as well.

“Carson, there’s something I need to tell you,” Annie began with a little hesitation. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to tell Carson about the baby, it was just that she didn’t want to be on bed rest for the rest of her pregnancy.

Carson smiled in a mysterious way. “I know.”

“What? You can’t know. You don’t even know what I want to tell you.”

“The baby. You want to tell me we’re having another baby. I know.” Carson sighed. “You haven’t been eating and you’ve been napping with Dakota.” Carson gave her a charming grin. “I’ve suspected it for a while now.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Annie asked flummoxed.

“Because I thought you didn’t know,” Carson shrugged.

Annie laughed. “Of course I knew.” A mischievous smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “But that’s still not what I wanted to tell you.”

Carson turned to her with a frown. “It wasn’t?”

“No,” Annie insisted with a heavy sigh. “Carson, I’m sorry but I’m not happy with the covered porch.”

Carson’s brows drew together. “But you wanted it. Now you want me to tear it down? It took me a week to build it, regardless of the lumber.”

Annie laughed. “I want a wraparound porch.”

“A what?” Carson asked, confused.

“I want the porch to wrap around the whole house, with a roof of course. That way I can sit on all sides and watch the ranch, the seasons changing and of course wherever you’re keeping yourself busy with.”

Carson laughed. “You and your strange ideas. Next you’ll be telling me to move the outhouse indoors.”

Annie frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

They shared a smile and a knowing look of love when Annie suddenly

pointed towards the road leading to the ranch. "Look, here they come."

Cassidy and her husband had travelled through Fort Worth to take on the last leg of their journey with Bonnie and her husband. The small wagon trail coming over the ridge brought a smile to Annie's face. "I missed them. I can't believe how much I missed them."

Carson nodded. "Me too. Just please don't invite them to move in."

Annie laughed. "How can I? With another baby on the way, we don't have the room."

Carson laughed. "You're right. But since we're probably going to have a dozen more, I had better add a few rooms on before I start building that porch."

Annie smiled. "That's a good idea."

"Have I told you today that I love you?" Carson asked softly.

Annie shook her head. "No, but you tell me every time you look at me. I can see it in your eyes."

"I thought you said I had hard eyes," Carson asked with a frown.

Annie chuckled. "You used to have hard eyes, especially when you wanted to throw me off your ranch."

"I think I'll keep you," Carson stood up and drew her in for a tight hug before he stepped back with a sigh. "Let the chaos ensue."

Annie couldn't help but laugh as she followed Carson down the porch steps to wait for his sisters, because he was right, when everyone was at the ranch it was nothing but chaos.

And she loved every minute of it.

THE FROZEN KISS



OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE



*H*arry Kennedy rolled his eyes at his younger sister as he took his place at the table after a long day out on the ranch. He just wanted to eat his dinner in peace.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, Harry Kennedy!” she declared, her cheeks burning with the humiliation of his reaction. “I am just trying to help you.”

“I keep telling you, you don’t need to help me. I don’t need help. With anything. Thank you,” he rebuffed.

“But I worry about you.” Tears stung at her blue eyes as she placed the dishes in front of each of them and took her own place at the table. She fought to keep the tears from spilling down her rosy cheeks. In a bid to hide it, she allowed her long curly hair to fall across her face as she sat.

Harry reached a huge, work-weathered hand across the table and caught her comparatively tiny hand in his own. “I am sorry, Mary. I shouldn’t have rolled my eyes. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She looked into his eyes to check whether he was being sincere or rather about to mock her again. A sincere expression, a gentle squeeze of her hand, and a small smile from her older brother convinced her to continue. Now was as good a time as any, after all. She retracted her hand and they both set about to enjoy the buffalo broth she had prepared for their meal.

“As I was saying,” she shot him a friendly warning glance. “Sheriff Jack’s put an advertisement in a newspaper to look for a bride. Only a few months later, he said he had the choice of six; he opted for one with whom he felt he had the most in common and she has just arrived this week. They call these women a ‘Mail order bride’. I think it’s just marvelous!” She looked up at him to gauge her beloved brother’s reaction and found none. “Well? What do you think?” she insisted.

“About what?” he asked quietly, as he took another spoon of the delicious broth.

Mary huffed loudly to express her frustration. “Of a mail order bride, of course! The Sheriff’s lady, who is now his wife; they married the very day she arrived. It is so beautiful. And she seems nice. I think he will be happy with her.”

“Why would I want a mail order bride?” he asked impatiently. “I am far too busy for that.” His tone was gruff, and he wore a frown on his sun-worn and tired face.

“Because, brother, you are twenty-seven years old now. You are not getting any younger. And there is more to life than work. Imagine if you could find a wife and even have children; a family of your own.” Mary cried excitedly at the thought.

His right fist rolled into a ball, and he slammed it onto the wooden table. The sound made Mary jump and again the tears sprung to her eyes. She looked at him and saw the anger rising in him as his face reddened. She had noticed over the previous few years that her brother had steadily started to show more and more anger at situations that would not have angered him before. She didn’t want him to change from the sweet, loving brother she knew; the one she knew before their father died.

“I do not have time for anything else. This ranch is everything for me!” he declared, his voice low and brows furrowed deeply into a frown. “On his deathbed, our father told me I would amount to nothing. That I would run this

ranch into the ground, and we would be bankrupt within a year of his death. He told me I was a good for nothing fool.” Harry’s voice became sad, and his anger dissipated somewhat as he reminisced the story which was so familiar to Mary who had heard it so many times since her father’s passing two and a half years before.

Harry, I know what he said to you, and I have told you that he didn’t know what he was saying. He was dying,” she tried to reassure him.

“We both know that’s not true. He knew exactly what he was saying. Well, look at it now!” he exclaimed as he gestured to the land surrounding them beyond the walls of their home. “I will not stop working until this ranch is the biggest in the state. I will prove him wrong,” he said sadly as he scooped the last of his broth.

Mary tilted the plate of bread toward him and he accepted a slice eagerly.

“You have already shown him. The ranch is a great success. It is growing all the time and you are doing an amazing job here,” she assured him earnestly.

“It’s not enough yet. I have to make it the biggest. I have to.”

“And in the meantime, your life is slipping away and you will soon be too old to be of any interest to any lady. There is more to life, you know than building this ranch. What is the point of working so hard if you have no one to enjoy it with?” she looked across the table at him, the question hanging in the air between them. “Father said some hurtful things to you, but you know what mother would be saying if she was still here. She would be saying the same as me.”

Their mother had died when Mary was just twelve years old and Harry seventeen. Her death had been sudden and had turned their father into a bitter, unkind man before their eyes.

“Alright. I guess you’re right,” he conceded. “But I am not old just yet, little sister! I still have plenty of time for all that. You can’t get rid of me that easily!” he teased, the smile returning to his face, brightening his light blue

eyes.

“And nor would I want to!” she smiled back at him. They were all the family they had left now. Mary knew his comment had been a throwaway line from him to try to shut her up, but she decided she would take it as an agreement that she could go ahead and help him. She would do everything she could to help him find the perfect wife.

They finished their dinner together, chatting with ease about their day. When they retired to their rooms for the night an hour or so later, Mary set about writing her brother’s advertisement for The Matrimonial Times. He just needed a little help to get going in the right direction.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1



Rachel Field watched sadly as her beloved mother was lowered into the ground. The sun beat down on them as though it didn't know it was the saddest day she had endured in her twenty-two years.

She looked across the grave to her stepfather. He looked like a shell of the man he used to be. Rachel knew he was taking her mother's death very badly and not coping very well at all. But the pair had never really seen eye to eye, so she had found it increasingly difficult to try to console him. Especially while she was also grieving.

As the last few words were said and the soil was scattered atop the casket, Rachel closed her eyes and said her private goodbye to her mother.

THANK YOU, Mom, for being the best that you could be. I was so lucky to have you as my mother, even if it was not for as long as I would have liked. I have the best memories of a happy childhood, especially when Father was still alive and with us. I hope you have found him in the next place, Mom. I hope you have been reunited, the way it should always have been. I will love you forever and keep you in my heart wherever I am. And I promise you I will have some adventures, just like you made me promise you.

THE TEARS gently rolled down her sun-kissed cheeks as she thought back to her mother's precious last few minutes when she had awoken and spoken to them both separately. Her mother had always known she and her stepfather, Geoff, had a somewhat strained relationship, but she had thankfully never tried to force them together and they had just kept their distance. Rachel had always believed that her mother had only married Geoff because she thought Rachel needed a male parent figure in her life. The truth was, Rachel would have been happier if it had just been the two of them. But she knew there was no point in being bitter and she had always just made the most of the situation as it was.

In the last moments that she spent with her mother; they had talked about how Rachel had always wanted to travel. She had always been an adventurer, with her head in the clouds, her mother had joked. Her mother told her she wanted her to explore the world; to see what was out there beyond Boston. She told her not to waste her life, and to do what she truly wanted. Rachel had cried at this and asked her mother if she regretted not having done the same; she had lived in Boston all of her life. She had replied with the words that would stay with Rachel forever.

“Oh, dear child, all I ever wanted was to be a wife and a mother and once I was blessed with your father and then you, my life was complete. I never needed adventures like that, I had my own and I loved every single minute. But you want a different life to what I wanted or had. Live your life, not mine, not anyone else's. Just yours. Be free. Have your adventure.” She had smiled her beautiful smile before closing her eyes and drifting off to sleep. She had never woken again because she passed later that evening.

At the burial ground, Rachel opened her eyes again and saw that Geoff had already walked away, his head hung low as his tall frame loped across the grass, weaving among the many gravestones.

Rachel stayed and thanked the intimate number of attendees who had come to pay their respects. She didn't feel ready to leave her mother's side

just yet and this proved a good excuse to hang around rather than looking forward to returning home to her stepfather. The norm for life with her stepfather since her mother had fallen ill was extended silent treatment while she cooked and cleaned for him.

When she could no longer avoid it, Rachel made her way home. As she entered the dark house with its curtains drawn out of respect, she could feel her stepfather's ominous presence. He was not a bad man; she had never had any need to be fearful of him. Rachel just found him to be simply dull, with nothing much to say for himself. He was not fond of children and for that reason, they had never got along, even though he had been in their lives for almost eight years.

"Are you alright?" she asked him as she walked through the kitchen to her room.

"Huh?" he asked, as he looked around, seemingly unaware of her presence.

"Are you alright? You left before the end of the burial."

They might not get along, but he was still her mother's husband, and she knew they had loved each other.

