



The Rancher's Wedding

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: From the bestselling author Diana Palmer comes a sexy opposites attract tale of unbridled love, set against a breathtaking Colorado landscape made for happily ever after—if things don't get too complicated . . . When a rugged Colorado rancher who's in the red meets up with a screenwriter-turned-waitress dogged by scandal, they put their talents—and their hearts—together. But will front page news put a damper on the sparks flying between them?

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Prologue

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1873

“One, two...”

Estelle Williams tiptoed away from her best friend. She knew the secret to hide and seek was to be as quiet as possible. Sounds would always betray you. It also helped that she had a plan and knew exactly where she was going to hide.

“...three, four...”

Megan was counting too fast, Estelle thought. Her heart raced. There was a tiny nook outside her father’s office and, if she could get there, she could curl up and hide inside. There was no way Megan could find her there. The question was, could she get there before Megan made it to ten?

“...five, six...”

Estelle inched up the stairs, light as a ballerina, wary of the steps that creaked. It was the house she had grown up in, so she had that advantage going for her. It also helped that she was still so small, even for an eleven-year-old.

“...seven, eight...”

She was almost there. The nook was just down the hall. She could do it. She held her breath and scurried her feet, making sure that each of her steps was perfectly silent.

“...nine...”

The nook was right there. She climbed inside right as Megan said...

“...ten! Ready or not, I’m going to find you.”

Estelle took in light, shallow, quick breaths, none of them reaching the bottom of her lungs. She felt tense and scared, with heightened awareness of the sounds that Megan made downstairs.

Estelle could hear her walking into the den and could almost sense her looking around corners; then she heard the quick footsteps of Megan moving across the wooden floor to look somewhere else. So long as Megan stayed downstairs, Estelle was safe.

The office door opened and closed. Estelle put her ear to the wall and listened as her father walked in, talking to someone else.

“Take a seat,” he said. “Now, let’s go over this. What’s your proposal?”

It sounded like grown-up talk, the kind of thing that Estelle wouldn’t usually be interested in, but something about them not knowing she was listening made it exciting. This was grown-up talk that Estelle wasn’t supposed to hear.

“Richard, this is my son, Ethan.” That was a voice Estelle didn’t recognize.

“Pleasure to meet you, young man.”

“Likewise, sir.” That was the man’s son. He definitely didn’t sound like a child, but he didn’t quite sound like a grown-up, either. Estelle peeked through the thin spaces in the wood to try and get a look at him, but all she could see were the pants the men were wearing. She was too low to see any faces.

“Firm handshake, my lad. That’s the sign of a good man.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The other grown-up continued. “It is my understanding that you don’t have a son of your own to continue the family banking business.”

“No, just one beautiful daughter.”

“Quite beautiful.”

“She takes after her mother.”

The other man laughed. “Of course, she does! Now, what I propose to you is my son, who has just recently finished his education at the University of Pennsylvania, studying business and economics... Son, tell him your grades.”

There was a pause.

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“Go on, tell him.”

“All A’s, sir.”

“That’s mighty impressive,” Estelle’s father said. “Don’t be shy, that’s something to boast about.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The other adult continued. “I propose an arrangement whereby we agree that my son will marry your daughter, when she comes of age. In the meantime, you will act as Ethan’s mentor, with the eventual goal being to merge our two banks with him eventually, down the line, acting as successor to us both.”

Did Estelle hear them right? Was this her future husband in the other room? She imagined the weddings that she used to play out with her dolls when she was younger. Did she want to see him?

Estelle had just reached an age where the boys at school, once vile little things that the world would be better without, had become slightly interesting. A few years earlier, she would have felt sick at the idea that she would have to someday marry a boy, but now it didn’t seem so bad—depending on what he looked like.

Part of her wanted to see her future husband. Would he be tall and handsome? Or maybe he would have dirty blond hair and a smile that could make her heart flutter.

“Gotcha!” Megan tagged Estelle, giggling.

Estelle turned toward Megan, putting an index finger to her lips. “Shh!”

“What is it?” Megan whispered. “What’s going on?”

Estelle pointed to the slit between the wood. “In there, it’s the man I’m going to marry.”

“Well, then,” Megan replied, pulling Estelle up, “we have to meet him.”

“What? No, Megan!”

Megan pulled her out of the nook and tugged her down the hall. Estelle wasn’t ready to make that decision on her own, but Megan dragged her into it.

Through the doorway, Estelle saw the man. He was tall and certainly older than a child, maybe in his 20s, with thick locks of golden blond hair and a very slim build.

He was an utter disappointment.

And he was shaking her father’s hand.

“I believe we have a deal, young man,” her father said.

This was her Prince Charming? This was the man she was going to make babies with? Maybe someone else would find him attractive—indeed, he was attractive, in a boyish sort of way, but that’s not what Estelle wanted in a husband.

She wanted to one day marry a man who was strong and could take care of her. This man just looked like a grown-up brat.

Chapter One

Seven years later

By her 18th birthday, Estelle had all but forgotten about the blond man. Her father had never mentioned him to her, so she thought perhaps she had only imagined it. She had been known for her wild imagination as a child, so it would stand to reason that maybe she'd just made the whole thing up. His face seemed so specific, though, more like a real person she had met than a fuzzy picture of someone that her imagination would come up with.

The blond man wasn't on Estelle's mind at all when her father told her that somebody would be joining them for dinner and he would very much like her to meet him. The guest was a man that her father had been working with for a long time at the bank, and so he wanted her to be on her best behavior.

"My lord, father," Estelle said. "I'm an adult now. You don't need to talk to me like a child."

"I know, I know," he said. "I just want to be very clear that you need to be using your pleases and thank yous and demonstrating proper manners. This is a very important evening for both of us."

Estelle assumed this would be an older gentleman who was interested in some sort of business deal that only affected her tangentially.

He was not an older gentleman, however, and when he arrived and removed his hat, she recognized him by his eyebrows and the odd way his nose seemed to turn up toward her.

"Hello, Miss Williams," he said, taking her hand and kissing it, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

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She backed away from him, frightened. It was as though he was a monster from her childhood, hidden in the shadows of her bedroom, who had suddenly returned to her as an adult. She had dismissed what she had seen with her own two eyes as the delusions of a child, but now realized she should have trusted her instinct all along.

“She’s quite shy,” her father said, “but once she becomes accustomed to you, I’m sure that will go away.”

Her father turned toward her. “This is Ethan Fitzgerald, darling. He’s been my protégé for some time now. He’s an upstanding young gentleman, if I may say so myself.”

Estelle had no response to that. Her tongue remained frozen in her mouth, unable to make any sounds—certainly none that were appropriate, given the setting. Thoughts raced through her head as her heartbeat quickened and she felt dizzy as though she were about to faint.

“I think I need to sit down,” she said.

“Perhaps you’re just hungry,” Ethan said. “I understand that you have a wonderful dinner planned for us tonight?”

Estelle’s father nodded. “Yes, we do. May I take your coat?”

“Please.”

He took them into the kitchen, where Estelle sat down next to her father at the far end

of the table and across from Ethan.

“You know, Father,” Estelle said, “I don’t have much of an appetite this evening. May I be excused?”

“What’s come over you, Estelle?” her father asked.

“Perhaps it’s the heat?” Ethan suggested.

“Yes,” Estelle said, “that must be it. The heat. I think it’s best if I lie down.”

Her father flashed her a disapproving look.

“We can discuss business, Mr. Williams, it’s fine,” Ethan said.

Her father considered the idea, but clearly did not want to make a scene in front of the guest. “Go along, then,” he said.

Estelle got up from the table and, as quickly as she could, left the room and ascended the staircase to her room. She laid down on her bed and took as deep a breath as her corset would allow, then bit her lip to keep herself from crying.

By the time her father came to check on her, she had already fallen asleep.

The following day was sunny and bright, with temperate weather that would have been a tragedy to waste. Estelle went next door to ask Megan, still her friend after all these years, if she’d like to join her on a picnic at the park.

Upon arriving there, the two of them spread out on a blanket just as the sun hid

behind a cloud, diffusing the light across the sky and softening their features.

They began with pleasantries, but Estelle quickly moved into telling her friend about Ethan.

“You’ll never believe who my father brought home last night,” Estelle said, trying to phrase it as a happy thought and not something that had been burrowing in her mind since the day before.

“Who?”

“Do you remember the funny man we met as a child? In my house? The one my father said would be my husband?”

Megan looked at Estelle as though she was speaking another language. “I don’t, no.”

“You’d think you’d remember something like that.”

Megan shrugged. “I’m sorry, Estelle, I don’t.”

Estelle hoped she might be able to trigger Megan’s memory. “We couldn’t have been much older than 11 or so. We were playing hide and seek in the house and there was a blond man and I told you he was going to be my husband.”

“Is he handsome?”

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“In his own way,” Estelle said, cautiously.

“I expect I’d remember him if he was handsome.”

Estelle was struggling to find the words. He wasn’t particularly unattractive, but that wasn’t the part that bothered her. There was another element to him that simply rubbed her the wrong way. She didn’t have the words, and the ones she did have made her seem silly. Maybe it was the way he looked at her. When his eyes fixed on her, they didn’t blink. The stare was so intense that she felt as though it might never leave.

He frightened her. He sent a chill down her spine just being in the same room as her. She hadn’t been lying to her father when she’d told him she wasn’t feeling well. Her stomach was, indeed, turning.

But that sounded melodramatic. She’d have to say something simpler.

“He’s pleasant enough to look at, but is it too much to want to be wooed by a man rather than just assigned to him?”

“Perhaps he will try to woo you if you’d only give him a chance.”

“Or, perhaps I don’t wish to be wooed by him.”

Megan nodded. “This, I understand.” She reached inside of her picnic basket and pulled out a large pamphlet, which she handed to Estelle. “I think I may have a solution for you.”

Estelle looked at the pamphlet, unsure of how it could possibly help her.

“What is this?”

“Are you familiar with the concept of a mail-order bride?” Megan asked.

A mail-order bride? “Is that what it sounds like?”

“A man corresponds with you via post, then, if you reach an agreement, he sends to have you shipped to him and you marry.”

The very notion of marrying a man sight unseen sounded wrong to Estelle. It felt elicited, like a game of chance. Her cheeks burned. She was both aghast and, secretly, intrigued.

“This is something you’re thinking of doing?” Estelle asked.

“I’m considering it. It never hurts to see what options are available. These are men from all over the country just looking for wives. They’ll pay for transportation and provide room and board—all in exchange for marrying them.”

Estelle couldn’t deny her interest in the subject. Part of it sounded so romantic, to marry a man based only on correspondence, but she had to admit that she was a woman who cared about appearance, as well.

“How do I know what they look like?”

“Here,” Megan said, pointing to one of the entries. “They describe themselves sometimes. Brown hair and moustache, 35 years old, 6 feet 2 inches tall.”

Estelle laughed. “They can say whatever they want. How am I to know they’re telling

the truth?”

“I suppose, but why would they lie? If they’re paying for you to go all the way across the country, I imagine they don’t want you to be disappointed when you arrive.”

“Fine, let’s see what we have here.” Estelle perused the long list of descriptions. “60-year-old gentleman widower seeking a good cook between the age of 20 and 25 in Louisville, Kentucky. I suppose at sixty, he wouldn’t be here much longer, either.”

“I agree, they’re not all diamonds, but there are some men in here who genuinely sound good.” She took the pamphlet from Estelle. “Like this one, 25-year-old eligible well-kempt bachelor seeking spouse in San Francisco, California. He doesn’t sound so bad, does he?”

“I just wonder, if he’s so eligible, why must he put an advertisement in a paper like this? Why can’t he find himself a wife on his own? Particularly in such a big place like San Francisco.”

“If you don’t like the man, perhaps settle for the lifestyle. 24-year-old rancher in Grafton Town, Utah. Spend the days tending cattle and the evenings around the firepit, looking at stars. Humble, quiet home with horses and dogs. Looking for spouse who enjoys the outdoors and adventure.”

Estelle felt a tiny ember in her heart. She imagined herself on the back of a horse, riding through the mountains, wrangling up cattle, alongside a man with a light tan and a Stetson hat. She couldn’t quite make out his face, though it also didn’t matter to her. What mattered was the sun on her face and the feel of clothes that weren’t so tight. More than anything, she found herself excited by the sense of freedom that the brief mental image evoked in her. Was it really her on the horse? It was her face, but with a genuine smile, the likes of which she hadn’t felt for years.

“Let me see that,” Estelle said.

She read through the advertisement again.

“It seems that one piqued your interest.”

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“What do I do?” Estelle asked.

“You write him a letter asking for more information. Ask him to tell you more about himself. Maybe ask him to include a photograph, if he has one.”

“You’ll help me write it?”

“Of course,” Megan promised.

To Mr. Michael Holden:

I am responding to the ad you posted in the Weekly Matrimonial. My name is Estelle Williams and I am...

“Do I tell him the truth?” Estelle asked.

“That you’re a spoiled rich girl running away from a comfortable lifestyle to wrangle cattle? I would think not.”

...an orphan. My parents died when I was very young and even being in the city of Philadelphia reminds me too much of them to bear it any longer. I wish to move away from the city to enjoy a calmer, simpler life.

I am 18 years old and quite fair, with auburn hair and beautiful hazel eyes.

“Do I sound conceited?”

Megan shrugged. “A little. Maybe state it as though someone else has said it to you.”

I am 18 years old and quite fair, with auburn hair and what I am told are beautiful, piercing hazel eyes.

“He’s probably not going to respond anyway,” Estelle said, “so I may as well go all out.”

“That’s the spirit!”

I only request that you tell me a bit more about day-to-day life on your ranch. I can cook quite well and also keep things tidy, but I would prefer helping with the outdoor work.

I eagerly await your reply.

“Maybe not eagerly,” Megan said. “We don’t want to sound too forward.”

I await your reply.

— Estelle Williams

“That looks good to me. Let’s rewrite it fresh and send it off,” Megan suggested. “And, of course, we’ll include a photograph.”

The photograph made Estelle more nervous than anything else.

Estelle enclosed the best wallet-sized photo of herself she could find, then dropped the letter off at the post office—hopeful, but also fearful that time was running out. Her father had tried to introduce her to her arranged husband just the night before. If he was to go forward with the wedding, as she feared he would do, he would become more and more insistent and it would be harder and harder to escape.

Her father confronted her that evening.

“You were very rude to our guest last night,” he said.

She was standing across from him in his office, the very place where she had first seen Ethan seven years earlier.

“I apologize, but I wasn’t feeling well.”

“I wonder if perhaps there’s more to it than that.”

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Her father had adopted a harsh tone, sending goosebumps up all over Estelle's arm. She knew the tone well, though it had been a while since she'd heard it. It was the tone he adopted when she'd misbehaved. It was strange to hear it as an adult.

"No, Father," Estelle said. "I felt ill." But her voice betrayed her and, though she knew what she said was the truth, it came out as a lie.