"I was cold," he stated as he slunk into his armchair by the fire. She knew he had just needed to get away from the entire situation and she understood that. It certainly hadn't been cold and the July sun had shone throughout, but she had also felt a chill deep inside and wondered if that was what he had felt too. She knew not to get into that deep a conversation with him.

"Shall I make us a coffee?" she offered, knowing he would not make his own.

"Yeah," he replied abruptly.

Rachel prepared the coffee and served it to Geoff, placing it on the table beside him after she had cleared a space for it.

"I want to let you know that I won't be staying here for too much longer. I want to go traveling, so as soon as I can, I will be leaving."

She had no idea how he would respond to this revelation as he had not been present when she and her mother had the talk about just this.

“Good. I am too old and tired to look after someone else,” he replied coldly as he flicked his newspaper open and held it up between them as a clear indication that their conversation was over.

She climbed the stairs wondering how he had ever thought he had been the one looking after her. That certainly was not the way she had seen it. But it didn't matter, she would be gone soon.

Once in her room with her own cup of coffee, Rachel pulled out the newspaper she had spotted at the newsstand the previous day. This was her first chance to get to look at it, now that all the arrangements for the burial had been seen to. She traced her slender index finger along the title: The Matrimonial Times. Then she opened it and began reading through the advertisements.

One stood out among all the others.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2



*R*achel awoke with a start knowing that she needed to take action. Nothing would ever change for her if she didn't do something to make the change. She had quickly popped down the stairs to get a hot drink and a slice of bread and butter. Without even acknowledging her stepfather, she had rushed back to the shelter of her room.

She made herself comfortable behind her desk, with paper and pen at the ready at her fingertips. She sipped her warm coffee and enjoyed the feel as it slipped smoothly down her throat, warming her insides. Her mind whirred with what she could say in response to the advertisement which had caught her eye the previous evening, but every time she lifted the pen and dipped it in the little pot of ink, her mind went blank.

Finally, after finishing the last crust of buttered bread and the remnants of the coffee, she had no further distraction, and so she was able to begin.

DEAR MR. KENNEDY,

I write in response to the advertisement you have placed in The Matrimonial Times. I have never replied to one of these before, so please forgive my ignorance as to what I should say.

My name is Rachel Field, and I am 22 years old. I live in Boston but have

a desire to get out and discover places I have no idea of. To this end, Colorado sounds just lovely. I have never been on a ranch, but yours sounds wonderful and you seem to be very hard working. Rest assured that I am not afraid of hard work and would be fully willing and able to help on the ranch in any way I am required to.

I would love to know more about you, Mr. Kennedy. Do you have family nearby?

I do hope to hear from you soon,

Regards,

Rachel Field.

RACHEL RE-READ HER LETTER, and then folded it and popped it into the envelope before she could change her mind and start again. There really was very little she could say at this point, which meant no point going back over it and changing it all.

On her way to the front door of the moderately sized family house, Rachel heard her stepfather call out to her. She stopped walking so that she could hear him.

“Are you making coffee, girl? I am hungry.”

Rachel could tell just from the gruffness in his voice that he had been drinking late into the night and was not his normal self. Now that her mother was laid to rest, she had no intention of caring for her husband.

“No! I have had mine. I am going out. Help yourself in the kitchen,” she called back as she opened the door and left with a skip in her step and a sense of foreboding for when she returned as she knew he would not be happy with that development. She reminded herself that she would not be around for very much longer if she had her way. With the letter securely in her hand, she practically ran into town to mail it to Colorado.

Rachel took her time in town, window shopping outside the shops she

knew she could not afford to shop at. She had little desire to return to the house which had once been a happy home. Without her mother there, it was simply a building that no longer held the magic she had once felt.

She chatted amicably with the townsfolk and admired the finery of some of the lady's clothing. They had always just got by, being neither wealthy nor poverty-stricken. They had always had enough, and she had always had her mother, and that had always been more than enough. Now, Rachel felt envious of the various lifestyles evident in the town and wondered if she would ever be so fortunate as to own beautiful gowns such as those worn by the more affluent townswomen.

Seated on a bench, enjoying the rays of the summer sun beaming down on her face, she saw an elegant lady and her daughter making their way to the dress shop on the corner. They laughed as they talked, deep in conversation and unaware of the world around them. Rachel felt a deep sense of loss as she watched the pair. She would give anything to see her mother just one last time, to chat as they once had, much the same as the mother and daughter she was now envious of. Grief gripped at her heart and immobilized her for a brief while.

Once she felt able, Rachel got to her feet again, smoothed her gown, and began the lonely walk back to the house. She tried to cheer herself by thinking of the letter she hoped to receive back from Mr. Kennedy. She hoped he would be prompt in his response as she was so desperate for a change in lifestyle.

Rachel had worked in the local factory for just over a year, but when her mother became poorly, she had resigned to look after her. At first, they had thought her mother would be cured of the consumption which had ravaged her body, but it had later become apparent that it had gotten the better of her and it was just a matter of time.

Now, Rachel passed the factory in which she had worked and considered going in to ask after a possible position. It reminded her of happier times

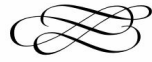
when she would return from work in the evening to spend the time at home keeping her mother company before she fell ill. They would talk about their day and tell each other everything. They had missed each other so much while Rachel was at work. She could not pluck up the courage to go in, so she continued her slow walk homeward.

She wondered what life would be like on a ranch. She imagined how Mr. Kennedy might have cattle and chickens. She had always wanted to tend chickens. With her mind focused on the potential of a fresh beginning, she entered the cold house and immediately made her way to her room.

“Where have you been, girl?” Geoff shouted from his seemingly static place by the fire, even though it was July and the sun was beating down outside of the cold brick walls.

She ignored his calls and continued to her room. He had made it clear he didn't want her around and she would therefore feel no remorse at not pandering to his every need. He was a grown man and could look after himself. He would have to get used to it. If she had her way, she would be out of his life as soon as the opportunity presented.

CHAPTER 3



Mary Kennedy took her usual morning walk to the end of the gravel road to check for mail. It had been over six weeks since she had placed the advertisement in *The Matrimonial Times* and still, there had been no response. Well, there had been one response, but she knew immediately on reading the letter that her brother would not have even entertained having the likes of her in his home. She had been clearly very focused on the finances and wealth of the ranch. Her brother was not money orientated, more determined to make the ranch a success, but for the sake of the community and to prove his father wrong, than for the sake of the wealth that would, in turn, come his way.

She approached with the normal expectation of not finding mail, only to find a single envelope. She gently took the white paper and slid it into the waistband of her dress, hiding it beneath the apron she was still wearing after making breakfast.

The short walk back to the house was uninterrupted, as it was most mornings. Harry went back out onto the ranch immediately after breakfast and normally did not return until the evening when they would have dinner together. She sometimes went out onto the ranch to see him if she felt lonely during the day, but mostly she kept herself busy in the house.

She sat out on the porch on the old wooden bench, where she could see

all around her so that her brother could not sneak up on her. She took a deep breath and opened the letter, which was addressed in beautiful handwriting to Mr. Kennedy. She felt a little bad about opening his mail, but he had more or less given her permission.

As Mary read the lovely letter, her heart began to beat faster. This could be it! This could be the one who could make her brother happy and stop this unhealthy obsession with growing the ranch. This Rachel Field sounded like a kind and thoughtful person; someone Harry might take to straight away, she hoped.

She quickly went into the house and penned a response. There was no time to waste and if she was quick, she could get into town and have the letter mailed by the end of the day.

Mary allowed herself to feel excited about the future. Just for a moment. She knew that if she was able to find someone suitable for her hard-working, stubborn brother, then she might have a chance at finding a husband herself. She could not even consider this until she knew her brother was settled; he needed her if he was to be alone.

DEAR MISS FIELD, or may I call you Rachel?

Thank you for your lovely response to my advertisement. I enjoyed reading your letter and would very much like to get to know you better.

There is nothing to forgive in the way in which you have replied. I did not think you ignorant at all, more genuine and interesting.

I have a sister who is your age by the name of Mary who lives on the ranch with me. We are the only family we have now that both our parents have passed away.

You are right, I do work hard, but I also promise to spend time with my family and not be completely consumed with the ranch.

Please, tell me more about yourself. Do you have parents or siblings? Are

you currently employed? I would love to know more about you, Miss Field – Rachel.

*In hope of hearing back from you soon,
Harry*

SHE FOLDED the paper carefully and placed it in the envelope. When she was ready, she gestured across the field to her brother, to let him know that she was going into town. He gave a thumbs up to acknowledge that he knew what she meant, and with that, she began the walk.

Once in town, Mary quickly mailed the letter and then took the time to do the shopping she had decided on during her walk. She had already planned their evening meal but decided on a change of menu while she was headed to town. Shopping would explain her walk into town, so as not to raise suspicion.

While in town, Mary took the opportunity to check the train schedule. She wanted to know in advance how long the journey was from Boston to Colorado, and she saved the times to memory.

Mary knew she should, and would soon have to, explain to Harry what she had been doing behind his back. But she wanted to wait as long as possible so that he couldn't change her mind and so as not to upset him. Recently, they had pleasant conversations in the evenings and she knew this was most likely down to the fact that she was not constantly pressuring her brother to find a wife. Her concern was all to do with her love for him, but she knew he did not always see it that way.

CHAPTER 4



Rachel excitedly opened and read the letter from Mr. Kennedy. She could not believe he wanted to know more about her and felt suddenly inadequate when she realized that there was really not very much to tell. She was remarkably uninteresting, really, she thought.

Nevertheless, she took the precious letter up to her room and penned her reply. With the delivery of mail taking so long, she wanted to get her reply ready and sent off as quickly as she could.

Her situation at home was not good. Geoff took every opportunity to complain and to demand that she cook and clean for him. Rachel had become stubborn and refused to do anything that was solely for his benefit. She cleaned the communal areas that she also made use of but she would not clean his bedroom or wash his bedding when she knew he could do that himself and that he would need to soon enough.

If she chose to cook an evening meal for herself, she made enough for him too and offered to share it with him. Her offer was however most often met with disgust at what she had chosen to prepare followed by a demand that she cook what he wanted. Therefore, she would keep the leftover meal for the following night, when she would enjoy it a second time around.

Rachel was determined not to let him get to her and each time he berated her or tried to ridicule her, she would simply smile at him and leave the room

to avoid having to look at him any longer. She knew this angered him but she took no responsibility whatsoever for his ire. She had tried everything she could to support him as best she could without being taken advantage of and she knew she could hold her head up high in the knowledge that her mother would have approved of her actions. Her mother had always taught her to be kind, but not to be taken advantage of. She was grateful for that lesson now. Safe in that assurance, Rachel continued her life, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to escape.