"No matter," he said, "I will invite him over again, and perhaps several times after that. It is in your best interest to get to know him."

"And why is that?"

The question left her lips before she realized what she'd said.

Her father raised his voice, ever so slightly, and spoke faster as his emotions began to take hold. This was the way he got when he was not to be questioned.

"Because I am your father and I don't need to explain myself to you. He's a very important person to me and it is equally important that he likes you. I'm disappointed in the first impression you made on him and would like for you to apologize and make it up to him. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Father." It came out as a squeak, only audible because of the pure silence that followed her father asserting his dominance. She felt powerless.

"Good."

She went to bed that night staring out the window at the moon shining over the city. If her father had his say, she would be marrying Ethan. At the moment, it seemed that Michael was her only chance of escape. She felt as if she could see all of Philadelphia, with people walking up and down on cobblestone streets, lampposts lighting up the sky with their gaseous glow and rendering the stars invisible. It was all so confining to her, just like her corset. She longed to look out the window at an open range, hearing the sounds of the wilderness. There would be a constant murmur of crickets chirping, with the occasional coyote howling in the distance and perhaps a barnyard owl hooting. That could be her life.

Estelle told herself to banish such silly thoughts from her head. The letter was in the mail, and all she could do at this point was pray that he'd respond. There was no reason to expect anything from him in the next few days or even weeks. It may take a minimum of a month to hear back and, during that time, her father was going to become more and more insistent that she and Ethan begin the wedding proceedings. Maybe by the time she received a response, it would be too late.

Or maybe she would never hear from him at all.

Chapter Two

Grafton Town, Utah

The cattle were getting restless, holed up in the barn for so long. Michael looked on and felt for the poor animals. Cows weren't meant to be inside, but it was just too darned cold for them out in the field during the harsh Grafton Town winters.

It was finally springtime, though, and Michael could move them on out to their pastures where they had more space and all the grass they could eat. It was his favorite time of the year, which isn't to say that the job wasn't work. A single cow was a hefty thing, usually weighing at least five hundred pounds or so. Put enough of

them together to get a herd and he had dozens of tons of meat that didn't necessarily go where he told them to.

It required teamwork and, unfortunately, since the accident, teamwork was in something of a short supply at the Holden Ranch. Still, it was a job, and he had to do it every year.

Fortunately, Michael wasn't working the job completely on his own. He had his two Australian Shepherds, Daisy and Buckley, who helped to fill in where another human on a horse otherwise might.

Still, it was by no means easy. Michael stood outside the barn door beside the two dogs, wiping the sweat off of his brow and adjusting his hat.

"It's just you two and me," Michael said to the dogs, who looked at him attentively, eager to please. "We do this, and I'll be fixin' you both a nice cut of steak for dinner."

They obviously couldn't understand what he was saying, but that was the joy of dogs. People were always expecting something in return, but dogs just did things for the fun of it. Steak or no steak, these two had herding bred into their blood. It was what they were made to do. And that was why Michael knew he could count on them to keep the cows together in a tight bunch as he led them to the enclosed pasture.

The main trick, though, was getting the cattle not to stampede. Michael knew you had to keep everything nice and slow and, above all else, orderly. And, he reminded himself, whatever you do, don't spook them. You could yell all you wanted and even smack them on the behind if you needed to direct them, but if there was anything louder than that—or, heaven forbid, the sight of a snake—one of the cows could take off. When one took off, the rest followed. And that was when you'd lose control of the several dozen tons of meat.

Michael had to be sure he was ready before he opened the barn. Once he started, he couldn't stop until he was finished. He'd cleared them a nice clean path to the grass and opened the gate to the field. He'd also painted dark lines enclosing the path—cows weren't terribly smart and couldn't distinguish between painted lines on the ground and actual unsurpassable barriers, though this trick would fail to stop them if they started stampeding.

There wasn't anything left for Michael to do. It'd be a quarter-mile trot and there was other work on the ranch for him to be doing, so he figured the sooner he got started, the better off he'd be. He pulled the lock off the barn door and swung the door open.

Daisy and Buckley ran into the barn, toward the back, and started nipping at the heels of the cows to motivate them forward. Those in front were so excited to see sunlight that they came out on their own, a surprising spring in their step that one might not expect from such a bulky animal.

“Here we go,” Michael said to himself. He ran over to Buttercup, his horse, and jumped on her saddle. With a gentle pull of the reins, she started forward so the two of them could lead the herd.

The two dogs kept the cows in a tight group, circling around them once they'd all left the barn. Things were going according to plan.

Still, that was no excuse for Michael to let down his guard. A perfectly ordered cattle herd could descend into chaos in an instant if even one cow deviated from protocol.

Keeping his horse to a slow trot, Michael continued forward and the cows followed methodically, one hoof at a time, staying together, more or less, in an orderly fashion. Michael kept his eyes peeled for any potential dangers. So long as there wasn't any thunder or gunshots going off, there shouldn't be any sounds that would spook the livestock. And, judging by the sun in the cloud-free sky and the fact that Michael was

the only human being around for miles—except Jacob, of course—there wasn't any risk of such loud bangs. That left snakes as Michael's main concern.

Of course, there was always the unknown factor when dealing with animals, but that was harder—if not impossible—to prevent. Sometimes, for no good reason, one of the cows would just start trotting along a little faster and, like a rubber ball bouncing down the stairs, the whole herd would pick up speed and get out of control. So, even as he was watching forward for snakes or obstacles, Michael also had to keep an eye on the cattle behind him.

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The barn was getting smaller in the distance and Michael had made it about halfway to the grassy pastures when his mind started to drift. He realized how lonely this kind of work could be, especially with Jacob, his brother, giving him the silent treatment. Not that he blamed Jacob, who had every right to be upset. Time was supposed to heal all wounds, but that didn't mean it wouldn't leave any scars.

Michael was still upset, too, even after all this time—he'd lost even more than Jacob had, if he was being truthful. Still, the ranch needed tending, and that gave him the motivation to get up every morning.

What he wanted, however, was to have a partner in all this. Someone who would help out on the ranch and maybe not be too bad on the eyes. But it was lonely work and, aside from the few times a month he had to head into town to pick up grain and other supplies, he didn't do much interacting with people, let alone women.

He'd put an advertisement in one of those papers not too long ago, looking for a woman who would be willing to be his wife. He knew it was something of a hard sell. A woman could just as easily find herself a wealthy man who would care for her and let her live a life of comfort and luxury. But Michael knew he wouldn't be happy in a life like that and figured there might be a woman out there who felt the same way.

He'd kept his expectations tempered. Michael wasn't looking for love, nor was it even anything he wanted. He'd lost enough people he'd cared about in his twenty-four years and couldn't risk any more heartache.

All he wanted was a woman who was willing to help out around the ranch and give him someone to talk to while doing it. Someone he could talk to who could actually

respond, that is. And who didn't mind the scars on his face.

It would be purely a marriage of convenience, beneficial for both parties, he believed. All the same, he hadn't received any responses and suspected he never would.

He'd made it to the gate and led the cows to the field, where they pranced around, feeling a sense of freedom after being stuck inside all winter. Cows didn't smile like humans, and they didn't wag their tails like dogs, unless they were swatting away flies or feeling threatened. Still, there was joy in watching them run around, exploring the space they'd stay in for the next eight months or so, if they were lucky and the cold front didn't roll in early again this year.

A few found places in the grass where they could graze, and Michael watched in awe at the beauty of the world he lived in. If only he could have put this image in the paper. If only there was a way to show all the bright colors or let a woman feel the warm sunshine on her face, he knew he could convince her that this life he led was heaven on earth. He wouldn't trade it for the world.

He hopped off of Buttercup to close the gate, then hopped right back on her and called Daisy and Buckley so they could move on and start tending to the hogs.

The sun was setting and Michael had finished tending to his daily duties. He'd just sat down to eat some supper, after giving Daisy and Buckley their much-deserved steak, when the postal delivery man arrived. He didn't come every day and, in fact, sometimes Michael went weeks without seeing him. But today was special. The postal worker dropped off a single letter, postmarked from Philadelphia of all places, with what appeared to be a woman's handwriting on the front.

Michael was excited, but he tempered himself. It could be anything, though he wasn't

expecting any mail. He lit a candle and opened the envelope. Along with a letter, there was a small photograph inside.

He was taken aback by how much beauty could fit on one small piece of paper. She practically glowed, even in the sepia tones, radiating an energy that seemed to take hold of Michael, rendering him weak and unable to look away.

Michael stared for what felt like hours before remembering that there was a letter enclosed, as well.

Stopping himself, Michael whispered aloud, “You’re not looking to fall in love. You can’t do it.” Of course, it was just a picture, but this was a woman who instantly evoked the feelings of love—which was perhaps even more dangerous than someone he truly did love. Feelings of love could be deceiving and would often make men do reckless things. Michael was, still, only human, and, reading over her letter, he felt he had to respond that evening and send his response off first thing in the morning.

He didn’t want to let this woman get away.

And, in realizing that, he also realized he didn’t know her name. He’d read right past it in the letter. So, he looked one more time.

“Estelle,” he said, testing the name on his tongue. “Estelle.”

It sounded real good to him.

Chapter Three

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Two months later

The sun was rising, but Estelle hadn't slept a wink. She was too nervous. Too much could go wrong and too much depended on things going exactly according to plan.

It was Megan who had proposed it—Megan was always the one coming up with the dangerous ideas. She was the one who'd set the whole thing in motion.

The letters went back and forth between Estelle and Michael. With each one, Estelle became more and more confident that the life she wanted to live was out in the country—spending each day outdoors, breathing fresh air, and having something to do from morning until night.

Michael did end up sending a picture and it was difficult to tell much from it. It lacked definition, but he was a pleasant enough looking fellow. Estelle particularly liked his hair, which was just long enough to reveal that he didn't spend his mornings combing it or putting it just so.

Of course, the most important thing to Estelle wasn't the man, but the life that came along with him.

Either way, he was certainly better than the alternative, about whom her father was getting pushier and pushier. He kept insisting that Estelle give Ethan a chance, though "chance" may not have been the right word as her father wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. And, for that matter, neither would Ethan, who greeted her as though the two were already married, calling her "darling" and telling her she looked lovely, then asking her why she wouldn't say "thank you."

Her father would clear his throat or glare at her or give some indication that the conversation would not continue until she gave Ethan some form of verbal appreciation. It felt less like she was being wooed and more as though she was in training to become Ethan's obedient dog.

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Estelle was not a dog and she didn't like being treated like one. If anything, she was more like a cat. And she currently felt like an indoor kitten, looking out the window and seeking freedom. She was willing to do anything to get it.

And that was where Megan's plan came in.

Solo travel for women had gained a reputation for being unsafe over the previous several decades. Indeed, it seemed as though everywhere Estelle looked, there were stories about what men would do to unaccompanied women on trains as well as admonitions against women giving in to "nomadic flirtations." It seemed that women who stayed in the town where they had grown up behaved more properly than the nomads who traveled around and didn't have a reputation to uphold—or, at least, that was what the gentlemen believed. A woman on the road was almost certainly a coquette just waiting for a man to make advances upon her.

The solution, of course, was to travel with a male companion, particularly one who could pass as her husband. Megan, from years of acting training, had developed some skill with stage make-up and could add a moustache and costume herself to pass for an older gentleman. Estelle was impressed. By deepening her voice some, Megan managed to be quite convincing.

They'd pick up the money sent to Estelle via Western Union, get on the train, and the next thing they knew, they'd be on their way to Holden Ranch.

But step one was escaping the house. With the sun just barely peeking over the horizon, there wasn't much light to go on. Estelle had packed a bag of personal belongings—mainly clothes, including her mother's old wedding dress, which was

nearly a perfect fit on her—and she made her way out of her bedroom. Tiptoeing down the stairs, Estelle was careful to avoid the creaky steps that she had learned from childhood.

She left a note on the front table and placed a jar on top of it to keep from blowing away.

Dearest Father,

By the time you read this, I will be gone. I have left and run off. Please do not come looking for me.

I have my own life and my own wants and desires, and I refuse to give in to some business arrangement I had no part of just because it's convenient for you and your wealth.

I do not care for Ethan and do not wish to wed him under any circumstances or for any reason.

I hope that you will understand, though I fear you may not.

— Estelle

This wasn't how it needed to go. Again and again, Estelle had tried to reason with her father and explain to him that she didn't want to spend the rest of her life with Ethan. He frightened her. His gaze sent shivers down her spine and, even after several months of sitting with the idea of marrying him, it hadn't gotten any easier.

She opened the front door and, with a hint of sadness, whispered, "Goodbye, Father," not sure if she'd ever be able to see him again or if he'd ever forgive her.

“You’re quite a handsome man, you know,” Estelle said to Megan.

“In that case, maybe you don’t need to go all the way to Utah,” Megan teased in her deep masculine voice, dressed in her suit, hat, and false moustache. “You and I could get married right here.”

Estelle laughed. “If you were truly a man, Megan, I’d marry you in an instant.”

They walked to the city center, where they could take a wagon to the train.

“What did you end up telling your mother?” Estelle asked.

“I told her I was taking a trip to visit my cousin.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yes,” Megan said. “She lives out in Kentucky and she’s my father’s niece, so my mother won’t be checking in on me.”

Estelle was barely listening. She was too nervous. In all her life, she’d never done anything like this.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Megan asked.

“No, but I certainly know that I don’t want to stay and be married to Ethan.” Even the name tasted bad in her mouth, as if she had just eaten something bitter that refused to go away.

They took a wagon to the train station, which was located right next to a Western

Union office, as the telegraph line followed the tracks.

Estelle walked inside. She had never had a telegraphic transfer before and wasn't quite sure how it worked. The operator sat behind the front desk, smoking on a cigar. He tapped the ash out and put it aside once he saw her.

"Can I help you?" he asked, a hint of aggression in his voice, angry at the young woman who had disrupted his early morning smoke.

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“I need to pick up some money somebody sent me.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He pulled out a large book and opened to somewhere in the middle. “Name?”

“Estelle Williams.”

He skimmed the page, then turned it back and found her. He flipped the book around to face her and gave her a fountain pen.

She took the pen and touched it to the page beside her name.

“Wait,” he said. “This signature indicates you’ve received the money. I haven’t given it to you yet.”

He counted out a few bills from the register and handed them to her.

“Here you go. Now sign, please.”

She signed her name and took the money. As a woman of some wealth, she’d always had access to nice things like jewelry and fancy clothes, though she couldn’t recall ever having to handle money itself. She looked at it with some fascination: it was just paper, and yet it was going to completely change her life around.

She worried, as she walked out of the office, that she was going to be found out. Maybe her father had woken early and saw her leave, or maybe there would be someone here who recognized her or who realized Megan wasn’t really her husband.

She handed Megan the money and had her buy the two tickets while she waited by the bags. The wait was agonizing, watching Megan walk over to the ticket counter and being unable to hear what was going on. The exchange went on for a while and it was difficult to read Megan's expression, with the angle that she faced and the moustache hiding so much of her face.

When finally the money exchanged hands and Megan walked away with the tickets, Estelle let out a sigh of relief. They were almost free.

Megan led Estelle to the train and handed the tickets to the conductor. He examined them both, then looked at the two girls with a stern face that seemed impossible to read. He glanced back and forth before looking back at the tickets.

He then punched a hole in each of them and returned them to Megan.

"You two have a lovely trip," he said.

Estelle and Megan walked inside the train and entered their cabin. They put down their bags and closed the door, then looked at each other and smiled.

They'd made it.

The trip took four days, including stops, to make it to Promontory, Utah, by which point Megan had tired of her costume and switched back to her typical women's wear. The two hired a wagon to take them to Holden Ranch, and the second they left the town and found themselves surrounded by country was a revelation.

Estelle had tears in her eyes.

“Is it everything you hoped?” Megan asked.

It was an unfair question. Estelle had seen paintings of the great American West, done with bright watercolors or pastels, but they couldn’t capture the supreme majesty of it. A painting encouraged one to focus on details, but there were just too many out here. It literally surrounded Estelle. Everywhere she looked, there was something new. It would take an expert painter a lifetime to capture even a fraction of what it was like to be in the middle of a canyon, with critters scurrying through the sand and birds soaring overhead. It was an overabundance of beauty, and Estelle took it all in as if she would never see it again.

But then she reminded herself that this was her life now. This was what she would wake up to and surround herself with. This was the new normal.

“Well,” Megan insisted. “Is it?”

How could she even answer that? Was this everything she hoped for? Yes, and so much more.

“This puts what I hoped for to shame.”

Michael looked at himself in the mirror, wearing the suit that had gathered dust in the attic all these years. It still fit well and looked good on him, but he didn’t have any occasion to wear it until today.

And it had looked good on him for the past hour. He realized now that he should have picked the women up from the station, both his bride and her maid of honor. By now, he would have met them, instead of having to wait for their wagon to arrive.

Of course, there was work to be done around the ranch, and it was a long ride all the way out to Promontory and back. With the relationship between him and Estelle being what it was, Michael didn't think it would be worth it for him to make the trip.

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Out his window, he saw a cloud of dust off in the distance. Was it the women, or was it just a gust of wind? As the cloud grew bigger, he saw the top of a wagon and the pair of horses pulling it.

His normally steady hands were shaking as he watched them come up the road. Could she possibly live up to the promise of her picture? Either way, he had to remind himself, this wasn't about love. This was about convenience, and even someone plain would be wonderful to have so long as she could help a bit with the work and offer him up some conversation to temper his loneliness.

And, yet, it felt like it was about more than that. During the past few months, Michael had felt a sense of hope build up inside of him. He'd long ago dismissed falling in love again. Love was just something to tell kids about in storybooks and treat as the greatest thing in the world. But, to the extent that love existed, it was a powerful thing, and that made people extremely vulnerable.

The fire had left Michael with burns across his face, visible as scars even years later, but they'd healed. What hadn't healed was the emptiness he felt in his heart. Yes, it was the fire that had done that, but it was love that had allowed him to feel the unimaginable pain that Michael now knew would never go away.

He'd found himself looking at her picture over the previous weeks and every time he did, he felt his heart flutter and he had to remind himself not to fall victim to romance. Human beings were too delicate to love. Michael felt love was best served for things like the outdoors or a day's hard work, things that weren't going to go away anytime soon. But people were mortal, and if two of them fell in love, at least one of them would end up hurt.

Those thoughts steadied his hands somewhat. Estelle would just be a companion and, although she would be his wife, it would not be a marriage based on love, no matter how beautiful she may be. Their relationship would center on a shared love of the ranch and all the things associated with it and, in that, they would find common ground. And that was enough.

It was just about noon now, judging from the sun, which he figured would give him plenty of time to introduce himself and get ready for the ceremony tonight, back in town.

He walked toward the approaching wagon and waited outside as the driver assisted the two women out.

Estelle's friend came out first—her maid of honor. What was her name again? Megan, that's right.

Michael offered a smile and a nod. "Good afternoon," he said.

"Good afternoon, sir," Megan replied. "It's quite beautiful out here."

"Yes, it certainly is." Michael suspected it was about to get even more beautiful. "I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Estelle's foot came out first. A delicate thing in heeled boots, laced up to well beyond the bottom of her dress. They wouldn't do for ranch work, but Michael had to remind himself that this was a city girl. An orphaned city girl. He supposed that, in the city, even orphaned women got fancy shoes.

The dress itself was a faint pink, full of frills, and so large that it was a wonder it could even fit inside the wagon. Pretty, no doubt, but out of place in the dusty Utah farmland. They'd probably have to pick her up some new clothes when they went

back into town later, though maybe that would have to wait until tomorrow. It seemed a strange thing to worry about clothes shopping on their wedding night, even if it wasn't much more than a formality.

Her arm came out next, carrying a parasol umbrella in her white-gloved hand, and Michael thought to himself that at least she brought something to help prepare her for the environment. It wouldn't do a whole lot, what with the way the sun reflected off the sand, but at least it was something.

He wasn't one to judge, though, because just like she didn't properly prepare herself for the desert sun, he hadn't properly prepared himself for her face, with her soft, pursed lips and delicate light features. Which was to say nothing about her eyes, which she had noted in her first letter, but didn't nearly do justice. He could have written pages and pages on just her eyes, the beauty of which couldn't be properly recreated in any photograph.

When she turned her head and looked right at him, he thought he might dissolve right there into dust.

He didn't, though. Instead, he offered her an awkward smile and said, "Estelle? I'm Michael," as he internally reminded himself that this was a marriage of convenience and nothing more.

Blushing, she looked down toward her feet as they touched the ground.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, offering her hand.

What was he supposed to do with it? Michael thought. Her hand lay there floating, somewhat limp, not offering a handshake.

Was he supposed to kiss it, like in the pictures? He worried about getting dirt on her

pristine gloves, but if she was going to live out here, they wouldn't remain white for very long.

With the very tips of his fingers, he took her hand, leaned forward, and gave it the gentlest of kisses.

“Madam, I assure you: the pleasure is all mine.”

Chapter Four

Estelle felt like a fish out of water. She felt like everybody was staring at her even though there was nobody there except for her, Megan, and Michael. And, of course, the wagon driver, who took off once he had unloaded their bags.

It was difficult to believe that this was Michael in the flesh. She'd seen his picture before, squinting at it in an effort to possibly make out more of his features, but there was always something that struck her as unreal about him. The picture felt more like a crude drawing than an actual person.

Now he was here, though, right in front of her. So real that she could actually touch him. He did touch her, when he took her hand and brushed his lips against the back of it.

She noticed the scarring on his face. It was difficult to miss and perhaps that was why he'd sent that particular picture. He was still a very handsome man (even more so if she had thought to compare him to Ethan, who, at that moment, was the furthest thing from her mind) and, in fact, the scars gave him a rugged quality that sent her heart pounding. It was strange how sometimes supposed imperfections could make things better.

He also wore a hat that suited him quite well, over casual but tidy clothes that must

have been cleaned especially for their arrival. The giveaway was Michael's boots, made of dark leather that had faded in the sun and collected their share of scuffs.

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“Would you like me to show you where y’all be staying?” Michael asked.

“Please,” Megan said.

She and Estelle reached for their bags, but Michael stopped them. “I’ve got them,” he said, leaning down, taking one in each hand, his muscles pushing against his shirt as he lifted them.

Estelle felt the breath leave her chest as she watched him.

“This way,” Michael said.

Yes, sir, Estelle thought.

Michael gestured up ahead at a small, cozy house maybe a few hundred meters down the road.

“That’s it,” he said.

The house didn’t look like much from the outside, but it seemed sturdy and well-built and, judging by the paint, relatively new or at least well cared for.

“We’re still figuring things out around here,” Michael said. “It’s tough to run a ranch all by your lonesome, so I appreciate your being so excited about helping me.”

“Oh, I am,” Estelle said. “I can’t wait to get started actually doing the work.”

Michael gave her a smile that seemed to suggest maybe she wouldn't like it once she got started, but Estelle was confident. Michael didn't know the woman he was marrying. If she wanted something, she was willing to move mountains to get it.

"You'll be staying in the second story," Michael said. "You'll have most of the floor to yourself pretty much all the time."

There was a window at the top of the house and Estelle imagined waking up every single day and looking out at the morning. She smiled at the thought.

"I mostly only go inside when I'm eating or sleeping, so if you need time alone, that's the place to be." Michael thought for a second. "Well, to be honest, we've got over 400 acres of land here, so you probably won't have too much trouble getting privacy whenever you want it."

They made it to the door and Michael opened it. "After you, ladies," he said. "Head on up the stairs. It's the first door, can't miss it."

Estelle looked around at the living room and kitchen area. The former was quaint, but the latter was fairly large, considering the size of the house, filled with pots and pans along with whisks and large metal spoons and several utensils she didn't even recognize. It was intimidating, but she took a breath and reassured herself that she'd have time to figure it all out.

Estelle walked up the stairs and into the bedroom—simple enough, with a desk and a bed, but what she really wanted to see was the window.

She poked her head through, and the view was breathtaking. There wasn't another human in sight. It was all farmland and grass and animals. Looking off to the right, she could see the green of plants covering a hill. In front of her was a flat plain that stretched out all the way to the horizon. And more hills were off to the left.

There were pens holding pigs and others holding cows. She even spotted a couple of dogs running free, playing with each other and sniffing everything they could find. It was as if she had jumped right into a storybook.

The sun shone bright in the sky, without a cloud to block it, and though the air was warm, it felt drier than back home, which made it pleasant and energizing instead of heavy and exhausting. There was something distinct about the smell, too. One might have expected a farm, with all the animals and dirt, to produce an offensive odor, but instead it smelled fresh, unlike the stale air that got caught between buildings in the city.

And it all belonged to her.

Megan followed right behind her. “My lord,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

Estelle had grown up with money. More money than her father knew what to do with. And so, like most men with money, her father used it to get more money. If it weren’t for banks, he’d be drowning in currency.

And for what? It was only paper. What was the point of money if all it bought was a life crammed against everybody else where the only thing you’d see if you looked out a window was another window in a different building?

“I won’t ever tire of this,” Estelle said. “Every single day, I’ll thank God that this is the life I get to live. I don’t deserve this, Megan.”

“Of course you do,” Megan said.

Michael came up the stairs and put the suitcases down. “Quite a view,” he said. “But believe me, you’ll be working for it.” He said it with a smile on his face.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Estelle told him, standing proudly. “It’ll be worth it.”

“That it is,” Michael agreed. “I wouldn’t trade it for all the money in the world.”

“Who’s that?”

As they walked out of the house, Megan pointed to a small log cabin off in the distance and the silhouette of a man looking through the window at them.

“That’s my brother,” Michael said. “Jacob.”

“Can we meet him?” Megan asked.

Michael paused, uncertain of how to respond. It was a fair question, but the answer was a bit more complicated than it seemed.

“We can try,” he said. He began walking toward the cabin, taking an easy stride partially because he didn’t want to rush the women in their boots and dresses, but mostly because he felt nervous about introducing anybody to Jacob.

“I feel as though I must warn you,” Michael said, “Jacob is a little distant. He’s not the most friendly of people.”

“How do you mean?” Estelle asked. “Is he dangerous?”

“No, no... nothing like that. Just he doesn’t usually like visitors. He was perfectly fine before, a little shy maybe, but we had a bit of an incident a few years ago together and he never fully recovered.”

“What happened?” Estelle asked.

He sighed. It wasn't a story he had any desire to get into, especially not now. “An incident,” he said, “where he nearly died. But that there's the past and life's gotta move on, you hear what I'm saying?”

They nodded, but didn't seem fully satisfied with his answer.

“I'd still like to meet him,” Megan said. “Maybe if we go over there and introduce ourselves, he'll come out of his shell a little bit.”

“I don't think so. Like I said, he doesn't usually like visitors.” It was something of a white lie for Michael. In reality, there hadn't actually been any visitors, not since they'd first built the ranch with the help of the town.

The truth was that Jacob didn't like Michael visiting him. And Michael didn't want any drama to break out, not while he was still making first impressions on Estelle.

“I'd like to meet him,” Estelle announced. “If I'm going to be living here, I feel like I must introduce myself.”

“I came all the way here,” Megan said. “I may as well meet the whole family.”

It seemed like the women weren't going to take no for an answer.

“Okay.” Michael wiped his brow and turned back toward the cabin. “Let's go meet Jacob,” he said.

Michael hadn't actually stepped foot inside the cabin in months, not that he could remember. He'd leave food outside the door several times a day, as was part of his routine because he believed that, one day, his brother would return as the man he

remembered and loved. All of his other loved ones had left this earth, but Jacob remained. He just refused to be loved.

Michael reached the top of the path and stood in front of his brother's door. He had seen Jacob's face poking through the window, so there wasn't any reason to make their presence known, but Michael knocked on the door anyway.

"Jacob?" Michael said. "I have some people I'd like you to meet."

He'd always spoken to Jacob through the door when he dropped off food, pretending that everything was okay between them and offering a friendly voice in an effort to lure Jacob out. He hoped that one day Jacob would respond with more than a few words, but it hadn't happened yet. Michael was running out of hope.

The door creaked open and Jacob, unshaven and disheveled, stood on the other side.

"Hello," Jacob said, his voice scratchy and weak, but with a hint of surprise.

"This is Megan and Estelle," Michael said. "I've told you all about them, but here they are, finally here after a long train ride."

"Pleasure," Jacob said. When, for a second, he locked eyes with Megan, he averted his gaze and blushed, looking down. Michael saw the unmistakable beginnings of a genuine smile on Jacob's face.

And Michael smiled back.

Then he looked at Megan and, could it be? He saw the same glimmer of excitement on her face, though she didn't make any effort to hide her smile.

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Jacob looked back at Megan. “You’re Estelle? You’re the one marrying my brother?”

“No, no,” Megan said. “This is Estelle. I’m Megan. I’m her maid of honor.”

Jacob couldn’t keep the smile hidden any longer. It was restrained, but impossible to deny.

“You’ll be attending, I assume,” Estelle said.

Jacob became shy real quickly, looking down at his feet. “I’d like to, but I’m not sure I have anything to wear.”

“You’re not going to your own brother’s wedding?” Megan asked.

“You’re welcome to go into town a bit early and pick up a suit,” Michael said. “Maybe get yourself a shave and haircut while you’re there.”

“Yes, yes,” Jacob said. “That’s a good idea.”

“Well, we should probably leave you be,” Michael said. “There’s plenty more to do around here.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Jacob said.

“It was very nice meeting you, too,” Megan said.