Money was fast dwindling in their household as her stepfather had not yet returned to work following their loss. He was a shoemaker and had a small shop in town, but his business had taken a hit in his absence since the time leading up to his wife's last days.

Rachel had heard the gossip in town and knew that Geoff had not been a kind or nice man to do business with. Because of this, it had not taken much for his customers to willingly take their needs to a new shoemaker who traded from his humble home on the outskirts of town not too long after Geoff had stopped trading during normal trading hours.

She wondered when her stepfather would realize that he could not use people and be cruel to them and that there would be consequences if he did. She felt as though she knew him well enough to know he would always be stuck in his ways and that his grief had made this even worse. She felt sad for him, but also knew he was not her responsibility, just as he wanted no responsibility for her.

She again took the walk into town and mailed her letter. On her return journey, she did pop into the textile factory and spoke with her erstwhile boss. He was thrilled at the prospect of having her return to work, saying that he had always been more than happy with her work and her work ethic. She had been brought up well by her mother and knew the importance of working hard.

Rachel skipped back to the house happily. She was relieved that she

would not have to spend too much time in that house with that man. Now that she would be working, she would be out of the house six days a week and would have more independence than before. She would also be able to save the money to afford the train ticket to Colorado, should the opportunity arise.

“Where have you been?” asked her grumpy stepfather as she walked through the door. She paused at the doorway to the kitchen to look at him seated by the unlit fire.

“I got my job back at the factory,” she stated with a smile on her face.

“Good! We need the money. It’s about time you started paying your way around here!” he grunted.

Rachel knew better than to rise to his harsh words. Again, she smiled and walked away.

She sat down on the wooden chair in her room, wondering at the workings of his mind. He lived in the house that her father had bought and paid for. He had not paid a penny towards it and yet he now technically owned it. He had not been to work in a long time, but he thought it was she who was not bringing in enough money to pay her way. She had taken to selling her possessions to pay for food for the week, but he did not see that. He only saw what he wanted to see. And she was done with trying to change that. She had no more argument left in her. There were many more exciting things to do.

CHAPTER 5



Over the previous months, she had exchanged letters with Harry and felt as though she had really got to know him. She was excited to meet him but was worried that he had made no mention of this possibility as yet. What if he was not interested in her in that way and they were to simply be friends?

She realized she had pinned all her hopes on one person: one man, Harry. Maybe she should have responded to more than one advertiser in *The Matrimonial Times*. Maybe she should have given herself more options.

Geoff was still very much the same as he had been after her mother passed away. He constantly asked her when she would be leaving, making unkind comments about no one else wanting her. He had still not gone back to work and was still insistent that Rachel should provide for them both off her income from the job at the factory. She was happy to contribute towards the upkeep of the house and groceries, but she kept a little aside for herself of which he was unaware. She had managed to build up a significant nest egg during that time and was ready to leave as soon as the opportunity presented.

“Don’t forget to bring something home for dinner,” Geoff shouted at her as she passed the kitchen doorway. He had even taken to sleeping on his chair which left little chance of avoiding him.

“There is food in the pantry!” she called back as she did every morning.

Theirs was not a true pantry but rather a supply cupboard inside the kitchen. But her mother had started referring to it as such in a joking manner as if she was keeping up with the rich and famous.

“You never listen, girl! Why will you never do as you are told? Useless!” he bellowed after her, his voice becoming obscure as she shut it out by closing the front door of the house. She took a deep breath, relieved to be outside the awful place that she had once found a comforting and loving home.

On her way out the gate on her way to work, she popped the lid of the mailbox, as she had become accustomed to doing every morning. This time she found a white envelope. She gasped as she pulled it out and glanced around to make sure her stepfather was not looking. When she knew she was alone, she looked again at the envelope and, sure enough, it was addressed to her, and she recognized the handwriting to be Harry’s.

Rachel placed the envelope carefully in her bag and continued her journey with the butterflies in her stomach making her feel funny. She always left the house early in the mornings, so that she had time for a drink before she started her shift. She was sure glad of that today as she headed for the bathroom which was the only offer of any privacy.

Once alone, she gently tore the envelope open and pulled out the letter.

DEAREST RACHEL,

I hope my letter finds you well.

We have been corresponding for quite some time now, and I hope I am not being too assuming, but I wonder if you would consider becoming my wife.

We seem to be getting along famously and have a fair amount in common and we both seem to have similar wishes for our futures. I would be honored if you would choose to become my wife.

In the hope that you might agree, I have enclosed the fare for a train ticket. The first available opportunity to catch a train is on Saturday, which would have us together by Thursday. But of course, I do not want to rush or pressure you so if you would rather come at a later time, or even not at all, then I would appreciate it if you could let me know.

*Yours,
Harry x*

RACHEL'S HEART leaped with joy. At last, she had her proposal and of course, she was to jump at this chance. She only had a few days to pack her belongings and get herself ready, but she knew she wanted nothing more in the world. Harry sounded like the ideal man to her. She had loved getting to know him through his letters and could not wait to meet him.

At last, her adventure, which she had dreamt of since she was a child, was to begin.

CHAPTER 6



Mary felt nervous anticipation growing in her stomach. She knew the letter would have arrived by now and Rachel would have made her mind up whether to accept her brother's offer of marriage or not. All going well, Rachel would be boarding a train the very next day and would arrive in Colorado on Thursday.

This meant Mary had less than a week to tell her brother what she had done and that he had a bride on her way to be with him. She had been waiting for the right moment to arise, but that never seemed to come. Harry was still working hard and was stressed about the upcoming winter season when he worried about his crops and the cattle.

But Mary knew she had no time to waste now, for it was likely that his bride-to-be would be on her way the very next day.

She laid the table and placed the evening meals down at their places. She then paced the kitchen, eager for him to walk through the door so that she could get it over and done with.

Suddenly the door flew open and in her brother blew with a gust of cold wind. Mary pulled her shawl around her shoulders as he emerged through the doorway and into the kitchen. He looked ashen and cold.

"What on earth is it?" she asked him as she placed the pan on the stove to warm water for him.

“There’s unrest among the cattle,” he replied as he closed the door behind him. “I don’t know if there is disease, but they are unhappy, Mary. Very unhappy.” He shook his head and his brow furrowed with worry.

“I’m sure they will be fine. At least until morning. You need to rest, Harry, you look exhausted.” Mary handed her brother a mug of warm water, knowing that was what he liked to warm his bones quickly. He gratefully accepted as he took his place at the table and washed his hands in the soapy bowl of water before him, which Mary took away once he was done.

“I don’t know this time, sister. They have taken to fighting this afternoon. The biggest one has done some real damage to a few of the little ones.” He looked distraught. Mary knew how much the cattle meant to him. He had reared most of them himself from birth. “I’m going to have to go straight back out after this.” He indicated his plate before he picked up his fork and began to eat.

Mary knew better than to raise the subject of Rachel at that moment. She felt deflated having built herself up to tell him and was ready with what she would say. She wondered now if there would ever be a good time, but she had no choice, she had to tell him before Thursday when he was due to meet Rachel off the train.

After dinner, they went out together to see what they could do for the cattle. Her brother was right about them being aggressive towards each other, so they spent a few hours creating a barrier between the large and smaller beasts. At least then they could leave them overnight with a good chance that they would get through the night unscathed.

It was late when they finally headed back to the dark house. Mary asked if Harry wanted a hot drink before bed, but he was exhausted, they both were, so they headed straight for their beds.

She hoped the morning would bring better news and that the cattle would have settled. It would be the only way she would be able to speak to him about the exciting events about to unfold.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7



Rachel awoke with excitement. This was to be the day that would change her life forever! She quickly dressed and made doubly sure she had packed everything she would need the day before.

Before she left her bedroom, she looked around and allowed all the happy memories to come flooding back to her. All the time she had spent in this room with her father and mother. All the laughter they had shared, the stories they had told her, the games they had played.

Her work shirt lay on her desk, and she retrieved it. She would need to drop it off when she passed by the factory on her way to town. Rachel's manager had been very understanding about her change in circumstances, although she was a little worried about her traveling such a distance for someone she had never even met. But Rachel had assured her that they had got to know each other well and all would be fine.

On her last day at work the previous day, she had been given a lovely send-off from her workmates and told that she must come back and visit if she was ever back in Boston, and she was assured there would always be a job for her there should she need it.

She had thanked them for their kindness and generosity, but in her mind she knew there would be no coming back to Boston for her. Her life here was over and she was ready for her new life in Colorado.

Rachel stopped at the room her mother had shared with her stepfather. She knew he hadn't stepped foot in the room for months, so she tentatively entered. On the vanity table in the corner of the room lay her mother's belongings, as they had been before she had passed away. She allowed her fingers to trail over everything before her as she remembered her mother sitting right here.

She picked up her mother's hairbrush and a brooch which had been her favorite and she placed them carefully in her bag. It was only right that she should keep something of her beloved mother for she knew that once she left this house, she would not be back.

As she reached the doorway of the kitchen she stopped briefly, not wishing for this to take long or for a scene to ensue.

"That's me off now, Geoff. Take care," she said kindly and she moved towards the front door to make her getaway.

"Where are you going?" he bellowed angrily.

"I told you. I am going to Colorado to marry," she responded without hesitation.

"Who would want to marry you?" he spat at her. "Don't be stupid, girl!"

"Goodbye," she said again, as she opened the door and left. She took a deep breath when on the other side of the door and then began her walk into town, dropping off her work shirt at the factory along the way.

About halfway through town, the snow started to fall. It was usual for snow to fall around mid-November, so it was a little early, but it made Rachel feel good as she and her mother had always loved the snow and it made her feel as though her mother was watching over her. She pulled her overcoat around her a little tighter and tugged her bonnet down a little more.

Rachel was so looking forward to meeting her husband-to-be and his sister, Mary, who lived with him in the ranch house. From what Harry had said, the pair were very close and both were looking forward to welcoming her.

The train was already at the station as she approached, much to Rachel's relief. Her walk had taken longer than normal due to the snow which was starting to fall quite heavily now. She quickly collected her ticket, paying with the money Harry had sent, before making her way to the train to find her carriage.

Once Rachel was settled into her seat, she was able to relax a little. She hoped the snow would not delay the journey in any way. A young lady took up a seat in the same carriage with her small baby held close against her. They greeted each other shyly and allowed each other the space to settle into their seats.

The train pulled away from the Boston platform and the long journey to Colorado was finally a reality. She watched the scenery pass by and she wondered at the adventure she was to be a part of. She wondered about Colorado and whether the snow would still be falling there.

A little while after they had set off, Rachel started chatting with the travel companion in her carriage, Alice, and they hit it off straight away. The baby was just fourteen months old and slept through most of the journey but was adorable when awake. Rachel and Alice enjoyed chatting with each other and were glad of the distraction. The journey went much faster when they were talking.

Rachel told Alice that she was to be a mail-order bride. Alice thought her very brave and told her about a friend who had ventured of likewise but had unfortunately found the man she was to marry not to be who he had said he was. This made Rachel more anxious about her decision to travel all this way for a man she had never met. Alice assured her it was not likely to happen to her and that the majority of the men who sent for mail order brides had to be honest. She tried to hold onto those words, but she was feeling increasingly worried about what might be awaiting her at her destination.

CHAPTER 8



Rachel felt her stomach somersault when the train pulled into the station at Colorado. She and her new friend, Alice, bid their final farewells before they prepared to disembark.

She stood at the doors, watching the goings-on pass by her, searching frantically for the person she thought might be her husband to be, Harry. The platform was not busy by any means, with perhaps as many as ten people milling around. She pulled her overcoat tighter around her to protect her from the softly falling snow, picked up her bag, and stepped onto the platform as soon as the train had come to a full stop.

She took a few steps away from the train and then placed her bag on the ground so that she could get a proper look around. With a smile on her face, just in case he had spotted her, she searched the platform again. A gentleman was heading her way, although he appeared much older than she had anticipated Harry to be. She smiled at him but felt anxiety building in her stomach. The man walked past her, and she sighed with relief, as she watched him head towards a lady standing behind her who had disembarked further along the train.

No one else on the platform looked to be the man she had come to marry. Maybe he was running late. Rachel picked up her bag again and strolled over to a wooden bench undercover within the protection of the railway station.

She could see beyond the doors that the snow was still falling relentlessly, so she was grateful that the platform was undercover, although it was still very cold. She sat down and hoped she would not be left to wait too long.

After what felt like forever, which was in reality merely a few minutes, a young woman approached the bench. She looked to be suffering from the cold, but she smiled warmly at Rachel, who smiled just as warmly in response.

“Rachel?” she asked as she held out her hand.

“Yes?” Rachel replied in the form of a question even as she accepted the proffered hand and the woman shook her hand by way of welcome.

“Hi! It is so good to meet you.” She must have seen the confused look on her face, for she followed up with, “I’m Mary, Harry’s sister.”

“Hello!” Rachel responded enthusiastically as she stood and the two women embraced warmly.

“Harry is so busy working. He’s in the fields getting the animals fed and trying to sort shelter for them all because of the snow. It’s only going to get heavier and will soon be a blizzard. He’s sorry he couldn’t be here, but he asked me to collect you off the train and take you to the ranch where he will be waiting to meet you.”

Mary seemed to struggle to maintain eye contact, Rachel thought. She also seemed quite jittery and nervous. Maybe this was a normal response when she met new people.

“We should get going before the snow starts to fall too heavy. There are already drifts along some of the roads.”

Mary led the way to the entrance of the station across the track where the horse and cart were tethered to the railings. She held out a hand to help Rachel up, which she accepted gratefully as she clambered into the cart. Mary took her place up front to drive the horse. The snow continued to billow around them, silencing the surroundings and introducing an eerie atmosphere. A few minutes into the journey, the visibility became so bad that Rachel

hoped Mary was able to see more than she could, as she was guiding the horse.

Rachel tried to chat with Mary, leaning forward in the cart to be heard, but it was no good. The noise of the wheels on the dirt tracks and the driving wind around them drowned out her voice, so Mary was not able to hear her. She felt bad for Mary on the journey, upfront with no shelter at all, she must have been so cold. At least Rachel was in the cart and reasonably sheltered.

Finally, they took a sudden turn which made Rachel's stomach turn. Just a few moments later the ranch house came into view, and she was in awe of it. It was even nicer than Harry had described in his letters and she liked that he was a modest man. She was even more excited to meet him now that they had finally arrived. She looked around the homestead, as far as she could see, which wasn't very far due to the snow, which was really coming down heavily now.

Mary pulled the horse and cart to a halt and jumped down from her seat upfront. Rachel watched as she tethered the horse to the railings of the porch before she returned to the cart and held out her hand to help Rachel down. Once on the ground, she looked at her sister-in-law-to-be and found her anxiety mirrored in her eyes. Rachel wondered what she had to be anxious about.

"Quick, let's get indoors and warm up. I'll make us a hot drink," Mary invited, her voice low and her eyes darting nervously around the homestead grounds.

Rachel nodded her head in agreement and followed, keeping her eyes peeled for her husband to be. The snow was really coming down by that time and the visibility was incredibly poor which meant she had very little chance of seeing much at all. Maybe he was inside. She was surprised and somewhat disappointed that he hadn't been waiting on their arrival and hadn't come out to greet her when the cart stopped.

Once inside, Rachel shook off her overcoat and hung it as Mary

indicated. They entered through a doorway that took them straight into the kitchen and she was relieved to see a fire burning in the hearth. The fire began to warm her immediately as she was frozen to the bone after the journey. Again, Rachel looked around for the man she had traveled to marry, but there was no sign of him. This time Mary must have caught her curious looks.

“Harry will be back from the ranch shortly. He works so hard,” she said again, reiterating what she had said back at the train station.

Rachel noticed yet again how anxious Mary seemed and decided to ask.

“Are you alright, Mary? You seem very worried about something,” Rachel asked gently as she took the chair that Mary had pulled out for her. Mary placed a steaming cup of hot coffee on the table in front of her.

Mary took a deep breath. “Rachel, there is something you should know.”

“Oh goodness, now you are worrying me, Mary. What is it? Has Harry changed his mind? Does he no longer want me to be his wife? Does he no longer want me here?” her voice trailed off as she considered having made such a long journey for nothing and the possibility of finding herself stranded. She searched Mary’s eyes for an answer.

“Rachel, I am sorry. So sorry. But Harry doesn’t yet know anything about you,” she blurted out, much to Rachel’s shock and confusion.

“What on earth do you mean? He has been writing to me,” Rachel replied cautiously.

“It was me writing to you. I am sorry to have lied to you, but he really is the most wonderful man and I do truly believe you will get along famously. But he knows nothing about you just yet. I tried to find the right time to tell him when you were on your way, but it just never seemed to be the right time, and now it’s too late and he’s going to be so cross with me...” her voice trailed away as the realization of the severity of this situation hit.

“But what will he do? Will he send me back? I don’t have anywhere to go, Mary!” she declared with tears in her eyes, threatening to spill down her

rosy, red cheeks.

“I honestly don’t know what he will say, Rachel. I hope he will see sense and agree that you can stay. He needs a lady just like you. He is just too stubborn to admit it.” Mary’s eyes were also filled with tears at the prospect of her brother coming home.

Rachel stood abruptly, upsetting the table slightly which caused a din in the small room. She collected her overcoat and began to pull it back on.

“Please take me back to the train station, Mary. This is awful. I cannot meet your brother under these circumstances. I cannot dupe him as you have.”

“No, no, it’s not duping him. He did agree that I could find him a wife... in a way.” Mary approached Rachel and held her hands in her own. “You are clearly a lovely person and my brother will never have the chance to meet someone so lovely again. Please stay and meet him. I just know he will love you, just as I did from your letters.”

“But what will he say when he gets home and sees me? This is madness!”

“I know, but we have no option now. Look at the snow falling outside. There is no way we can travel now, it’s simply too dangerous. We would never make it. Besides, once he meets you...” Mary’s voice trailed off as the door swung open and a confused-looking Harry stomped in.

CHAPTER 9



Rachel was taken aback by just how handsome Harry appeared when he walked through the door, even though his expression showed utter bewilderment, followed almost immediately by a stern look aimed at his sister.

“Oh Harry, you’re here!” Mary exclaimed nervously. She looked from her brother to his intended wife and back again. Rachel could tell she was frantically pondering what she should do next. “This is my friend Rachel,” she announced before leading the guest back to the table and chair she had just vacated to pull on her coat. Rachel was obedient, not wanting to cause a scene.

Rachel watched out of the corner of her eye as Mary pulled her brother closer to the fire and away from her. She could just about see their facial expressions and hear their muffled voices. She sat anxiously awaiting the verdict.

The voices suddenly became louder behind her, and she tried to keep her eyes averted, although she desperately wanted to know her fate.

“You did what?” Harry bellowed loudly which made Rachel jump in her chair. Mary tried to shush her brother as Rachel glanced around nervously. “I will not shush in my own home!” he responded angrily.

“You said you would consider taking a wife. So, I helped you out. You

should be grateful!” Mary had started to get angry too, by the sounds of her voice.

“You helped me out?! I didn’t ask you to. I am perfectly capable of finding a wife for myself, Mary. You have really overstepped the mark this time.” His voice boomed, as Rachel saw him indicate to her. “Are you in on this?” he asked as he approached Rachel seated quietly at the table.

“Not at all, actually. Mary had only just admitted her part in the letter-writing moments before you walked through the door.” The tears which had been threatening now fell down her cheeks and she wiped them away quickly, not wanting him to see that she was upset.

He turned back to his sister. “This is ludicrous! What do you expect me to do now? Marry a complete stranger?”

“Well, it’s surely better than being lonely and on your own,” Mary spat back.

“I was not lonely or on my own. You are always here! Maybe it is you who should be getting married. Maybe you should be focusing on you rather than on me,” he roared back at her.

An uncomfortable silence followed that hung awkwardly for a few moments. Rachel dared not so much as turn around to see what was unfolding behind her.

“Oh Mary, don’t cry!” came a gentle voice that Rachel had certainly not heard up to now. “I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry, I’m just shocked and upset that you would go behind my back like that.”

Rachel allowed herself to glance around and she saw Harry put his arm around his sister’s shoulder. She was pleased to find another side to this man who had so far only scared her.

Rachel stood up and approached the pair. “I really think I should leave now. Can one of you take me to the train station please?” she beseeched them hopefully.

Mary jumped up and again took Rachel’s hands in hers. “Honey, you

can't go out in this weather, it is simply unsafe. You must stay until the blizzard dies down."

"But I am not welcome here. I don't want to make anything uncomfortable here." She cried.