Sometimes, life was full of surprises. Michael wanted a wife in part because he

wanted someone to spend his days with, since the relationship he had with his brother was strained. But maybe, he thought, just maybe, having a wife would help mend his and Jacob's relationship, too.

Chapter Five

There was a back room in the chapel where Estelle could get dressed and, for the first time, Megan got to see her in the dress. It was a beautiful thing, full of embellishments that complemented Estelle's figure. Megan had always been aware of Estelle's pretty features, but with the dress and just a touch of powder along with some color for her lips, she became an absolute princess.

"He's a very lucky man," Megan said.

Estelle looked at herself in the mirror and smiled: She looked better than she could possibly imagine. It was almost like looking at someone else. "You did a lovely job with my hair," she said.

"It's not the hair. Or the powdering or the lip shade, for that matter, and both you and I know that. It's you. You're beautiful," Megan said.

Estelle didn't respond, but she did like hearing it. She only hoped that Michael would feel the same way.

"What do you think of him?" Megan asked.

"Who?"

"Who do you think? Michael. Your husband-to-be."

Estelle hadn't actually asked herself that. She was so consumed by the ranch and the

landscapes that she didn't even think to consider the man that she would be attaching herself to and spending the rest of her life with and likely having children with.

"I don't know him," Estelle said. "I can get impressions of people when I meet them, though. With Ethan, I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him that he was not somebody I would ever want to be with. I didn't get that feeling with Michael."

"What feeling did you get?"

Estelle thought for a second. She knew she felt attraction, but many men were attractive. At the same time, it was different than the attraction she had felt to men back home, with their clean-cut hair and well-ironed outfits. With Michael, there was a natural attraction to him, as if he wasn't putting anything on. It wasn't better or worse, necessarily, but it was new and she didn't know what to make of it.

But Megan wasn't going to let her get by without an answer, so Estelle gave her one. "What I felt was comfort. He seems kind and caring and, above all else, genuine. I like that he cares for his brother and I like that he has such a positive outlook on life."

"Do you think you could love him?" It was a bold question, direct and exactly what Estelle feared. She truly did want to love him in that she wanted to be married to someone she loved, though with Michael, she felt she could share a life with him even if they didn't truly love each other.

"I'm unsure if I'm capable of love, at least as I understand it. I've read in books of women who want nothing more than to stay inside and serve their husbands. If that's what love is, then it's not for me. We spoke of this in the letters. Love is not what we're after and, for that reason, I believe we are a fine match."

Megan offered Estelle a coy smile. "What do you think of Jacob?"

Estelle cringed a bit at the question. “He seems to have suffered quite a lot over the past few years.”

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“Right,” Megan said, “but beyond that.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

Megan thought for a second before saying, “Do you think he’s capable of love?”

Estelle laughed. “Megan, my dear, he seemed to struggle to smile correctly. If you think you can make him love you, well, you may have quite a bit of work ahead of you.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Megan said, blushing. “I’m just suggesting that, perhaps, if he had a chance to clean himself up a bit, he might be quite the eligible bachelor himself.”

“Sure, Megan,” Estelle replied. “Sure.” Estelle knew Megan saw men as projects more than anything else. A man without a woman was just a block of marble, according to her. Megan’s plan was to go in and carve a proper husband out of it. For this, Estelle admired her friend. It took a good person to see someone’s potential, particularly someone hidden behind a layer of dirt and messy hair, as Jacob was. And, though Estelle didn’t quite see the attraction, she did like the idea of being sister to Megan.

However, with the state Jacob was in, it seemed unlikely that she’d be able to form him into a husband.

“Now,” Megan said, “how do you want to do your hair?”

Michael paced back and forth in his suit, waiting for the ceremony to start so that it could just be over with. Any other man might jump for joy to marry someone as pretty as Estelle, but it only made him more nervous. Why, he found himself asking, couldn't she just be plain? Why did she have to be so beautiful? It would have made things so much easier.

Be strong, Michael, he thought to himself, clenching his fists as though they were his heart.

He would grow to appreciate Estelle, both for what she provided to the ranch and for her being another person for him to spend the days with, but she could never be a true love of his. That would only complicate things.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yeah?" Michael said.

The door opened, and it was somebody he hadn't seen in so long he almost didn't recognize him: Jacob. Not the person whom grief had taken over the past few years and who was living isolated in the cabin, but a man with a clean face and an approximation of a smile, dressed in a suit and looking presentable.

It almost brought a tear to his eye when he realized how much he had missed him.

"How do I look?" Jacob asked.

Michael wrapped his arms around him. "Brother," he said, "you look fantastic."

The ceremony was small, but so was Grafton Town. Even with that, most of the residents would rather be at the local saloon or gambling hall. Still, many of the elders came by to fill up the first couple of pews in the chapel.

There were also a few of the locals that Michael considered himself friends with, the ones that he would trade with and sell to, who helped keep his ranch in business. He wouldn't call those relationships close, but they were pleasant enough people, who were always polite and knew his name.

He stood at the front of the chapel, by the preacher, looking at them, making brief eye contact, and smiling, making sure each one of them knew that they were noticed and that their showing up was appreciated.

Once Estelle entered the room and started walking down the aisle, he stopped paying attention to the guests. Michael couldn't stop staring at his bride. Yes, that was the same woman who had arrived at his ranch earlier in the day, but, in her own way, she had undergone just as much of a transformation as Jacob had. The baffling thing to Michael, though, was that he didn't realize that Estelle could look any better than he did when he first got sight of her.

She walked with an elegance, surefooted down the aisle—clearly comfortable in the dress, which was more than Michael could say for himself. He knew his outfit looked good, but there was something about it that didn't sit right with him. It was almost like a costume and he was pretending to be someone he wasn't.

Estelle seemed less a human at that point than an angel brought down from heaven. Maybe that was exactly what she was: it certainly would explain a thing or two. She walked toward the altar in slow motion, taking her time with each step.

Michael wondered if he was actually going to be able to kiss the bride. He wasn't sure how these things truly worked, these bride-by-mail situations. How much like a

real marriage was it? Wasn't this all just ceremonial? Still, the kiss was part of the ceremony. He just had to remind himself that it didn't mean anything.

Earlier, he had been uncomfortable kissing her hand. It felt like a work of art, so delicate that even just touching it could ruin it forever. Now, at the end of the ceremony, he might be expected to kiss her on the mouth—and the most amazing thing was he hadn't even considered that before this very instance.

Which wasn't to say he didn't want to, just that he didn't know if he could bring himself to do it. He could corral a herd of cattle or spend a day chopping wood and fixing wagons, but he didn't know if he could move his face close enough to his wife's face to kiss her.

At last, she made it to the altar, and he alternated between staring at her and looking away because he realized he was staring.

"We are gathered here today," the preacher began, but Michael was too distracted to pay attention. He'd been to weddings before and knew the gist of what was going on. Instead, he was focused on his bride and how this moment would determine the rest of his life. Right now, in this moment, he had the opportunity to back out and tell Estelle that he was having second thoughts, then offer her train fare back to Philadelphia. Maybe that was what he should do. Maybe that was the right thing—not just for him or the memory of Lucille, but for her, too. She could do so much better than a man who only wanted her out of convenience for himself. There were probably plenty of men out there who would treat her right and shower her with riches. He didn't know what she could possibly see in a rustic cattle herder like himself.

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But, as he was having these thoughts, he realized that everybody was silent and staring at him. Had it come to that part of the ceremony already?

“I do,” he said.

“Will you comfort her, honor her and keep her, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will.”

The preacher turned toward Estelle. “And Estelle Williams, do you take this man, Michael Holden, to be your husband? Do you pledge to share your life openly with him and to speak the truth to him in love?”

She looked toward Michael and his heart fluttered.

“I do.”

“Will you comfort him, honor him and keep him, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, so long as you both shall live?”

“I will.”

“Estelle and Michael,” the preacher said, “through their words today, have joined together in holy wedlock. Why, they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”

The preacher looked to them both and, in one final breath, said, “You may now kiss the bride.”

And then he kissed her.

Estelle had never been kissed before. When she was younger, she used to kiss her hand to see what it was like, but, as she had suspected at the time, it was a pale imitation of the real thing.

Love was something that Estelle never thought she’d get to experience in life, which was part of the reason she’d found herself out in Grafton Town, Utah to begin with. But, in Michael’s kiss, she at least knew what love must be like. For an instant that lasted forever (and that also ended too fast), she felt her body swell with an intensity and a sense of belonging that she hadn’t known she was even capable of. It was a feeling so strong it threatened to tear her apart—but at the same time, she wanted it to.

And it all came from the slightest touch of her lips against his.

She opened her eyes when they separated and wondered if Michael had felt it, too. The look he gave her provided comfort and reassurance, though she couldn’t interpret much more than that. She hoped that he had felt even an ounce of what he had done for her, if for no other reason than it would mean that they’d kiss again sometime soon. She didn’t know him well enough, though. She couldn’t interpret his expression.

All he did was whisper, “Mrs. Holden.”

In that kiss, she had become a whole new person. Estelle Williams was no more.

Now, she was Estelle Holden.

She liked the way it sounded.

Chapter Six

Megan handed her small bag to the whip, who put it in the wagon for her.

“What a gentleman,” she said.

“I do wish you’d reconsider,” Estelle said. “Can’t you just stay a week longer?”

“Dear,” Megan said, “I wish I could, but I must return to my family. I promise I’ll write to check in on you. I’ll miss you, dearly.”

“Stay,” Estelle said, “if not for me, then for Jacob.”

Megan smiled. “I’ll be writing to him, as well.”

Megan had finally admitted after the ceremony, after she had seen Jacob cleaned up, that she had feelings for him. Estelle really believed that if she pushed hard enough, she could convince Megan to stay, but Megan always was stubborn. When she made up her mind, she stuck to it, even if it didn’t make very much sense.

Estelle hugged her best friend and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Remember to address the letters to E. Holden,” Estelle said. “And please, please, keep this a secret from my family.”

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“My lips are sealed,” Megan said.

The whip helped her into the wagon, then took his seat at the reins of the horses.

“Travel safe,” Estelle said.

Megan waved goodbye to Estelle and Estelle felt a tear form in her eye. Almost every day since she was eight years old, she had seen Megan. Megan was more like a sister than a friend. And, as the wagon headed off down the road, Estelle feared that she may never see Megan again.

“Your friend seems to have charmed my brother,” Michael remarked, coming up behind her. “I was beginning to lose hope.”

“She’s quite a woman,” Estelle said.

“As are you.”

Michael eyed her up and down, looking at her frilly dress and boots. “Did you bring any work clothes?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I didn’t have any.”

“At the orphanage?”

“Yes,” Estelle said. “At the orphanage.”

“Let’s see what we have around here for you to wear for today. We can always pick you up something more in town later.”

Estelle looked in the mirror and laughed with joy. She couldn’t believe it was her in these loose farmer clothes. She had never worn denim before, and the frumpy overalls made her look like a completely different person. She almost looked like one of the men on the farm. From a distance, once she tied her hair up, anyways, she wasn’t sure anyone would be able to tell the difference.

“Oh, this is such fun!” Estelle said.

Michael offered a half-hearted chuckle. “You ready to get started, then?”

“Yes, I most certainly am!”

He walked her outside the house and whistled. Two dogs ran over from off in the distance.

“That one there on the right is Daisy and the other’s her brother, Buckley,” Michael said. “They’re Shepherds, so they’re good herding animals, but they like to help with all the work out here. They usually follow me around until I need them for something. In the meantime, they’ll play or find themselves a stick and fight over it.”

“Oh, my.”

The dogs approached and barked at Estelle, sniffing at her heels.

“Go ahead and show ‘em your hands so they can smell you.”

He took her hand and moved it in front of the dogs' noses. After a second or two, she earned their approval in the form of Daisy licking her palm.

Estelle pet them each on the head. They were soft, but a bit more active than the dogs she was used to. They both had a bounce in their step as if they were full of energy that had to go somewhere, but didn't have any place to go. She remembered seeing a bean once that her father had shipped to him from way down south. He'd put it on the table and it had popped in the air. And it had kept on doing it until, eventually, a worm had burrowed itself out.

The dogs were much like that bean, but without the worm.

"Come on," Michael said. "I like to start with the hogs."

"Certainly."

He led her toward the barn and said, "That's another thing you might want to work on."

"What's that?"

"The 'certainly's and the formal talking and such."

“Is there a problem with it?”

“No problem, just relax is all. You’re out here in the west—you talk like that and you’ll stand out like a sore thumb. People might think you’re looking down on them or something.”

“Oh,” Estelle said, “but I wouldn’t dare even dream of such things.”

“See? You just need to say, ‘I won’t do nothin’ like that.’”

She tried it out. “I won’t do... nothing?”

“Nothin’.”

“...nothin’ like that.”

It felt odd coming out of her mouth, as if she was committing a sin.

“Yeah,” Michael said. “Try it again.”

“I won’t do nothin’ like that.”

“There you go,” he said. “Just relax. We’re out here working on the field, so we earned the right to not have to work so hard on the talking. No one’s gonna smack you with a ruler like they mighta done at the orphanage if you say the wrong word or leave off the ‘g’ at the end of one.”

“Very well, then,” Estelle said. Then, “I mean... okay.”

“Now you’re getting the hang of it. I won’t be too hard on you, but so long as you’re gonna be here, may as well get used to talking the way we do.”

He patted her on the back. She liked it. She liked that she had done something right in his eyes.

“Now, let me introduce you to the hogs here.”

The smell caught her off-guard at first. Estelle had always liked animals, or at least the idea of animals, but out here on the farm, it wasn’t like it was in the pictures. Pigs were always very cute in pictures, but, in the flesh, they were big, brutish things that made grunting sounds. And even that she could manage, but the smell was overpowering—and that was something that books and paintings never quite captured.

She put her sleeve up to her nose to block it.

“Oh, the smell,” Michael said. “You’ll get used to that. It’s gotten to the point I don’t even notice.”

He handed her a bag of pig feed. The three pigs came up to the fencing and the grunting got louder and more excited.

“You just toss this here in the pen and they just love it, don’t y’all?”

The pigs squealed in delight.

“I can’t just dump it out?” Estelle asked.

“Nah. You dump it out and one of them will try and take it all for himself. They don’t call ‘em hogs for nothing. Go ahead. Get your hand in there and throw it all around the pen.”

Estelle stuck her hand in the bag, which was full of what looked to be food scraps. She saw apple cores, half-eaten vegetables, and some unidentifiable cold meat. Looking away, she pulled out the food and tossed it at the pigs, who eagerly ate it up and came back, eager for more.

“They’re hogs,” Michael said, “so they eat a lot. We got another couple of bags of this to give ‘em, so keep going.”

She kept on throwing the scraps at the pigs, trying to get it as far away from herself as possible, then watched as they waddled on over to it, their curly tails wagging.

“Look at that,” Michael said. “I think they like you.”