"No one is going anywhere in this weather," Harry stated in an authoritative tone. "Mary is right, for once. This weather is far too bad to be out on the road in a horse and cart. It is simply not possible. And you have not made things uncomfortable, my sister has." He winked at his sister affectionately, and she turned her head away in response.

"I don't know. Maybe I should try to walk," Rachel suggested.

"The snow is creating drifts out there, Rachel. It is not safe for anyone to be outdoors, especially not on foot. You would likely fall into a drift and never be seen again. Where is the sense in that?" he asked her gently, his eyes showing concern. "How about I take you to the train station as soon as the weather allows. It is likely to be several days, though, maybe even into a week before this all goes enough for us to travel." He nodded his head in the direction of the window where the snowfall was heavy.

"Yes, please agree!" cried Mary. "I would feel awful if anything happened to you. It would be all my fault because I got you to come here in the first place."

"Well, it sounds like I have no choice in the matter," Rachel complied sadly.

"We have plenty of space for you, fortunately, so we will be able to place you in your own room. Mary will settle you in, won't you, sister?" he asked.

"Of course. Come on, let's settle you in now," Mary agreed as she led Rachel across the room, picked up her carpetbag, and maneuvered through the room to the stairs.

Once upstairs, they crossed the corridor and Mary opened the last door on the left. "This room will be best for you. My room is right next door, so if you need anything you can come to me at any time. Even if it is in the middle

of the night.”

“Thank you, Mary, you are very kind,” Rachel responded genuinely, sitting despondently on the bed.

“It’s the very least I can do under the circumstances,” Mary replied, sitting beside her on the bed. “I shouldn’t have lied to you. Or to my brother. I was just so desperate to see him happy and settled with a lovely lady. All he does is work. He is on a mission to prove our father wrong about him and it’s not healthy,” she tried to explain.

“I just don’t know what I am going to do now,” Rachel admitted. “I really have nowhere to go. I can’t go back to my old life. I simply can’t.” She began to cry, aghast at her situation, and worried about what her future might hold. She had been so stupid to believe she had been writing to Harry and that they would live happily ever after. She was angry at herself for being too trusting and so naïve.

“Let’s try not to think about that just yet, Rachel. You are going to be here a few days at the very least, so why don’t we continue to get to know each other. At the very least, we can maybe become good friends and keep in touch once you do move on,” Mary suggested kindly.

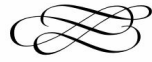
“Well, we did get along in our letters, I suppose.” Rachel winked at Mary as she said this and then looked away ashamedly.

“I’m sorry, Rachel. Truly I am.” She stood and moved to the door. “I am going to leave you to get on with getting settled in. Come down when you feel ready. I am going to start preparing dinner.”

Rachel nodded her agreement.

Once alone, Rachel was relieved to have some time to herself to think about her next move.

CHAPTER 10



Harry was still shocked at his sister's betrayal and her uncharacteristic behavior. He had not slept well the previous night, his slumber disrupted by the thought of a stranger sleeping under their roof. They did not know this girl; they didn't know if they could trust her. He took some comfort in the knowledge that she had nowhere to go. The snowfall had not abated at all which left no way of leaving the ranch at this time.

"Good morning, brother," Mary said as he entered the kitchen. "You are up a little later than normal today."

"Yes, I didn't sleep well, thanks to you," he retorted harshly and watched as his sister's face reddened.

He took his place at the table and she brought a hot coffee and warmed bread to him, which he accepted gratefully and thanked her genuinely. He knew his sister certainly didn't need to look after him and so he was very grateful for all that she did for him.

"I have said that I am sorry, Harry. Must you keep bringing it up?" she asked, tears brimming in her blue eyes.

"I can't just forget overnight what you have done. Not when the result of that is now under my roof," he replied incredulously.

"But I have explained my actions and the reasons for them. I worry about

you, and I just want you to be happy.”

“I was happy,” he stated, anger starting to show in his voice. He tried to keep calm, but his frustration with his sister was definitely winning out.

“Then why do you never smile? Why are you always working? Why do I never hear you laugh?” she asked as she took her place at the table across from him, a mug of coffee in her delicate hands.

He scoffed at this ridiculous comment. “Because I am trying to make a success of this ranch so that we are financially stable and will be comfortable for life!” he exclaimed, astonished that she did not already know this.

“We are already financially stable. The ranch is already successful. You have made that so and I am proud of you for that, but why do you need to continue to take it to the next step? Why are you never quite satisfied?”

He felt as though she was prodding at him, pushing the point too much. She was in the wrong right now, not him, but she was turning it around on him somehow and he felt as though he was losing control over the conversation. This made him feel angry. He ate the last of his warmed bread and stood up from the table.

“I will not discuss this with you any further. It is my life, Mary. Stop interfering in it!” he knew his voice was raised and that his sister was startled and upset by this, but he was fed up with her always nagging on at him.

He crossed the room, grabbed his coat, opened the door, and left abruptly, allowing the door to slam behind him.

Once outdoors he took a deep breath and struggled into his coat to protect himself even just a little against the billowing snow. He knew that in this weather it was going to be a long hard day and the last thing he needed at this time was his sister interfering in his life and a stranger held up in his home.

He crossed to the stables and checked in on all the cattle that he had managed to move to safety the previous evening. He was relieved to find them all fine and not adversely affected by the bitterly cold night they had endured. His mind wandered again to the cattle he had not managed to round

up. He knew that he needed to manage their situation first. He had to see how many had perished in the open, left to the elements as they had been. But he was reluctant to as the thought of losing any of his precious cattle was almost too much to bear. It had been since their father had died. He felt as though losing stock which his father had bought would just be another nail in his coffin.

Harry allowed his mind to wander to the lady who had entered his home and now slept a few feet down the corridor from him. She sure was pretty and she seemed to be nice and kind, but he had no time for romance. He had no time to spend anywhere but on his ranch which had to be his priority always. He could not allow his mind to wander and to chance possibly forgetting what was important in life. He vowed that during her stay in his house, he would stay away from Rachel as much as he could, and he would do that by working all the more.

CHAPTER 11



Rachel entered the kitchen that morning and overheard Mary and Harry's disagreement, seeing also the door close behind him when he left the house abruptly. She had looked to Mary as she walked towards the table to join her and had seen her look of anguish.

"Good morning, Rachel," she had greeted as brightly as she could muster under the circumstances.

"Good morning, Mary." Rachel was very obviously calm but not happy. She had not slept a wink during the night and the more she had thought about what Mary had done, the angrier she had become with her.

"Did you sleep well?" Mary had asked her, a small smile upon her pretty face.

"Not really, to be honest," she replied as she accepted the coffee from Mary's outstretched hand.

"Oh, I am sorry. I will get you another blanket for this evening. Make sure you are warm enough," she suggested hopefully, to which Rachel simply nodded. She had been a little cold so another blanket would not go amiss.

Now, as Rachel stood in the room they had allowed her to stay in, she looked out of the window across the fields and at the stunning mountains beyond. The snow gave it even more of a magical appearance, creating a smooth blanket over the landscape, as far as the eye could see.

She was regretting her behavior towards Mary earlier that day. She had been a little upset and angry about the situation and she knew she had taken this out on her somewhat, so she felt as though she needed to correct that as soon as she could. It was not in her nature to be unkind and she felt uneasy about her own behavior.

In her logical mind, she knew she was going to be stuck in the ranch house for the foreseeable future and it would therefore be better to make friends with Mary and see to it that she experienced the adventure of life on a ranch. It would certainly help the time pass quicker. As she looked across the magnificent grounds of the ranch, she could spot Harry in the distance. He seemed to be dragging something across the ground. She marveled at his tall, strong frame before reprimanding herself for having inappropriate thoughts about a man who did not want her there.

A small knock sounded on the bedroom door that was almost inaudible. Rachel listened closely and the knock came again, so she left the window and strode over to the door to open it.

“Rachel, I am sorry to bother you. Could we please talk?” asked a sheepish-looking Mary. Rachel stepped back to allow her to enter and the two sat on the bed as they had the previous day.

The familiar anger started to build in Rachel again as her defenses threatened to prevent any form of reconciliation. She fought to ignore these feelings as she faced her.

“I truly am sorry for what I have done, Rachel. I should not have put you in that position. I realize I have made things very difficult for you, especially as you have left your home and cannot go back. I am angry at myself for doing that to you.” Mary’s face said it all and Rachel could not help but feel for her. She held out a hand and the pair held hands as Mary continued. “I just love my brother so much and know that he deserves so much more than he thinks he needs.”

“I can see that, Mary, I really can, and I can clearly see he loves you too,

but don't you think you overstepped a little here?" Rachel asked carefully, not wanting to upset her.

"Maybe I did. To be honest I had not even really considered you leaving your home and how you might be feeling. Of course, I know from your letters that you weren't happy living with your stepfather, but I never thought about the consequence of you potentially ending up without a home. I don't know how I will live with myself knowing that you will not have a roof over your head," Mary cried, tears streaming down her face.

"Listen, you were right yesterday. Shall we just enjoy the time that we do have together? Get to know each other, become friends and then we can stay in touch. It will mean none of this was wasted." Rachel responded earnestly.

Rachel could tell that Mary had only meant well. She had only been trying to do the best for her brother, so she could not be angry at her for this. She had obviously thought Harry would come round to the idea and would welcome her with open arms, but this had not been the outcome. Rachel realized Mary could not have foreseen the resulting outcome, so she needed to let her anger go.

Ultimately, she reflected on the fact that she had left her old life. A life she did not enjoy or want. A life that she had been desperate to get away from. So, she should have no regrets. She would find a place to go, a place to stay. Everything could be sorted out, she was sure.

"Really?" Mary asked cautiously, "You can forgive me?" the question was etched across her pained face.

"Yes, really. I know you were just looking out for your brother. You acted out of love for him. I respect that actually." She responded kindly, a smile upon her face.

"Oh, thank you. I fear I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I will accept it gracefully and gratefully. Thank you!" Mary hopped up off the bed, obviously buoyed by the possibility of her new friendship. "Would you like me to show you around the grounds? I know it's still snowing, but we can

wrap up warm.” She suggested hopefully.

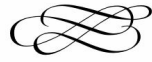
“That would be really lovely, actually; thank you, Mary,” Rachel agreed wholeheartedly. The place was undoubtedly beautiful, and she would love to see more.

They spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the stables and the immediate surrounds of the homestead. The two women enjoyed each other’s company and found themselves laughing and joking together.

They prepared the hot evening meal together; Rachel was happy to be able to help and to share her ideas for meals. She started to feel nervously excited about Harry’s return at the end of the day. She wanted to see him and find out how he felt about her being there now that he’d had time to think about it while he was out on the ranch.

She was to be disappointed as Harry did not return from the ranch before she retired to her room for the night. She had remained downstairs in the living area for as long as she could without making it obvious that she was waiting for him. Eventually, she had called it a day and gone to her room. She looked out of the bedroom window and spotted him in the distance, hard at work. She thought he must be exhausted by now, and she respected his work ethic.

CHAPTER 12



*H*arry was determined not to show any interest in Rachel. Over the past few days, she had been helping Mary in the ranch house. He had to admit that she was a good cook and was skilled in putting ingredients together that neither he nor Mary would ever have thought of.

He was now able to sleep at night, safe in the knowledge that she was not going to run away with their belongings. He was working very long hours, even longer than before. The cattle that he had not been able to round up had suffered a great deal. A good many had perished and he had been spending every waking hour dragging the carcasses across the field to discard of them safely. It was tiring and hard work, but also essential and needed to be done quickly.

He had not even seen Rachel on her first full day there, but he had been home in the evenings for a few nights now, so he had eaten with the two ladies. They had talked, although it had been quite stilted. He was polite but had no intention of forming any type of relationship with the woman.

“Just give her a chance.” Mary was talking to him over the breakfast table and he was deep in thought.

“What are you talking about?” he asked her impatiently. He had been daydreaming so intently that he had not heard what his sister had said.

“I have seen the way you look at Rachel. You like her. I can tell. Why are

you not allowing yourself to get to know her?” she asked him.

He was irritated by her comments. She was right, he did enjoy her company more than he would like to admit, but he had been hoping his sister had not noticed as much.

“Mary, don’t be silly! She is leaving as soon as this blasted snow abates enough to travel. I have no intention whatsoever of getting to know her better,” he responded abruptly, feeling his temper rise at her insistence.

“If you say so,” she replied, a small smile on her face as she turned her back to her brother to place the dishes in the sink.

He stood and paced across the room, put on his boots, collected his coat, and told her he was off to work, and he would see them that evening for dinner. Just as he was closing the door, he spotted Rachel entering the kitchen. They caught each other’s eye, and he felt his stomach somersault. He smiled as the door fully closed and they could no longer see each other.

As he walked down the wooden porch steps and away from the house, he wondered about the strange and unfamiliar feeling when he had caught Rachel’s eye. He knew he needed to keep his distance; he had no time for anything other than his work.

The snow had stopped falling at last, but the wind had picked up and this had caused eight-foot drifts on the trails. There was no possible way to travel to the train station. Not yet anyway.

CHAPTER 13



Rachel thought she saw a spark of something in Harry's eyes when they had made eye contact as he was leaving the house that morning. She could not deny that she certainly felt attracted to him. She could tell now that he was more relaxed with her being around, and that he was a kind gentleman who loved his family and his ranch.

She had felt disappointed when the snowfall stopped. She knew it meant she would be getting closer to having to leave. She didn't want to leave, she had become close friends with Mary, shared conversations with Harry, and had no idea where she was to go or what she was to do.

Harry had explained to the two ladies the previous night that they would not be able to travel to the train station yet due to the wind creating deep drifts along the tracks. She was relieved that she would not be able to leave just yet.

Mary agreed to lend her boots, which she now put on together with her overcoat and gloves. If she was going to be there for a few more days, she may as well do some exploring. She had decided she would venture out onto the ranchlands.

As she walked along, bracing herself against the cold by pulling her coat tight around her, she spotted Harry across one of the fields. She observed him at work for a little while, admiring his strength and his strong work ethos.

Finally, she approached him. He saw her as she got closer to him, and she could tell from his body language that he didn't know how he felt about her being there. She smiled openly at him and explained she had come out for a walk.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, genuinely interested.

"I lost a lot of our cattle in the storm, so I am gathering the carcasses to discard safely," he explained as briefly as he could.

"Oh Harry, I am so sorry to hear that! That must have been awful for you."

He nodded his agreement that it had indeed been a terrible time. She could see the pain etched on his face and could tell that his cattle meant a lot to him.

She watched him place the carcass of a fully grown bull on the mound. The acrid smell of death was strong at the distance. She saw Harry struggle and stepped up to help him without thinking twice about her actions. He looked aghast.

"You don't need to do that, Rachel. You'll get dirty," he exclaimed without a moment's thought.

She shrugged her shoulders and continued to help, even if it was against his will. She had been brought up to help others who were struggling and so it was in her nature to do so. And she wasn't worried about getting dirty at all. She was at her happiest outdoors and she had never really been girly in that way.

Rachel continued to help him move carcasses over the next few hours. They fell into conversation eventually, and he finally started to open up to her a little about his desire to have the biggest and best ranch around. His bright blue eyes lit up when he spoke about his goals for the ranch, and she could see it meant an awful lot to him.

"I must say, I think most ladies would be quite squeamish about this kind of work," Harry said to her as they made their way back to the barn to wash

up before he went on to round up the surviving cattle for feeding.

“I’m not most ladies!” she exclaimed with a smile on her face and a cheeky wink of her eye.

“No, it doesn’t appear you are,” he said in a rather matter-of-fact tone. Rachel didn’t know whether that was a compliment or criticism and regretted her words instantly. What if that had put him off her completely and he would rather have a ‘normal’ lady?

“My ma and pa brought me up to get stuck in and help out where it was needed, no matter what. I like being busy. I have enjoyed this afternoon,” she tried to explain, as she felt her cheeks flush.

“Alright. Well, thank you for the help but I must get on now,” he replied quite curtly as he walked off in a different direction and she went on her way to the barn to wash up and clean Mary’s boots before she returned them to her.

CHAPTER 14



Harry was increasingly surprised by Rachel. She was physically strong and had become very helpful around the ranch, appearing when he needed help and getting stuck in.

They had been chatting over the last few days while she had been out on the ranch with him, and the time had flown by as they had found they had quite a lot in common and a good many similar interests.

He had now found her to be highly intelligent and she had helped him with the accounts for the ranch, letting him know in no uncertain terms how and where he could save money and how and where he was wasteful.

At first, he had felt offended by her interference, but after some thought, he had come to realize that he was only ever going to expand the ranch by being clever with the expenditures and so he realized that he needed to take her advice.

Rachel now seemed to be spending the majority of the day on the ranch with him and he wasn't complaining. In fact, he had started to teach her how to ride a horse. He could see his sister Mary watching them from the window at times, and this was when he would draw away and take a step back from the situation. He did not want to give Mary false hope. As soon as the weather allowed it, he would be taking Rachel to the train station so that she could return home.

“So, where is home, Rachel? Where will you be heading back to when the weather allows?” he inquired as he led her while she sat astride his horse. He thought he saw her flinch at his words, but when she smiled, he realized he must have been seeing things.

“Well, it used to be Boston. But I did not leave my stepfather on the best of terms, so I won’t be welcome back there,” she replied. “Nor do I want to go back there, to be honest. I promised my mother on her deathbed that I would pursue adventures and make my own life after she had gone, and that is what I intend to do.”

“I sure know how that feels, making promises on a loved one’s deathbed. That is why I am so determined to make a success of the ranch. In his last few hours, my father told me I would amount to nothing and fail the ranch.”

“Oh gosh, Harry, that is awful!” she exclaimed. “No wonder you have been working so hard. It would have made me do the same; to prove him wrong.”

“Where do you think you will go then? Do you have any family?” Harry asked, a look of concern on his face as they discussed her uncertain future.

“No, my ma was the last of my family or at least the last that I knew of. So, it’s just me. But I’ll be alright. I always am,” she said brightly, but Harry could tell from her eyes that she did not feel as confident about this as she pretended.

“Right, let’s get back to this lesson, shall we? Do you want to try galloping again? You were very good at it last time.” He had been very impressed with her ability on the horse. She had never ridden before coming to his ranch and she had taken to it very well and had become a competent rider.

“Maybe there is no point. I will be leaving soon, as you said, and I might never ride again.”

He detected a sadness in her voice, a sadness which he felt in his own heart. He nodded in agreement as he patted the horse’s flank and allowed

them to trot off without him.

Harry returned to his work on the ranch and thought about the last few days and all the time he had spent with Rachel. He needed to refocus his attention on the ranch and not lose sight of his end goal. Rachel had become too much of a distraction and he needed to stop that immediately. There was no time for distractions in this world.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15



She had felt a deep sense of disappointment when she had suggested the horse-riding lessons might be a waste of time and Harry had fully agreed with her. She had hoped he might say she could stay longer, or even better, that he wanted her to stay longer. But she knew it was pointless. He was never going to let anything get in the way of his desire to make the ranch an even bigger success than it already was, so she had to accept that she would leave soon.

Rachel had become rather fond of Harry over the days she had been helping him out on the ranch. She liked the work and the conversation had flowed easily between them.

She was also very fond of his sister, Mary. They had become thick as thieves in the time she had been there, and she knew it was going to be hard for them to go their separate ways.

The door flung open and Harry entered, the cold air billowing around him as the wind blew the remaining snow into a blizzard around him. She smiled at him, but received a frown in return.

While Harry took off his overcoat and boots, washed his hands, and took his seat at the table, Rachel busied herself with helping Mary to finish off the meal and set the table.

The mealtimes on the previous evenings had been pleasant, with lots of

chatter among the three. But this evening felt different. Harry was not in the mood to talk, and she could tell that he was distancing himself from her. Probably as a result of the talk they had earlier about her leaving.

Rachel wished it would begin to snow again just so that she could stay a while longer.

“The drifts will have gone in a few days, so I will be able to take you to the train station. Or Mary can. Whichever,” he suddenly stated, without raising his eyes from his plate. The message to Rachel was very clear; he was not bothered about her leaving and did not even particularly want to take her to the train station to say goodbye. She meant nothing to him and the time they had spent together was simply that, nothing more.

“Alright. Then I shall make plans as to where to go. Thank you,” she replied curtly as she glanced across at Mary, who looked as though she was about to cry.

“Do you have enough money?” he asked her brusquely with a quick glance in her direction. “I can pay you for the work you have done for me.”

She felt insulted at this offer and responded abruptly that she had her own money. Then she rose from her chair and excused herself to retire to her room. She needed to be alone with her thoughts. How could he have thought she wanted money from him for her time spent there and for her help. She thought he had got to know her better than that; obviously not. He was not the man she had thought he was either.

Later that evening she went back downstairs to find Mary sitting alone at the kitchen table. She looked sad and desolate, a mug of coffee in her hands, her head bowed low, almost leaning on the mug.