One came back and put its hooves on the fence, pushing its snout up towards Estelle, who backed away.

“No,” Michael said, “she’s trying to say thank you. She’s giving you a little snout kiss.”

He took Estelle’s hand and brought it up to the pig, who pushed her snout against it, squealing with delight.

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And, despite the smell and the utter disgust she was feeling, Estelle felt her heart melt just a little. The farm may not have been exactly what she was expecting, but maybe she would still get the freedom and life she desired out of it.

After a solid morning of work, Estelle asked for a little reprieve from the outdoor work and wished to get to work on lunch.

“Do you need help?” Michael asked.

“Please,” Estelle said, “as your wife, the least I can do is cook for you on my own.”

So, he left her on her own. When he walked back into the kitchen about an hour later, though, it was obvious that he should have at least stayed to supervise.

She was making a salad, though it looked like most of it had ended up on the floor. There was a certain beauty to it, though, with all the colors. He wasn’t sure if he should help clean it later or just let the hogs in and have them take care of it.

“Here you go,” Estelle said, smiling. She passed him a bowl with some half-cut-up carrots, lettuce, and a few chunks of apple.

“Thank you for making lunch,” Michael said. “We’ll make sure to get some meat with dinner.”

“Oh, yes,” Estelle said.

“You don’t need to be ashamed,” Michael said, “if they didn’t teach you how to cook at the orphanage. I’m happy to help teach you.”

“Oh, you’re teaching me so much already.”

“Couldn’t hurt to teach you a little more. It also couldn’t hurt for you to take a little break. You’ve done a lot already. I should be able to handle the rest on my own, like I usually do.”

He took a bite of the salad. As expected, it was fairly bland and dry, but nonetheless appreciated. It was a good sign, at the very least, that she wanted to help out. She would be very helpful one day, it just might take her a while to get there.

“How about you go check on my brother after this?” Michael suggested. “Maybe you can go into town and pick up some more work clothes with him, if you’re up for it.”

“Are you sure?” Estelle said. “I’d like to help as much as I can.”

“Go talk to my brother. That’s something I haven’t managed to do. If you can get more than a few words out of him, that’d be real helpful.”

“Certain—” she began, but she stopped herself. “Okay,” she said.

Michael smiled. “You’re learning.”

“Yer gonna want a good fit,” Jacob said, eyeing the denim at the shop. “Not too tight, not too loose. I reckon they don’t have much in the way of women’s clothes out here.”

“I’m not looking for women’s clothes, per se,” Estelle said. “I just want something that I can wear while working on the ranch.”

“Yup. I hear that.” He picked up a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt, red-and-black-patterned flannel, handing them to her.

“I don’t think they’ll do too much to highlight my figure, but I suppose that’s not the point, right?”

Jacob shrugged.

“You know, Jacob,” Estelle began, “Megan seemed to really take a liking to you.”

He avoided eye contact with her and looked at a pair of boots. “What size you think you are?”

“Those look about right,” she said, pointing to the smallest pair on the rack.

“I reckon those’re for little children.” He laughed.

Estelle did, too. “Yes, I believe they are.” She turned back to the subject at hand. “I think Megan would like it very much if you’d write back to her. I have her address, if you’d like it.”

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“She said she’d write to me.”

“Yes, but imagine her delight to discover that you’d written to her first. I’d be happy to help you.”

He considered it as Estelle looked hopefully on. “Okay, yeah. Let’s do that, then.”

Estelle tried on the jeans and flannel shirt in the back and traded out the jeans for another pair that were in a lighter shade of blue and fit better.

She came out and modeled them for Jacob. “How do I look?”

He looked, but he didn’t stare. “They’re not for looks,” he said, “they’re for function. How do they feel?”

“They feel great.”

“Good,” Jacob said. “I think they suit you nicely.”

They bought the clothes and walked back to the ranch.

“I’m glad you joined me today,” Estelle said. “It’s so much easier shopping for clothes with another pair of eyes.”

“It was good to get out of the cabin,” Jacob replied. “At first, I was a bit nervous when Michael asked me to go with you because I’ve gotten used to being in my space all the time where it’s comfortable. I’d forgotten how nice it is to be around other

people, even strangers. I'm glad I came."

"Well," Estelle said, "then I suppose we should do it again sometime. How does that sound?"

"I think it sounds wonderful."

Chapter Seven

As the week went by, Michael found himself more than pleased with Estelle as his wife. She was everything he had hoped for. She was also more than that, though he tried to push that thought out of his mind, reminding himself that, in this marriage of convenience, love and attraction could only spoil things.

True, she wasn't quite adept at all the skills that he'd like her to have. She didn't have any former ranch experience and, from the looks of things, she hadn't had much experience in the kitchen, either. This was to be expected, though, as life as an orphan in a city couldn't possibly have prepared her for the life out on the farm.

He was impressed, however, with how she held herself. She was very intelligent, speaking with that perfect English that he gave her a bit of a hard time about. Perhaps, in a large city, even orphans received a strong education. It would certainly explain how she could write so well, with her perfect penmanship and her way with words, which flowed out of her into the letters that they exchanged that it almost felt like he was speaking to her face to face.

They had finished with the day's work and the sun was setting.

"It's so beautiful out here," Estelle pointed out. "Would you like to have some tea and look at the stars?"

“I’d love to,” Michael said.

This was it: a moment for Michael and Estelle to spend time together, really together, without having to worry about getting work done or him teaching her how to do something.

And, yet, he felt discomfort between the two of them. The truth was that they didn’t know each other very well still and, despite the letters, felt like strangers. When he looked in Estelle’s eyes, what he saw was the slightest hint of worry, as if she wasn’t sure she wanted to really be alone with him. At least, not yet.

And perhaps that was why she said, “You should invite your brother to join us.”

Jacob had certainly opened up more in the past few days than he had in the previous three years, and Michael wanted to embrace that. He was also worried that maybe this was just a short-lived phase that Jacob was in and, before too long, he’d return to his old self, refusing to speak.

But inviting him could help ease the tension of the two of them being alone.

“Sure,” Michael said.

“Very well. You can go ask him and I’ll get started on the tea.”

Michael had a lot on his mind as he made his way up to his brother’s cabin. If he was going to be honest with himself, though, most of it was just Estelle. He couldn’t get her out of his head, no matter how much he tried. He felt as though he was fighting himself and his desire to love someone. And he felt ridiculous. He’d known it was going to be a problem from the moment he saw her picture. She was just too

beautiful. He wanted to break through the awkwardness and truly build a connection.

With each step, he found himself hoping that his brother would say no, that he didn't want to join them for tea. And it tore him up inside. At a time when his brother was finally starting to open up, Michael was tempted to push him away. He'd waited so long for this moment, when he could reconnect with Jacob, and there was a part of him that was willing to throw it all away to spend just a little more one-on-one time with a woman he'd barely just met.

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She was just so interesting to him. He wanted to know everything about her. How did she manage to become the person she was without a mother or father? How young was she when she lost them? Michael had lost both his parents, too, though it was when he was already an adult—but maybe that was a way to form a connection with her.

And there he went again, distracted by Estelle when he was trying to think about his brother. His only brother. His only true family.

He reached the top of the walkway and knocked on the door.

“Jacob?”

There was no response, though Michael thought he heard the creaking of somebody moving around.

“Jacob, Estelle and I were going to have some tea and look at the stars, if you’d like to join us.”

Still no response.

He knocked one more time, which didn’t make a whole lot of sense as he knew Jacob was in there and had obviously heard him.

“Tell you what,” Michael said, “we’re going to be down by the house and you’re welcome to join us. I’m sure Estelle made more than enough tea for the both of us. We’ll be out there a little while and it’d be wonderful to have you there.”

It really would be, too. As much as Michael wanted time alone with his new wife, he couldn't help but think of the idea of the three of them as one unit, everybody getting along with everybody else and no more of the distancing that Jacob had been doing for so long.

But so long as Michael had a night alone with Estelle, he planned on taking full advantage of it.

He walked down the path, carefully as it was getting dark and easy to misplace his steps, and saw that Estelle was still in the kitchen, steeping the tea.

"He didn't respond," Michael said.

"Why not?"

"He generally doesn't for me. He'll stay inside and pretend he doesn't exist. When he went with you the other day, to pick up clothes, was he quiet like this?"

Estelle shook her head. "He was definitely withdrawn, but he wasn't silent."

Michael figured as such. "He seemed to get along with your friend."

Estelle smiled. "He certainly did. And she with him."

"You think he would talk to her?"

"Absolutely." She handed a cup of tea to Michael. "Shall we go outside?" she asked.

"Please." Michael opened the door for her and followed her out, pointing her to the four chairs on the deck.

She sat down and he sat in the one beside her.

“It’s so wonderful being able to see the sky like this,” Estelle said. “In the city, it’s all buildings and gas lights, not to mention the noise. It’s beautiful out here.”

Michael sighed. “I guess I’ve gotten used to it, but it’s pretty remarkable, isn’t it?”

Estelle pointed toward the horizon, where the last bit of light from the sun had finally left the sky. “See that over there?”

She was pointing to a particularly bright star, unblinking in the sky.

“Yeah. It’s a real pretty star.”

“That’s because it’s not a star at all. That’s Venus. It’s a planet. The Romans saw it up there, all bright like that, and said it must be the goddess of love.”

Michael looked at it. It didn’t look like much other than a bright light. He looked back over at Estelle.

Now there was something that looked like a love goddess.

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“It must have been easier to make sense of the world back then,” Michael said, “believing in all those gods. It makes sense when things go wrong because they weren’t perfect and they were always fighting. Now, when things go wrong, we just need to have faith in the one God and that everything He does is for the best, even if we can’t possibly imagine how.”

Michael took a sip of the tea. “It’s good,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“I can talk to you about this,” Michael said, “on account of the fact that that’s the one thing I know we have in common. We both lost our parents.”

He waited for her to respond.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it,” he added.

“No, it’s fine,” Estelle said. “It’s just that, growing up an orphan, that’s just the way life is. I never really thought about losing my parents because I never had parents to lose.”

“Well,” Michael said, “then what was that like?”

She looked down at her tea, hiding her face from Michael, and didn’t respond for a minute as if something about the conversation was making her uncomfortable. Perhaps, Michael thought, it just brings up bad memories.

“It was just, as I said, it was life. I woke up in the morning and spent time with my brothers and sisters cleaning the house. Some of them would sometimes get adopted and I’d never see them again. At the same time, we’d always have new people coming in. You didn’t know who was coming or going or how long you’d get to know them.”

She had raised her voice at the end and then lifted her head, looking at Michael but avoiding eye contact.

“But I don’t like to dwell on the past,” Estelle added quickly. “I like thinking to the future and all of its possibilities.”

“I hear that.” Michael raised his glass and took another long, slow sip.

There seemed to be something more to her than she was letting on, the way she kept trying to push him away from the subject and avoid looking at him, like there was a reason for her to be hiding something from him. He wouldn’t judge her no matter what it was, but maybe she felt differently. Surely she was right and all that mattered was the future, at least in a sense, but it mattered to Michael to know about his wife’s past. He didn’t think she would truly know him if she didn’t understand his own history.

A star shot across the sky, interrupting his thought, then vanished in an instant.

“Did you see that?” Michael asked.

“See what?”

“You’d know if you’d seen it. It was a shooting star.”

“You’d better make a wish, then.”

“I’ll make one for the both of us,” Michael promised.

“No.” Estelle put her finger up to his lips to stop him. “You mustn’t tell me. Or it won’t come true. Keep it to yourself and make it for yourself.”

It was all just superstition, of course. The way Michael saw it, there was hard work and there was fate. You didn’t get something just by asking. There were some things you had some control over, like the quality of his livestock. So long as he fed them and cared for them, there was a solid chance they’d turn out pretty good.

Then, there were the others that were all left up to God’s plan. And God didn’t care none if you wished on a shooting star or a four-leaf clover. Sometimes he giveth and sometimes he taketh away, and it was only through fate and determination that you could find out what his plan was.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to send God a little message. He could think of it as an opportunity for a silent prayer.

Michael looked up where he had seen the shooting star and what was now an empty patch of sky. He closed his eyes tight and thought hard to himself, I wish for happiness and comfort in this new life for me, for Jacob, and for Estelle.

He smiled and opened his eyes.

“Good wish?” Estelle asked.

“I think so.”

She smiled at him, and it felt like maybe it was already starting to come true.

Chapter Eight

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Dearest Megan,

It has been ever so wonderful receiving your letters in the mail. As much as I'm glad to be away from the city life, it's delightful to hear that everything's going well for you, though I do confess that I wish you had sufficient motivation to come out here to Grafton Town. But I digress.

On that note, I have noticed you've been in communication with our beloved Jacob here at the ranch. Has he been responding? Oh, I do hope you two continue your correspondence. Every time I say your name, his face lights up. I do believe you have stolen his heart—and the proper thing to do would be to come back and return it, then keep watch over it as his doting wife.

I apologize for not keeping you abreast of the situation here but, as I'm sure you understand, life has been busy over the past few weeks. I have been working on the ranch with Michael, who is very patient in teaching me all of the inner workings. I assure you, though, that it is not all work from dawn until dusk. It's peculiar how, though the days are busy, there's a certain relaxed quality that one doesn't get back in the city. Things need to be done, but they get done at their own pace and in their own way. Dinner does not start at 6 o'clock sharp. It starts when I finish cooking. And I don't start cooking until my duties are finished for the day.

Oh, how I wish my mother could be here to assist me. I have Michael's help for all of the ranch chores, but I am figuring out the kitchen duties and cleaning on my own. My mother always did try to teach me when I was younger, but I never paid her the attention she deserved. It's no matter, though, as I'm teaching myself. Perhaps when you come live with us, you can help me with such things.

Look at me! I'm doing it again. Of course, I would love to have you here, but it is entirely your choice. Still, it's worth noting that since he had his shave and haircut for the wedding, Jacob has become quite the eligible bachelor—I suggest you come out here and claim him before someone else does.

Have you been in touch with my father? I'm curious as to how he's doing and, if I may be perfectly honest, also concerned. I received a letter from him which I dare not open. It was addressed to one "Estelle Williams, proximate to Michael Holden, Grafton Town, Utah" and that was evidently enough for the postal service to deliver it. The address is vague, but it's still a bit unsettling that he managed to get so much information as to my whereabouts. Do you have any ideas? This is, naturally, not me trying to accuse you of anything; I know perfectly well that any secret I tell you is as safe as if I had told nobody at all. Still, he must have found out somehow, and I worry that if he could send a letter, then he may be able to pay me a visit—and, perhaps, even get my marriage to Michael annulled.

Oh, and no, to answer your question, I still have not told Michael the truth about my family and my arranged marriage. I feel awful for lying to him, but does it truly matter? I am his wife now and whether I arrived here as an orphan or a wealthy young woman, the fact of the matter is that now I am a rancher's wife and that's what's important.

Still, I suspect he's suspicious and I worry that secrets can create distance between two people. At some point, I suppose I will need to tell him, but it still feels too early in our marriage and too intimate a truth to reveal. Why, if he finds out, he's just as likely to annul the marriage as my father might be.

I wish I could speak to you directly and that you could be here with me to help me decide what to do, but I shall have to rely on your letters. I miss you dearly and wish with all my heart that I will see you again soon.

Sincerely,

Estelle Holden

Estelle sealed the letter and placed a stamp on it, then left her room to find Michael. She eventually saw he was in the barn, sitting on a stool, milking the cows.

She watched from a distance as he remained focused on his work and felt her heart swell in her chest. It was a good feeling, to be sure, but it wasn't a good feeling that left her comfortable. It made her nervous, especially knowing that she was keeping a secret from him.

She approached him tentatively.

"I was wondering," Estelle said, "if you would care to escort me to town so I could mail this."

Michael stood up, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"You ever had milk like this when it's fresh?" he asked. He pulled a cup from a counter and scooped some milk into it, then handed to her.

She looked at it cautiously. It had just, moments ago, been inside the large, bulky animal beside Michael. Thinking of it that way, it didn't sound too appealing to her, but she closed her eyes and took the cup from Michael, the tips of their fingers touching for a moment, swelling Estelle's heart just a bit more and causing her to nearly drop the cup when she grabbed it.

"Careful, there," Michael said.

She brought the cup to her lips, eying Michael the whole time, watching him watch her, and took a sip.

It was full and creamy, still a bit warm, and filled her throat with a nice, comforting feeling. Her instinct was to go lie down and take a nap, rather than head into town.

“It’s delicious,” she said. “Why doesn’t all milk taste like this?”

“It’s not fresh. I bet you can get milk any day of the year no matter where you are out in Philadelphia, can’t you?”

“Sure,” Estelle said.

“But it don’t taste half as good as what I just gave you. Only difference is I had to raise the cow myself and do the work of getting the milk out of it. I don’t mean to make fun or criticize. I’m sure life out there’s mighty nice for the right kind of people, but I like it better here—and I hope you will, too.”

She smiled. “Michael, I haven’t been here very long, but I can’t imagine ever wanting to leave.”

“Me either,” he said. “I mean, I don’t want to leave, but also I want you to stay, too.” He looked at her and she looked back, the two staring at each other for longer than either intended until Michael broke the silence. “You were asking if I wanted to take you to town?”

“Yes. I need to mail a letter.”

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“I have to pick a few things up at the general store, anyway. I’d be happy to join you.”

Estelle dropped the letter off at the post office and walked over to the general store with Michael. She noticed a few rocking chairs in the front.

“Do you mind if I sit and rest here for a bit?” she asked. “My feet are starting to ache.”

“You go on right ahead. This could take a bit, so go ahead and make yourself comfortable.”

He went inside and she sat herself down in the chair, surprised at how good it felt to finally relax. She didn’t realize how tired the walking had made her, especially on top of all the ranch work she’d been doing lately. It was energizing being out in the fields, working with Michael and actually accomplishing something. Her life felt like it had purpose and every day was a new day, with new skills to learn and more animals to meet, but it was still exhausting.

“Congratulations.”

She looked up to see the voice coming from an old man, with a white beard and a joyful smile on his face.

“On the marriage, I mean,” he said.

“Oh,” Estelle said. “Thank you!”

He sat down in the chair next to her and offered his hand, which Estelle shook.

“Calvin Friar,” he said.

“Estelle Williams... I mean, Holden.”

He laughed. “You’ll get used to it, I promise. My wife was still slipping into her maiden name a full six months after we tied the knot. But, you know, you get to be with someone long enough, it’s hard to imagine ever being without them.”

“I can imagine.”

“It was a beautiful ceremony you two had. Of course, you’re a beautiful bride, so you didn’t deserve anything less.”

Estelle blushed. “Thank you,” she said again.

This was a far cry from what she was used to in Philadelphia. There, people didn’t just go up to strangers and start talking. It made her feel uncomfortable, but one look at the man’s face put Estelle at ease. She didn’t recognize him, and yet he still appeared friendly and comforting. Perhaps in a small town like this, there was no such thing as strangers.

“Do you know Michael?” she asked.

“Sure, sure,” Calvin said. “Such a tragedy he and Jacob went through.” The smile dropped from his face as he shook his head. “I can’t even imagine. But he’s always able to keep his spirits up and, if that’s not admirable, I don’t know what is.”

“What happened to them?”

Calvin looked at her and his smile dropped. “I feel I spoke out of turn, I apologize. It’s not my story to tell, I’m afraid. I bet he’ll tell you when he’s good and ready. But I will say this: Michael’s a genuine hero, and don’t let him tell you otherwise.”

“He seems like quite a wonderful man,” Estelle said.

“Missy, you have no idea,” Calvin said. “We all know what happened and how you two met, and let me just tell you, you couldn’t have asked for a better husband. If I had a daughter, Michael is exactly the kind of man I’d want her marrying.”

That reassured Estelle, though not completely. After all, she was only in this mess because of what a father thought might be best for his daughter.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” she said. “Everything’s been just lovely so far. I am enamored with the ranch and Grafton Town. It’s such a nice place to be.”

Calvin smiled back at her, barely able to contain himself, waving his arms ever so slightly to emphasize his words. He had quite a bit of energy for an older gentleman. “That’s what we love to hear. We try to be as welcoming as we can to outsiders like yourself. I promise you, before too long, you’ll feel like you’ve lived your whole life here. You’ll be just another member of the community. We look after each other here.”

Calvin’s smile was reassuring to Estelle. There was something genuine about him and, for that matter, everybody in Grafton Town. No one was just acting out of what they believed was supposed to be proper. When they said, “Good morning,” they really meant it. It wasn’t just that they didn’t say negative things about one another; it really felt like they had nothing negative to say about anyone.

The word that came to mind was “nice.” Everybody here was very nice. Estelle still wasn’t used to it, but she was beginning to relax into it. Sometimes, every once in a while, things that were too good to be true turned out to actually be true.

Maybe this was one of those times. Or, rather, one of those places.

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And maybe that was why it was probably best that Michael didn't know the truth about her just yet.

"That Calvin's a good guy," Michael said. He and Estelle were walking back to the ranch, taking a leisurely pace, as everything seemed to be done in this town. The wind blew a cool mid-afternoon breeze in Estelle's face and it was difficult for her to not feel overwhelmed by the beauty that filled her field of vision, no matter where she looked.

"He seemed quite friendly."

"Well, we all enjoy our small talk, but he was one of the first people who helped get me situated when we built the ranch." Michael spoke of the man with fondness in his voice, as if there was more to the story than he could ever possibly tell. "Calvin helped organize a crew of people from out here in Grafton to build it with me one piece at a time."

"They just helped you?" Estelle asked.

"Well, I paid 'em what I could, but for the work they gave me, it wasn't that much. And it worked out, because I was able to repay them later on when the crops started coming in and I didn't know what to do with it all."

"This is a dream," Estelle said. "In Philadelphia, we say you get what you pay for? We say it's the city of brotherly love, but I've never seen anything like that before."

Michael considered the question. “You know, the community is what you make of it. One bad apple can surely ruin things for everyone, but we don’t want that. I think that we all know we have a pretty good deal here, and while we use money to buy things, we also pay each other in kindness. And, so long as you’re around good people, you always get back more than you put in.”

“It seems a bit too perfect.”

“Well,” Michael said, “we have our problems just like everywhere else. There’s some minor thefts, and often a few of the gentlemen have a bit too much to drink at the saloon, not to mention things like floods and dry seasons, and... other things.” He drifted off, clearly thinking of something else. “But, overall, I’d say things are pretty predictable and that keeps life pretty easy.”

“Life is predictable to an extent in Philadelphia, too,” Estelle said. “But that doesn’t make it easy.”

Predictable like deciding who a girl will marry when she’s only eleven. Estelle thought back to the letter from her father sitting on her desk back at the house. Not too long ago, she knew she had to escape from Philadelphia to avoid being married to Ethan. She was escaping what her father had expected and that was what made him so upset. After leaving on the train, she didn’t ever want to go back. Now, after living here for a bit, she was even more scared about the possibility of her father dragging her back to Philadelphia.

Estelle was willing to take her chances with anything, knowing that it couldn’t be worse than a lifetime with Ethan. Now that she knew what the alternative was, she couldn’t possibly live back in the city with a husband who made her queasy.

She was going to keep that letter sealed. So long as she didn’t look at it, she could keep it in the back of her mind. It was some sort of superstition, perhaps, but

somehow it made sense to her that, so long as she didn't open it, her father wouldn't be able to find her.

Chapter Nine

Michael was impressed by how quickly Estelle improved her cooking. He would peek in through the window of the kitchen while he was working sometimes to see her going over recipes that her friend Megan had sent her. Was she the best cook in the world? Not by a long shot. But what she had was the same thing she offered to the ranch: pure enthusiasm, and a strong desire to do better. She would improve with time, particularly with proper guidance and gentle encouragement.

Michael walked into the kitchen one early morning as she was putting together a simple meal of beans and biscuits, with a side of some of the vegetables taken from the seasonal crops. As usual, much of the vegetables had ended up on the floor as a result of over-eager cutting, but that was easy enough to sweep up and add to the hog feed.

What bothered Michael was seeing a look of defeat in her eyes. The bean broth was boiling over on the stove and he could see the biscuits on the counter, slightly charred.

Estelle was holding back tears when Michael went over to her.

"I'm not a very good wife, am I?" Estelle asked.

"Well," Michael said, trying to find the right words that would be both honest and encouraging, "maybe not. But you're pretty new at wifing, and it's not the kind of thing one can pick up overnight."

"Admit it, Michael," she said, "I'm terrible. I'm hopeless."

Michael looked around the kitchen, which had filled with a thin layer of smoke, then grabbed a small piece of hide to remove the hot pot of beans from the coal stove to prevent it from boiling over any further.

“You’re not hopeless, but it wouldn’t hurt for you to have a little help in here. I think maybe it would be better, for the time being, for you to focus on simple meals. Just worry about the beans for today. They’re a good, hearty meal by themselves. You think you can handle that?”

She didn’t respond. Tears still filled her eyes, and Michael hated seeing her like this. He wanted more than anything to say the right thing to make them go away.

“There’s a lot to do on the ranch,” Michael said, “and if I tried learning it all at once like you did, it’d seem next to impossible. Try and just work on a couple of things at a time. Get good at those, and then we can work on learning more. Same goes with cooking. Try and get just the beans really good. When you’ve got that, we can add the biscuits. When you’re good on those together, we can add some more from there, one thing at a time.”

She nodded.

“The beans are still salvageable,” Michael said, “so go ahead and finish up with those. I can cut up the vegetables. The biscuits, we can feed to the hogs, so they don’t go to waste. How’s that sound?”

“It sounds good.” She mustered a half smile as she wiped away a tear that was just about to fall out of her left eye. There’d be more where that came from, but she seemed to have at least calmed down a bit somewhat.

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“And when we’re done with breakfast, well, we can go start work on the ranch.”

“Okay,” Estelle said.

Michael had some easy jobs to do for today. Still, he had a feeling that she wasn’t going to like them.

“What are we working on today?” Estelle asked.

“It’s not a particularly glamorous job,” Michael warned, “but it’s not particularly difficult, either. And it’s very important.”

They were walking toward the horse stables together.

“What is it?”

Michael pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Estelle. “You’re going to want to put this on. We’re cleaning up after the horses.”

“Bathing them?”

“No,” Michael said, “cleaning up after them. Not cleaning them up. We’re scooping up the manure and spreading it over the field for the crops.”

“Manure?” She said it slowly, as if it was a word she wasn’t familiar with.

“The horses’ waste,” Michael clarified.

“Oh.”

Michael put his handkerchief on over his face and tied it in the back. “Do you need help with yours?”

“I think I have it.” She copied what he did.

“Like everything else here,” Michael said, “you will get used to it, but I don’t expect you’ll enjoy it much the first time.”

“I don’t expect I will.”

They reached the stables and walked inside. Estelle looked in awe at all the horses, snorting and clacking their feet against the ground.

“Easy, guys,” Michael said. “She’s a friend.”

“They’re such beautiful animals.” Estelle reached out to one of the horses and Michael stopped her.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “They’re beautiful, but they can be aggressive if they don’t know you. You need to gain their trust, just like with the dogs, but the horses are a lot bigger and tougher to win over. I’ve seen someone move too soon behind a horse, thinking that they were fine, then get his jaw broken in by one quick kick. Believe you me, the walk into town to see Doctor Potts seems a whole lot longer when you’re trying to hold your jaw in place the entire time.”

Estelle shuddered. She seemed to get the picture.

Michael put his hand up to the nose of a big, black stallion, Orion, who licked it. “Orion here loves me,” he said, “but I suggest we don’t start with him because he’s the toughest one to befriend. And his previous owner said that he doesn’t much care for women.”

Michael walked down the line of horses to the end, the smallest in the bunch. “This here’s Buttercup,” he said. “She’s a sweetheart. Go ahead. You can give her your hand.”

Estelle reached her hand toward Buttercup with the smallest amount of hesitancy. Buttercup, shy as ever, eased her way toward the hand, perhaps unlike any hand she had seen before. Softer and more delicate, with skin that hadn’t been cracked and dried by years in the sun. She sniffed it and, taking her time, licked the tips of Estelle’s fingers before letting out a light neigh.

“Oh, I think she likes you,” Michael said.

Estelle laughed as Buttercup kept licking her fingers, nodding her head in the process, just like a giant puppy.

“I think she does,” Estelle agreed. She put her hands on Buttercup’s face and rubbed her thin layer of fur. “What a wonderful animal.”

Michael hated to break the moment, so he let it last as Estelle and Buttercup gazed into each other’s eyes.

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In the meantime, he went and grabbed the shovel and tossed it in the wheelbarrow, which he rolled over to Estelle.

“Now that you’ve gained her trust,” Michael said, “we can start our job.”

“Oh my,” Estelle said. “Do we have to fill that whole thing?”

Michael couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, ma’am. Several times over. Horses produce a good deal of manure.” He saw her face drop. “And it’s a good thing, because the crops wouldn’t grow without it.”

He handed her the shovel and opened the stable door, leading Buttercup out so that Estelle could fit inside.

“What do I do?” Estelle asked.

“It’s simple,” Michael said. “Shovel the manure into the wheelbarrow until it’s full. Really, there’s no way to do it wrong. Just try to avoid getting any of it on you.”

With hesitance, Estelle gripped the shovel as far from the spade as possible, then stuck it deep in a pile of the horse’s waste, lifted it up, and, shaking, brought it to the wheelbarrow and dumped it in.

“May I suggest something?” Michael asked.

“Uh-huh,” Estelle said, keeping her face as far from the pile as possible.