“Are you alright, Mary?” she asked, genuine concern for the woman who had been so kind to her since she had arrived and had made her feel so welcome. Yes, she had made some mistakes in writing to Rachel and inviting her here, but she had only done it out of love, and she understood that now. She thought Harry understood that now, too, and hoped he had been kind to

her. "I'm sorry I didn't help you clear away after dinner."

"And I am sorry my brother is so rude and obnoxious!" Mary spat out as tears began to drop from her eyelids onto the table. "I thought you were getting along so well. I have seen the way he looks at you. And then he treats you like that! I am sorry." She put her head in her hands and Rachel approached her at the table and pulled her own chair closer so that she could embrace her. There was no sign of Harry now.

"You do not need to apologize. He told me from the beginning that I would be leaving, so it shouldn't be a surprise to either of us," Rachel replied gently. "Has he retired for the night? I hope you two didn't fight again."

"I gave him a piece of my mind, so he stormed off onto the ranch. I hope he sits and ponders on my words. Once he has let you go, he will never get you back. I told him that. He will be sorry." Her voice quivered as she struggled to contain her emotions.

"Hey, hey, don't you get so upset. We will stay in touch anyway, won't we? We can write and maybe you can even come and visit me once I am settled someplace," Rachel suggested.

"That's just it!" Mary cried. "You don't even know where you are going to go! He is basically throwing you out onto the street!" she exclaimed. "Our mother would be so ashamed of him! She did not bring us up to be so heartless. I know I did wrong, but he shouldn't punish you for my mistakes."

Rachel sat with her as she cried. She tried to console her new friend, but there was nothing she could say to calm her down, so she simply sat with her and let her get it all out. It felt as though Mary had needed to get a great deal off her chest and this was the outburst she needed. Rachel got the impression that this was the first time Mary had cried since they lost their parents, and it was long overdue.

CHAPTER 16



Rachel awoke with a start that morning. She had a foreboding, knowing that this would be her last full day on the beautiful ranch that she had grown so fond of; the next day she would leave and begin her new adventure.

Over the previous few days, she had spent a lot of time in her room considering her options and what she would do next. She had decided that she would take the train to California, a journey of almost a week. Once there, she would find work and hopefully also lodging. She knew about the gold mining industry there and figured on plenty of opportunities for work in the local shops or saloons. Maybe she would even find herself a kindly miner.

She had shared her intended next move with Mary, who had been supportive but was still very upset that she would be leaving them. Mary confided in Rachel that she had not had a friend in a very long time, since their parents died really, as she had been so focused on looking after her brother, whom she now found to be ungrateful and inconsiderate.

Rachel did not want there to be a rift between the pair, but she was at a loss as to how to get them to talk to each other. In the days leading up to this, it had been awkward in the house whenever Harry was there. They all felt it, she was sure. She was almost at the point of being glad to leave, if only she didn't love it there so much.

She decided to make the most of her last day and, knowing she was not likely to get a chance to journey in California, she had asked Harry the night before if she could take his horse out for a ride around the grounds. She was looking forward to exploring a little on her own and it gave her a chance to say goodbye.

Rachel jumped out of bed and dressed for her adventure. She was allowed to borrow Mary's boots again - for the last time - and Harry had lent her a warm overcoat, which was too big, but nice and warm, so she had gratefully accepted it.

"Good morning, Rachel, you're up early today," Mary said as she entered the kitchen. Mary strode to the stove to get her coffee.

"No coffee for me this morning, thank you. I want to get out on that horse before the wind gets up again. The weather seems really calm right now, so I want to take advantage of that and get going," Rachel explained, and Mary nodded in understanding.

"Well, go careful out there, won't you. The snow is still pretty bad in places. That's why he shouldn't be making you leave just yet. It's not cleared up, it's going to be a terrible journey tomorrow," Mary complained again, and Rachel simply smiled, gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek for caring, grabbed Harry's coat, and left the house through the kitchen door.

Once on the porch, Rachel breathed in the air around her. With the negativity in the house at the moment, it had become quite stifling, so it was nice to get some fresh air. She looked around to see if there was any sign of Harry; there was not, but she quickly spotted his horse. Harry must have readied the horse for her and tethered him to the back railing of the porch so that she wouldn't need to go all the way to the stable for him. Rachel smiled at this kind act and wished that Harry could just be this was constantly, without the changing moods.

She patted the horse as she approached and talked to him, asking him to be gentle with her. She had only been riding for a week, but she loved the

thrill of it and Harry had said she was more than competent to be out on her own.

They trotted off towards the fields that Rachel knew best, where she had helped Harry to move the carcasses only a week before. She felt as though she had been on the ranch for much longer than she actually had and knew she would be sad to leave the following day.

The ground was still heavily laden with snow in places, so they took it easy. Rachel also wanted to be able to explore every nook and cranny, so going slowly allowed her to see places she might not have noticed, some hidden by the snow. Every so often she would pull the horse to a stop and hop down. She would wander around, exploring objects hidden beneath the snow and opening cavities she had never noticed before, with hidden animal dens beneath.

Rachel's adventurous side was back, and she spent a good three hours exploring the ranch beyond the homestead. She found she was able to clear her mind and focus on what she was doing, a welcome reprieve from thinking about leaving the Kennedys come tomorrow.

Rachel came across a ravine. It looked so beautiful and intriguing that she decided to very slowly make her way down there on the horse. It was hard going on because of the terrain and the horse lost his footing a few times but regained his balance and Rachel proudly stayed firmly in the saddle. When she and the horse finally reached the bottom of the ravine, she was rewarded with a stunning view. A small frozen lake stretched out ahead of them. In the very center was a beautiful rock formation, perfectly enclosed with sparkling ice. She stopped the horse next to a tree and tethered him to it. She knew she was a fair distance from the ranch house now and did not want to risk the horse galloping back without her.

She tentatively placed the front of one small foot onto the ice, Mary's boot making an imprint in the light covering of snow. She dared to put her foot a little further on and press down a lot harder. When she felt no

movement or give beneath her foot, she put her weight on one foot on the ice. Again, there was no movement beneath, so she concluded the ice was thick enough to hold her weight.

She stepped back onto the firm ground before taking a big breath and making her way to the formation of rocks that had captured her attention. She knew it was dangerous, she knew her mother and father would tell her not to do it, but the rocks were so captivating; they looked as though they had been arranged specifically and she wanted to see why.

Rachel slowly edged forward. She watched the ice beneath her feet with each step, careful to ensure there was no or little movement beneath the ice. With each step, she glanced up and admired the formation ahead of her and she tried to work out how many steps she had left until she reached it. It took longer than she had predicted and it must have been further than it appeared.

Finally, she reached the rock formation and reached out a hand to steady herself by taking hold of the largest rock in the center. And then the ice gave way, and she felt the rock slip from her reach and her body tumble into the depths of the freezing water. Rachel gasped just before her head went under. Her thoughts seem to bombard her mind all in one go; how could she have been so stupid? She should have known the ice around the rocks would be weaker. Was she going to die?

After what seemed like an age, she stopped freefalling into the depths and was able to propel herself upwards in the water. She reached the surface and frantically felt around for the gap in the ice through which she had fallen. She couldn't find it. Visibility was low under the water, and she was running out of oxygen.

She thought of her mother and father and the possibility of seeing them again. She was sure she was going to drown. She knew no one was around to help her, she had led the horse so far from the ranch.

Suddenly, she could see movement above the ice and hear bashing against the sheet of ice holding her prisoner. Someone was trying to break

through the ice. With a renewed sense of hope of surviving this adventure, she moved away so as to not be in danger of the shards of ice splintering away. She was becoming lightheaded, maybe hyperthermia would be setting in soon, she panicked.

Seemingly out of nowhere a strong hand reached her and pulled her roughly from the water. She gasped and blinked her eyes against the light as she surfaced from the freezing depths. She could feel her body lifted to safety, but she was in and out of consciousness.

She couldn't control her breathing and her body was shaking involuntarily. She gasped and coughed to clear her lungs.

"Take your time. Take your time. Slow breaths. That's it, take your time." She heard the soothing voice to her side. She opened her eyes as she tried to take slow and deep breaths. Harry! What on earth had he been doing out this way? She could not believe it was he who had rescued her. What would he think of her now? Surely, he would think her careless and irresponsible to have landed in such a predicament. She felt embarrassed and ashamed and hot tears threatened her eyes.

"H-Harry!" she managed in an unrecognizable voice.

"Shush now, don't try to speak. You have been through some ordeal there. You just concentrate on taking some breaths and regaining your composure and then we need to get you back to the house so we can get you warmed up," he replied kindly, a sad expression on his chiseled face.

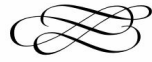
After what felt like an age, he told her he was going to lift her onto the horse and get her back to the ranch as quickly as possible. She could see her horse and the horse Harry rode in and happened upon her in distress. Harry gently placed her cold and shivering body over his own horse, removed his jacket, and placed it over her. He grabbed the reins of both horses and climbed into the saddle of her horse and together they galloped the relatively long track back to the house.

Rachel was aware of the cold and knew that Harry would need his jacket

to stave off freezing in this weather, but she didn't have the energy to make the point. She must have fallen asleep or lost consciousness because, before she knew it, they were at the porch steps of the ranch house.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17



“*M*y goodness me, what has happened?” his sister cried out as she opened the door to the kitchen and ran to their aid. She must have seen Harry galloping in from afar.

“Quick, Mary, get some blankets and heat some water,” Harry ordered, desperate to get Rachel warmed without delay. He had kept a vigilant eye on her on the ride back and her breathing had become labored. She was clinging to life but he knew she was not in a good way. He wondered if she had been under the water for too long. If only he had got her out quicker, he thought.

Mary had rushed off to do as she was told. He was grateful that she had not hung around to ask questions. They had to hurry to help Rachel through this.

He dismounted and tethered both horses to the porch railing. Rachel’s body was frozen and she proved to be a dead weight, carrying her made all the more cumbersome due to her wet clothes. He eventually managed to lift her off the horse and comfortably in his arms. He looked into her face, but there was no sign of life. His heart stopped beating for a moment before his survival instincts kicked in and he quickly carried her into the house.

Harry gently placed Rachel onto the blankets Mary had laid out in front of the fire in the kitchen. He asked his sister if she would be so kind as to remove her wet clothes and allowed them the privacy to do so. He noticed

that Mary had retrieved Rachel's nightgown from upstairs and she had at the ready. Mary silently nodded and started to peel the clothes off the frozen Rachel. Harry kept his back to them, preparing a warm drink for Rachel with the hot water. He knew that she would not be able to drink it just yet, but he hoped by putting it to her lips, the warm sensation might just help. It had to be worth a try.