“Grip the shovel lower down. It’ll give you better leverage. You’ll be able to go faster and won’t get as tired.”

“Lower?” Estelle asked. “Closer to the...?”

“That’s right.”

She inched her way down the shaft and stuck the shovel in, able to lift more this time, then dumped it into the wheelbarrow. Her form was markedly improved, the shovel’s movement much more stable.

“You’ve got it!” Michael said.

Estelle put down the shovel and ran out of the stables toward the fresh air. Michael went outside with her, holding Buttercup by her reins.

Estelle had taken off her handkerchief and bent over, coughing into the dust as Michael approached her.

“We can move on to something else,” he offered.

Estelle looked at him, her expression blank. She let him sit for a few seconds with the sound of her catching her breath after her coughing fit.

“No,” she said. “I don’t want your pity, and I don’t want you to treat me as a delicate flower. I’m here to work and that means doing all the jobs, even those that are less than glamorous. Allow me a minute or so in the fresh air and I’ll go back in there and finish the job, even if it takes me all day.”

Michael couldn’t believe it. This woman was full of surprises.

That night, something remarkable happened: At Estelle's request, Jacob joined Michael and Estelle for dinner.

At first, it had bothered Michael that Estelle was spending nearly every evening with his brother, but he quickly made peace with the idea when he realized what was really going on. Estelle was working on bringing Jacob out of his shell and, in the process, mending the relationship between the two brothers.

And, while the conversation between the three of them was uncomfortable and mostly filled with silence, the action of Jacob even being there spoke more than words ever could.

It wasn't until the end of the meal that Jacob said anything more than a mumble. He turned toward Estelle, handing her his dish, and said, "Thank you. It was delicious." And then, he turned toward Michael and said, "G'night, you two," before ascending to his cabin.

It hit Michael so hard he didn't get a chance to respond. When he finally realized what was going on, he leapt out of the kitchen and shouted after his brother, "Goodnight, Jacob!"

Jacob, without turning around or stopping, waved his hand in acknowledgment. If the moon hadn't been full, Michael may not have even been able to see it.

He walked back inside and helped Estelle in cleaning up the kitchen.

"That was... a bit uncomfortable," she said.

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“It was, but it’s also the most conversation I’d had with him since the wedding. It makes me feel like there may be hope for us, after all.”

“I don’t understand. You two seem to like each other. I’ve been talking to him, and he has nothing but good things to say about you. And you about him. Why is it so difficult for you two to talk to each other?”

Michael became silent. He wanted to answer her. He wanted to explain everything to her. But the heavy meal was already digesting in his stomach, and just the thought of having to relive everything drained him of any energy he may have had before.

“We’ve been working all day,” Michael said, “and it was a good day. I’m too tired and too scared of ending it on a sour note to go into the past right now.”

Estelle looked him square in the eyes—she was so beautiful in the indoor candlelight—showing him that she was serious. “I’m going to keep asking about it. You’re going to need to tell me eventually.”

“I promise you I will. Soon as I’m ready. But that’s not tonight.”

He patted her on the hand and got the impression she believed him from the look in her eyes. He hoped she wasn’t going to ask again. He didn’t know how long he could keep his defenses up around her. If she kept pushing and it became clear that it would take more energy to argue about it than to just tell the story, then he’d end up just telling her. Maybe she knew that.

But she didn’t press him.

And he was thankful for that.

Chapter Ten

Estelle walked into town, basket in hand, heading toward the general store. As she approached the entrance, she saw her new friend Calvin sitting on the rocking chair, smoking a pipe. She smiled at him and his face lit up.

“Mrs. Holden,” he said. “Good morning.”

“To you as well, Mr. Friar.” She offered a polite nod to him.

“What brings you into town?”

“I wanted to pick up some bread for lunch,” she said, which was true, but mostly just an excuse she gave. Truthfully, she wished to have a slight break from the ranch. It was quite a lot of work, day in and day out, and she preferred a gentle, relaxing walk into town. In fact, she had been hoping to run into Calvin so she could have some friendly conversation about nothing in particular. “I could use a break, though. Do you mind if I join you?”

“Be my guest.”

She sat down in the chair beside him, laying her back against it and allowing it to rock gently and relax her. She had to be careful because she knew that if she closed her eyes, she would fall fast asleep right there in an instant.

“I meant to ask you,” she said, “was there ever a Mrs. Friar?”

“Well,” Calvin said, “there was my mom, but I never did marry. See, when I was around the marrying age, there was a rumor that there was a whole lot of gold out

West. So, I figured I'd head out that way from Oklahoma, where I was born and raised, and maybe strike it rich."

He sighed.

"I take it from your tone," Estelle said, "that you didn't."

"No, ma'am, I did just the opposite. I spent all I had getting out West and never found a single nugget. I had to work for my money just like everybody else. And because everybody had gotten a one-way ticket out there for the gold only to be disappointed, there were a whole lot of people willing to work for next to nothing.

"Through hard work and determination, I eventually made it out of there, but by then I was already a crusty old man that no woman in her right mind would want to marry."

It was odd listening to him. His story was sad, but there was almost a joyfulness to it, as if each word had an undercurrent of acceptance, saying, "That's the way it is."

He looked off into the distance. "It's a shame, too, because the whole reason I went out there was to get some money so I could propose to this pretty little thing that lived near me. I was madly in love with her. And now, looking back, I reckon maybe she was just as in love with me. I could have just asked her to marry me and she'd probably have said yes."

"That's awful," Estelle said.

He shook his head. "You can drive yourself crazy thinking what might have been. But as you get older, you realize that if things are pretty good, there's no use trying to make them better. And sometimes the thing you want and think you'll never actually have is something you've already got. Like you and Michael, for instance."

Estelle was shocked. “Whatever can you mean?” she asked.

Calvin laughed. “Wisdom is wasted on the aged,” he said. “I could tell you exactly what I mean, but you’d tell me I’m wrong. You’ll have to realize it for yourself.”

He spoke somewhat cryptically, Estelle thought. The man thought he was wise just because he was older than she, but Estelle had noticed that with age came a rose-colored view of the past. Was that woman in love with Calvin, or was he just telling himself that now because he had no risk of her turning his proposal down? He’d never know.

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As for her and Michael, Calvin barely knew her at all and likely didn't know much of Michael, either.

"Mr. Friar," she said, standing up, "it's been a pleasure."

"Likewise, Mrs. Holden. Please, do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't do what I did. Don't wait your whole life to realize what it is you have."

She knew exactly what she had: an escape from a lifetime of misery with Ethan. And that was enough.

"I promise you, sir, that I will not."

"And don't run away or hide from the things that scare you."

It was as if he could read her mind. Maybe he was just speaking from experience, but it resonated with Estelle, nonetheless. She knew there was something terrifying her that she'd chosen to ignore—a lie she couldn't bring herself to tell her husband, who thought he knew her, but didn't truly know her at all.

Estelle walked slowly to her room when she arrived back at the ranch, dropping the loaf of bread off in the kitchen along the way. Sure enough, the letter was still sitting

there, unopened, with the vague address “Estelle Williams, proximate to Michael Holden, Grafton Town, Utah” on the front.

She grabbed a letter opener, the same one she’d been using for the letters from Megan, and cautiously opened the envelope, removing the letter.

For something that had been bothering her for so long, it was remarkably short. Just a few quick lines, direct and to the point.

Estelle,

I am very disappointed in you. I heard you were seen at the train station and asked around until I found, from the Western Union, that you had received money from one Michael Holden, to whom I have recently learned that you have been married. Your true husband is Ethan Fitzgerald. I demand that you have your marriage annulled at once and you return to Philadelphia.

Do not make Ethan and me come get you ourselves.

Your father,

Richard Williams

She could almost hear his stern tone in his penmanship, with each word etched into the paper, leaving blots throughout the document. With the time that it had taken Estelle to read the letter, it was likely her father and Ethan were already on their way. She knew she had to tell Michael, but she didn’t know how, nor did she know when the right time would be.

That evening, Estelle went looking for Michael, ready to tell him everything. She eventually found him in the stables, brushing one of the horses. In fact, it was one she remembered from the other day, the one that Michael said not to get too close to because he was difficult to befriend: Orion.

“That’s a good boy,” Michael encouraged.

Orion didn’t seem particularly mean. He was leaning his head against Michael’s back as Michael brushed him, completely relaxed.

Estelle cleared her throat and Michael turned toward her.

“Oh, hi,” he said.

She walked closer to him.

“Careful,” Michael warned. “He may not look it, but he’s got a red streak in him.”

Estelle stared at the horse, walking toward it. “He’s behind the stable, should I be worried?”

“He can bite,” Michael said.

Estelle had mentally prepared for this moment and, following Calvin’s advice, refused to let fear dictate her actions.

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“I’ll take my chances,” she said. She removed any fear from her expression and kept eye contact as she approached Orion, who stared back, unsure of what to make of her. She kept walking until she was nose-to-nose with the animal and he snorted in her face, but she didn’t budge. She remained calm and reached her hand out, slowly moving it toward the back of Orion’s head, then pressed it down on his mane, brushing his hair with her hand.

She kept doing it, unblinking.

“Estelle, I’m serious, he could bite you.”

She blocked his warning from his mind. If she thought of Orion biting her, then he surely would bite her. Instead, she thought of him as peaceful and submissive, and pet him gently as if he were a puppy.

Orion moved his head forward and opened his mouth.

“Estelle!” Michael said.

And the horse licked her face. She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“See? I knew he was just a sweet horse.”

“How did you do that?” Michael asked. “Do you have any idea how long it took me to get that close to him?”

Estelle shrugged. “If you treat him as a threat, he will act as one. You may be a

rancher who grew up in the country, but I learned from my mother from an early age that you can be loving and still refuse to take no for an answer. Hand me the brush.”

Michael handed the brush to her and, as it traded hands, their fingers narrowly touched. The fear that Estelle thought she had eliminated shot back through her body and she felt her face go flush.

But Michael didn’t say anything, so neither would she.

She began brushing Orion, who leaned his head against her just as he had with Michael.

“You’re a beautiful animal,” she whispered into Orion’s ear. “Maybe the most beautiful animal I’ve ever seen.”

Estelle leaned into the horse as she brushed him, giving him another hug, loving the feeling of being able to touch another living thing.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” Michael asked.

“I’ve been in wagons pulled by horses.”

“But you’ve never ridden one, have you?”

“No.”

“Would you like to?”

Estelle looked at Orion. It sounded thrilling. It was exactly the image she’d had in her mind when she’d first sent the letter to come out here and marry Michael. A teaspoon of fear came back in her system, but she pushed it away. “Would I like to?” she

asked. “More than anything.”

Michael lifted Estelle onto Orion’s saddled back.

“You are the one in control,” he said. “Don’t for a second let him think that he’s the one in charge. You are riding him. He is not taking you for a ride, got it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Feet in the stirrups,” he instructed. “Now hang on tight.” He patted Orion on the backside and the horse took off.

It was dark out except for the stars and the nearly full moon, and the cool spring breeze covered Estelle’s face. She was doing it: she was living her fantasy. And it was even better than she could have hoped.

Orion picked up speed and she could barely keep her eyes open, but she forced herself to, reminding herself that she was the one in control.

To prove it, she pulled on the reins, forcing Orion to turn to the right. She got him to turn around and run back toward Michael, who was already nothing but a tiny dot in the distance.

“Let’s go, Orion. Let’s see just how fast you can run.”

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She kicked her feet against his side and he took off, releasing a neigh of pure pleasure, as if he felt just as free as she did at the moment. The wind flowed through her hair, allowing it to wave behind her, and she wished there was some way that this moment could be captured. Perhaps with a photograph, but cameras were too slow. It would need to be a painter, but could any painter truly capture this experience? She'd seen paintings of people riding horses before and none of them could have prepared her for the feeling of actually riding a horse.

Orion tore past Michael, who was cheering both of them on. He seemed almost as excited as she felt.

She looked up at the sky and it felt as though she was floating in pure silence. She was alone in this world, which existed only for her. And instead of feeling lonely, she was filled with awe. Estelle had never had an experience like this before. She'd never felt an emotion as strong as this one, except for once and it had only been for an instant. It was so fast, in fact, that she thought she'd imagined it or overreacted, but now she knew that she hadn't.

No, the only time she had felt like this was at her wedding. It was the moment she became Mrs. Estelle Williams.

It was the moment when Michael kissed her.

Chapter Eleven

Michael watched as Estelle rode the horse around the ranch, disappearing in the darkness only to reappear again moments later. There was such a pure and child-like

excitement on her face as she did it, too. When people were children, everything was new and exciting, but as they grew up, they fell into repeating things day in and day out. The moments of a true fresh experience were so rare as to become almost nonexistent.

She would never ride a horse for the first time ever again. This was it. And Michael had not only gotten to witness it, he was also the one who had made it happen. If he hadn't written that advertisement, then she never would have come out here to get married to him. It was possible she would have gone her whole life and never ridden a horse. The very thought was tragic to Michael.

After several laps around the ranch, Orion eventually came back to Michael and Estelle sat there, exhausted, with the biggest smile Michael had ever seen.

"It looked like you enjoyed that," Michael pointed out.

"I never want to stop."

"I'll warn you right now that if you don't, you're going to be real sore tomorrow morning."

She considered that. "That's okay. It's worth it."

"And I promise, you'll be riding a lot of horses out here." He knew he wasn't going to convince her. If anything, he was playing a little game with her just to see how much she really enjoyed it. No matter what he said, he knew there was nothing that could keep her off of that horse right now. "Why don't you take it easy tonight?"

As he suspected, she wasn't listening. "But I want to ride the horse tonight," she said.

And she took off into the darkness.

Michael laughed. He couldn't help himself. Her exhilaration was infectious. He wasn't on the horse. In fact, he couldn't even see her on the horse. All he could do was hear her distant cheers of excitement echoing through the canyons and he still felt he was right on that horse with her, riding it for the first time.

It was something he didn't ever want to forget.

Eventually, she did grow tired, and she and Michael led Orion back to his stable.

"I can't imagine how lonely it must have been for you here," Estelle said.

"I don't even have the words." It wasn't that long ago that it was just Michael at the ranch with the animals, his brother completely isolating himself in the cabin. Still, it felt like an eternity in the past, as if it was part of a different life. He couldn't imagine being that lonely anymore, either.

"I had the animals," Michael said, "and that helped. They didn't talk back and I don't think they ever understood what I said, but they're good listeners and that's more than I can say for most people."

As they were walking, Estelle scratched the bridge of Orion's nose. Michael watched as Orion leaned his head into the scratch, blowing air out of his mouth in a playful way.

"They do communicate, though," Estelle said, "don't they?"

"They sure do. Maybe they don't talk because they don't need to. Sometimes the most important things to say we never actually find the words for."

"Your brother and you don't talk at all and that speaks volumes, doesn't it?"