Harry then rushed out of the house, telling his sister he was getting logs for the fire. Within moments he was back, checking before entering that Rachel was decent.

"Come in, Harry." Mary called, "I have her dressed and wrapped in blankets. Can you keep an eye on her while you pack the fire, and I will get something to put under her head? Her hair is sodden, so I need a towel and a pillow."

He had forgotten how well his sister handled problems. She was always quick to know what to do and how to best treat a situation. They had been living such mundane, normal lives for so long now that he hadn't seen that side of her for some time. He felt proud of her resilience and attention to detail and knew he would not have thought of everything that she did. He was grateful for her being there and taking control.

He added logs to the fire and stoked it with the poker while keeping an eye on Rachel. Her breathing was shallow, her skin pale, and her eyes seemed to have fallen back into their sockets. His stomach churned with fear. Why had he not been faster? How could he have been so stupid as to let her go out on horseback alone in this weather?

When Mary returned to the room, Harry knelt by the side of Rachel, her shivering body wrapped in blankets. Mary propped her head up onto the pillow, making sure her wet hair was bundled in a towel. He rubbed his hands, noticing for the first time that he was too cold for comfort. Being careful to not be disrespectful in any way, Harry rubbed her body vigorously to get the blood flowing and to warm her.

Mary brought over the mug of warm water which Harry had poured and lifted Rachel's head slowly and gently with one hand, bringing the cup to her lips with the other. There was no movement from Rachel and the liquid simply slipped down her chin. Mary aborted the mission for the moment and helped her brother rub circulation back into Rachel's arms to help warm her.

Together they worked on warming her for over half an hour. Slowly but surely some signs of improvement became noticeable in her. She was not shivering quite as much as she had been, and her lips were not quite as blue as they had been when she was brought back to the house.

"Do you think I should ride out to town and get the doctor?" Harry asked his sister, as he contemplated having not done enough to get her through this.

"I don't know, Harry. Maybe I should go. You can last longer with rubbing her limbs to get the blood flowing and bring warmth back to her body," Mary replied.

"But it's not proper for me to be left alone with her here, and besides, I am the faster rider. I should be back before you know it," he argued, before pointing out, "It's not easy out there on those tracks. I would hate for anything to happen to you too." He was relieved that she nodded her agreement and suspected she had no desire to head out, especially considering that state of Rachel.

Harry rushed to collect the blankets from his bed and placed these gently on Rachel, instructing Mary to rub her arms and legs until he returned.

He grabbed his spare coat out of the closet and left barely an hour after carrying Rachel's frozen body in through the same door. He felt a sense of foreboding at leaving her, but he knew it was sensible to get medical help and he knew his sister would take great care of her in his absence.

Moments before he rode his horse out the homestead yard, he thought he heard a sound behind him. He pulled the horse to a stop and looked over his shoulder. Mary was standing at the door, on the porch, waving her arms frantically. He could not hear what she was saying, thanks to the wind and so

he turned his horse back, fearful of the news.

“She’s waking up!” Mary exclaimed, her eyes wide with wonder at the miracle she had witnessed.

He leaped from the horse without so much as bothering to tether it. Returning to Rachel’s side inside the house, he could see that the color had certainly started to return to her skin, and she was not shaking as violently as she had been a few minutes earlier.

Mary sat on one side of Rachel, Harry on the other, and they each held her hands, stroking them to warm her and assure her that they were there for her. Her eyelids flickered as her eyes moved beneath, which was a promising sign. After just a few more minutes her eyes slowly opened and she looked from side to side.

CHAPTER 18



“*W*h-what happened?” Rachel asked, her voice croaky and weak. Her last recollection was tethering the horse to the tree. But then her memories began to flood back, and she remembered the frozen lake and her stupidity in trying to cross it to reach the rocks. She began to cry, the tears flowing freely down her cheeks and into her hair.

“Hey, don’t cry. You are alright. You are going to be alright.” She heard Mary reassure from one side. She looked across to her new friend and saw the tears streaming down her face too, so she knew that she had been in serious and real danger.

“She is right, you are going to be just fine.” She heard his voice and slowly turned her head until she was able to see Harry to the other side of her. She could feel her hand being stroked and knew that he had her hand in his. She appreciated that sentiment and his intent to warm her.

“I’m sorry,” she cried as she recollected Harry pulling her from the depths of that water, where she thought she would surely die.

“Please don’t be sorry, Rachel. You are safe now. You just need to rest,” he assured her.

“Have some of this, Rachel, it’s just warm water but we need to get your insides warm as soon as we can, so the more you can drink the better. Rachel felt Harry move to lift her head and place it on his knees to lift her to make it

easier for her to swallow, while Mary tipped the cup on her lips. She wanted to be able to do it herself, but she felt helpless, her arms felt weighted down and she was unable to move them.

She accepted the warm water eagerly and was able to take little sips. Meanwhile, Harry and Mary discussed what happened and Rachel tried to make sense of her near disaster.

“But why were you there?” she heard Mary ask her brother.

“I... I... I followed her out there,” she heard him admit. She was both shocked and intrigued by this revelation. “The weather is still not great out there, but she insisted on going out on the horse for her last day and I didn’t want to stop her. I know she loves adventures. But I was worried about her running into danger. So, I followed her. I know I shouldn’t have, but I did.” He sounded anxious and worried about this admission.

“I am so glad you did! It is not worth thinking about what could have happened if you had not been there to help her. Thank goodness you saved her!” she heard Mary cry, as she felt her squeeze her hand.

“Thank you,” Rachel whispered as she felt herself drift into a deep sleep.

A while later, Rachel opened her eyes again, this time to find herself alone with Harry, although she could hear Mary behind them at the stove. Her heart leaped in her chest when she saw his face. She looked at the window and could see it was now nighttime, she must have slept all afternoon.

“Hey, sleepyhead!” Harry remarked with a smile on his face as he pulled himself around so she could see him properly. He had continued to rub her arms and legs to help the circulation. She wondered how long he had been doing that. He must be exhausted too, she thought.

“Hello,” she answered, without the energy to say any more than that.

“Mary is just making us all some vegetable soup. It will really help you to warm your insides.” He had a look of genuine concern and care on his face. “You gave us quite the scare, you know.”

“Sorry.” She smiled weakly and attempted to lift herself in a seated position beside him. The effort was too much, and her body ached all over, so she allowed it to sink back, enjoying the warmth of the fire next to her.

“No,” Harry said firmly, “I am sorry. I have behaved terribly, and I am sorry.” They looked into each other’s eyes. “The truth is, I fell in love with you the moment I set eyes on you, on that very first day. My love for you grew each day, when we chatted, when you helped me work, even when I was rude to you, and you continued to be kind and courteous. I should never have tried to hide that. I should never have threatened to send you away. I am far too stubborn,” he admitted to her, as butterflies took flight in her stomach and her heart sang with joy.

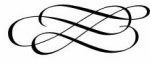
“You are!” she exclaimed, with a small smile on her face and love in her eyes.

“I hope you can forgive me. I don’t deserve to be forgiven, but I do hope you will. I thought I had lost you and it felt as though I would have lost my whole world.” She watched as his eyes brimmed with tears. “I never want to lose you. Please say you will stay and be my wife.”

Rachel let the tears drop from her eyes as she nodded in agreement. Of course, she would marry him.

“Oh, how wonderful!” she heard Mary exclaim from the kitchen. She had clearly been able to hear their supposedly private conversation. Harry and Rachel laughed, and he held her hand and promised never to let go.

EPILOGUE



Rather than getting up and leaving as planned just twenty-four hours earlier, Rachel woke to feel fairly fresh considering all that she had been through the day before. She had taken her time to wash and dress and had made her way down the stairs to join her husband-to-be and sister-in-law-to-be.

They had fussed over her the whole morning, eager to see her well. She seemed to have escaped any nasty repercussions from the day before. She assured them that she felt just fine, and she ate and drank all that she was offered to give her nourishment and warmth.

Rachel needn't have worried that Harry might change his mind overnight. He was still dead set on them marrying, and later that afternoon they all headed into town, he up front leading the horse, with Rachel and Mary in the cart wearing their best clothes.

In town, they married in a quiet service, with just Mary and a friend of Harry's as their witnesses. He intended to take on this friend as his ranch hand to relieve his workloads now that he had a wife,

The words they shared perfectly described how they intended to live their married lives together and they beamed smiles at each other as they spoke them.

She could see that Mary was beside herself with happiness that her plan

had indeed worked out and everything had fallen into place. Rachel knew this would give Mary independence and allow her to do whatever it was that she loved to do; she wanted to become a nurse in the local hospital and help the ill, as she had helped Rachel just the day before. She and Harry had undoubtedly saved her life.

Mary had prepared them a special meal for after the ceremony and they celebrated the marriage together around their table in the kitchen. They ate, they chatted, they laughed. Most of all they enjoyed each other's company and Harry and Rachel held hands across the table.

“Mostly, I want to give thanks to my sister for bringing this wonderful woman into my life and teaching me that there is more to life than work and proving my father wrong,” Harry shared. “Without you both, I would be nothing.”

Rachel looked out the window, up at the sky, and thought fondly of her mother and father, who she wished with all her heart could have been there for her wedding day. She knew they would be incredibly proud of her for following her dreams and seeing this adventure through.

ALSO BY EMMA ASHWOOD

Fleeing to Freedom

An unwanted arranged marriage, an audacious plan to become a mail order bride and a handsome frontier man saddled with tragedy and grief.

Eleanor Kirby faces a grim future as the arranged bride of a much older man. Desperate to escape this fate, she and her mother, Elizabeth, devise a plan to become a mail order bride to a miner in Arizona.

Bradley Brooker is immediately smitten by their correspondence. When a marriage proposal arrives, Eleanor flees to Thunder Valley. But life in the Wild West is not what Eleanor expected. Hardships and challenges test her strength and resolve.

Eleanor's ruthless stepfather, Donald, will stop at nothing to see his plans come to fruition and sets about to bring her home.

Eleanor has a difficult choice; adapt to this new life, far from the luxuries she was accustomed to or succumb to her evil stepfather's will.

As danger lurks in the copper mine and heartache and tragedy strike, Eleanor and Bradley must fight for their future and love.

Will they be able to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way? Love knows no bounds in this historical western romance.

[DOWNLOAD NOW](#)

OceanofPDF.com