She was entering uncomfortable territory, and Michael wasn't sure he wanted to be led down that road. "I suppose it does. I don't know exactly what's going on in his head, but when he comes in the room, it feels like all the air leaves. It gets tough to breathe—do you notice it, too?"

"It'd be hard not to."

They reached the stables and Michael brought Orion into his pen.

"Do you want to work on having a better relationship with him?"

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“I’m trying,” Michael said, closing the gate, then leading Estelle out. “He just doesn’t want to be my brother, I guess.”

“If I had a brother, and an only brother as you do, I would move mountains or whatever it took to make things right.”

“So would I,” Michael said. “But I don’t think it would help.”

“What did you do to him?”

Michael sighed and looked at Estelle. He really didn’t have the energy. “I saved his life.”

Estelle tilted her head, confused. “There must be more to it.”

He wanted to tell her, but he knew he was speaking in vague riddles that couldn’t make sense to her. And the truth was that the whole thing didn’t make a lot of sense to Michael, either.

“Of course,” Michael said, “but I’m gonna need to save the full story for another time. That could take an entire evening in itself.”

That wasn’t good enough for her. If anything, he’d made her more interested. He didn’t want to keep a secret from her, but for the time being, it was the way things had to be.

They reached the house and Michael walked her to her room. “Goodnight, Estelle. I’ll

see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Michael.”

He walked away. Hearing her say his name was exactly the note he wanted to end the evening on.

The next morning, Estelle was already down in the kitchen when Michael arrived. He was still waking up, while she was energized and ready to start the day—hoping for another chance to ride a horse and, possibly, to hear the story that Michael had only alluded to about how he had saved Jacob’s life. The breakfast beans were ready to be served and, did his nose deceive him? It smelled like there were biscuits in the oven and they weren’t even burnt.

He guessed he was wrong about her feeling sore.

“Good morning,” Michael said, walking over to the oven to check.

“No, no, no,” Estelle said. “Not until they’re ready.”

Michael backed off. He didn’t want to get in her way.

A few minutes passed and breakfast was served. A simple breakfast, to be sure—just the beans and biscuits—but when Michael took a bite of each, they tasted just right.

“Delicious!” he said.

“I think I’m starting to become accustomed to my duties around here,” Estelle said.

Michael laughed. "You still need to work on your Western tongue, but other than that I'd say you're making some real good progress."

"Thank you, kind sir."

In as dainty a fashion as possible, Estelle ate her breakfast quickly, clearing her plate before Michael had made it even halfway done.

"What are you so excited about?"

Estelle blushed. "I want to ride Orion again."

"Well, tell you what," Michael said. "Let me finish my breakfast and I'll try and show you how to mount him yourself. That way, you can take him for a ride anytime you want."

He took another bite of the biscuit and chewed for a moment, considering his next thought carefully.

"The other thing," he said, "is you need to understand that a horse is not just for fun. And we're going to need to work on teaching you how to control him."

"Whatever do you mean?"

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“Orion’s a tough horse, but he liked you. If he didn’t like you, he would’ve thrown you the second I sat you on top of him. He was having some fun with you. I told you last night that you need to show him who’s boss, and I didn’t really get the idea that you did that.”

Estelle nodded, but didn’t look like she understood.

“Don’t get me wrong, there’s a time and a place for what you did last night, but a horse is also as much a tool around here as anything else. And if you don’t manage to handle that tool correctly, it’s not going to have much use.”

She didn’t look so eager anymore. Today was going to be another lesson. Not like last night.

“Look, Estelle,” Michael said, “you’ll still be able to ride him to your heart’s content. But...” He couldn’t stand disappointing her.

“Actually,” Michael said, “there’s no but there. You saw one thing you could do with him last night and now today, I’m going to show you what else you can do. How’s that sound?”

She still seemed less than enthused. “Fine,” she said, but she at least offered him a forced smile in response.

He patted her hand. “It’s important,” he said, “and it’ll let you ride him on your own.”

“I’ll go ahead and saddle him,” Michael told her, “but I’m not helping you get on him.”

He pulled the saddle from off the wall and put it on Orion’s back, connecting the fasteners together and making sure everything was nice and snug.

“I should be able to figure it out.”

“I think so, too,” Michael said, “but it’s not as easy as it looks. Here, what you do is—”

“Let me just try it on my own.”

Orion was a large horse and it was difficult for Estelle to keep her balance as she put a foot into one of the stirrups. She held onto the reins, resting her weight on it and pulling herself up, but it slipped, and so did she, falling flat on the floor.

Michael offered a hand to help her up.

“I’m quite fine on my own,” she said. “I’m going to get it.”

“Suit yourself.”

The pride was a bit confusing to Michael. It felt as if she was trying to prove something to him and getting frustrated when she couldn’t do it. Now that Michael was thinking about it, it was similar to how she was with the cooking or cleaning up the stables. It struck him as Estelle just being stubborn.

He kept his distance to fight his instinct to try to help and just watched. Perhaps to another set of eyes, it would appear comical, but it wasn’t to him. It took all the effort he had to hold his hands together and not reach out to show her what she needed to

do. Part of it was just the fluidity that came with confidence. If Michael was thinking about his every move, he probably wouldn't be able to mount the horse, either. It was only through not thinking that he managed to do it.

If nothing else, though, Estelle had determination. It could take her an hour and she would still keep trying. Giving up just wasn't an option for her.

And that was how, eventually, she managed to find herself on top of the saddle, ready to take Orion out.

"There you go," Michael said. "You got it."

"Don't patronize me," Estelle said, out of breath. "Let's go."

Michael pulled another saddle from the wall and threw it on Buttercup, fastened it, then jumped on.

"You're showing off," Estelle said.

Michael was trying to make it look like he wasn't, but the smile gave him away. "A little," he confessed, then led Buttercup out of the stables and whistled, signaling Orion to stay by his side.

Rather than take the horses for sprints, Michael kept them both at an easy trot that allowed him to walk Estelle around the complete perimeter of the ranch. He watched her and saw that her mind was focused on something, but he dared not break her concentration. She looked so beautiful in the early morning sun that it was difficult for him to not take at least a little pride in her being his wife, even if it was in name only.

Between the night before and this moment, Michael wished they had met under

different circumstances. He didn't know what those may have been, but maybe in a different world, they could have met and gotten married for the right reasons. Maybe he could have opened his heart to her.

Maybe he still could.

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No, he thought. Stop that. He knew she didn't think of him that way and it was cruel for him to taunt himself with an impossibility.

He was lucky to have her in his life in any way, shape, or form. It was the same thing with the livestock and the crops—he could have wasted time wishing for what could have been, but instead, he chose to be grateful for what he had.

Still, even as just a ranch partner, he wanted to know more about her. Was she, in fact, keeping a secret from him? Was she everything she said she was?

His gut was telling him there was something she wasn't saying, and his gut had a solid track record for leading him in the right direction.

Chapter Twelve

Estelle and Michael had taken the horses out far enough from the ranch so that everywhere they looked, in every direction, it was all nature. The desert surrounded them, with its surprising lush flora and, if she looked long enough, she could see some animals, too. It was mostly lizards, but there were also some squirrels and rabbits, though they tended to avoid staying out in the sun on warmer days like this one.

It was relaxing and something that she wanted to make a habit of with Michael, on days where they didn't need to do much ranch work. The two of them fell into a gentle rhythm with their conversation where they allowed little pauses to stretch out without feeling any obligation to fill them with empty chatter. There was a word for this feeling, Estelle knew, though she hadn't actually felt it with anybody else—not

even Megan. That word was comfort.

This feeling allowed words to present themselves. Like when Estelle found herself saying, “I like this,” it wasn’t in response to anything. It was pure communication.

And when he said, “So do I,” in return, it wasn’t because she had asked for a response. She knew that he felt it, too, and the two of them were sharing an experience together.

It was in this ease and unforced honesty that Michael expressed himself out of the blue, saying, “I miss my brother.”

He paused for a moment and Estelle took that opportunity to take the thought in. What did he mean by that? His brother was just back at the ranch. They could have invited him to join them.

Estelle sensed that perhaps this literal meaning wasn’t what was going through his head, though. Rather than ask, she let him continue the thought at his own pace.

By the clock, it may have been two whole minutes before he did, as he was mulling the thought over in his mind.

“He and I used to be really close,” Michael said. “I don’t just mean because we were brothers, either. We were the best of friends—we’d do everything together.”

They continued aimlessly down the trail as he continued. “I want to let you know what happened,” Michael said. “I want to tell you everything. And I will. The problem is that I don’t much understand it myself.”

“I’m sure you’ll let me know when you’re ready.”

“I will,” Michael assured her, “I promise you that. But in the meantime, just know that, without my brother—I mean, the brother I remember—I’m not really fully myself. It’s like I’m missing part of who I am without him.”

He shook his head and patted some dust off of his jeans.

“Maybe that don’t make a lot of sense to you,” he said. “But I’m trying. I’m really trying to make things right between the two of us.”

Estelle saw that Michael was hurting. And, to her, part of the issue was obvious, but she wasn’t sure she could tell Michael without making things worse. However, in the spirit of the comfort they’d developed together, she felt she had to at least try to let him know.

“The way it seems to me,” Estelle said, “is that maybe that’s the problem.”

“How do you mean?”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard. Maybe, by constantly trying to make things right, you’re pushing him away. Whatever it is that’s going on with him, I think he needs to figure it out for himself. He probably misses you, too.”

“Then why doesn’t he just get over it?” His response was terse, breaking the spell of the gentle comfort. There was more than a hint of anger in his voice and Michael immediately pulled back after he said it.

Estelle ignored the tone and answered the question. “Because I don’t think you’re the person you used to be, either. Every time you interact, you’re trying too hard to make everything right between the two of you. Is that how you acted back when you were close?”

He thought about it for a while, careful to consider the idea instead of letting his anger spit out an answer for him.

“I suppose not,” he admitted.

“Allow him some distance,” Estelle suggested. “He’ll come back around. He’s a good man, and so are you.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The sun was getting low in the sky and the two of them turned back toward the ranch, not wanting to be lost too far away from the comfort of home when it got dark and the air gained its sharp desert night chill.

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Estelle and Michael spent the bulk of their day away from the ranch, and when they came home, Estelle found a letter from Megan waiting for her. She ran and took it to her room, lighting a candle so she could read it.

Dearest Estelle,

Oh, how I miss you! Life around Philadelphia is dull and lifeless without you here with me. I pass my time reading and writing and awaiting your responses, hoping every day to receive another letter about all of your adventures out on the ranch in Utah. I read every letter you send over and over again, imagining myself there with you, feeling both overjoyed for you and jealous of the life you get to live.

I feel as though I must be true to you and say that there is one other thing that I look forward to, and that's another letter from Jacob. Perhaps you wouldn't know it from speaking to him, as he's shy and a man of few words, but he writes absolutely beautifully and every letter he sends is poetry to me. I whisper the words aloud just to hear how they sound, but I must keep my voice down for fear that I will betray my feelings to my parents.

I do believe you had the right idea, running off from Philadelphia. Life here is so dull and ordinary, and I am giving serious thought to doing exactly what you did. It seems so easy, having seen you do it: just buy a train ticket and make my way to Utah. Not only would I be able to spend time with my closest friend, but Jacob and I could be married. And then you and I would be sisters of sorts. How wonderful would that be?

Be warned, however, that word of your escape has been the talk of the town out here and Ethan finds it utterly humiliating. I fear that he and your father may go looking for you. Your father even spoke to me a bit of it. He told me that he received your letters and feels that you have been taken in by the empty charms of the rustic West. There were daggers in his breath when he described how you presented Michael, though he wouldn't dare use his name and certainly wouldn't call him your husband. No, instead he referred to him as a "kidnapper," which is absolutely absurd.

I told him that you went out there of your own volition and, by letters I received (I did not tell him that I was sending letters to you for fear that he would suspect I knew where you were), it sounded as though Michael was quite the gentleman and you were very happy with him. He accused me of not understanding what was on men's minds. Can you imagine?

I do not know when this letter will reach you, but it appears that both Ethan and your father are on the verge of leaving to go find you. I urge you to take whatever precautions or preparations are necessary. I suspect that if they make it all the way to Utah, they won't be satisfied until they leave with you in tow.

Please be safe and be careful, my friend. Keep everything there ready for me. I dream of being out there with you and I promise that the second Jacob proposes to me, I will be there in a heartbeat to accept. Could you be a dear and drop him a few hints, please? I'm beginning to get impatient.

Lots of love to you, Estelle. I miss you terribly.

Sincerely,

Megan

Estelle put the letter down. There was much to take in, some of it providing some

much-needed hope and some of it inspiring her worst fears. In the back of her mind, she kept on hoping that marrying Michael would solve all of her problems relating to Ethan. He couldn't very well marry her if she was already married to someone else. Still, with both her father's and Ethan's father's legal connections, it was likely they could find some sort of loophole to annul the marriage.

She knew that her only hope of getting ahead of this was letting Michael know everything. Telling him about her arranged marriage and that she had lied about being an orphan. Warning him that her father may be coming and bringing her one-time fiancé along with him.

Throughout the time she'd been with Michael, she had built up trust with him. And now, if she told him that it was all a lie, he may just tell her father and Ethan to take her back home to Philadelphia. She had to explain herself before anyone else revealed it for her.

But, deep in her heart, she knew she wasn't ready. Just the thought of telling such things to Michael tensed up all her muscles and made her feel dizzy.

Sometimes, the seemingly simplest things to do—like just tell someone a few words about your past—could be the hardest.

Chapter Thirteen

How long are you going to keep it from her? Michael asked himself. If you're not going to tell her now, then when? She has to know sooner or later.

It was a fact of life that, with anything painful, the best bet was to get it over with as quickly as possible. He'd seen it once when he was only eight years old and he was bitten by a rattlesnake while out on the prairie. He'd run inside and his dad had brought out his knife and a bottle of gin.

“Son,” he’d said, “this is going to sting, but I promise you, it’s for the best. Be brave.”

His mom had held him down as his father poured the gin on his arm, stinging the wound.

“Don’t move,” his father had said. “This is going to be a lot easier if you don’t move.”

His mom had tightened her hold on him into a painful hug that made it hard to breathe. He couldn’t have moved even if he’d wanted to.

With intense focus, his father had cut the wound out, taking the poison along with it. The pain was excruciating, so much so that Michael hadn’t realized he was even screaming until his father told him about it later. All he could focus on was the wound and the blood that flowed out of it.

His father had stuck the knife into the kitchen table and grabbed a cloth rag, wrapping it tightly around Michael’s arm. The blood had immediately soaked into it, but the rag was thick enough to hold it all in.

Whatever happened after that, Michael didn’t remember. At that point in his life, it was the worst thing that had happened to him. The treatment itself was worse than the bite and, even with the wrap, his arm had still swelled up quite a bit, but after a few days’ rest, he was fine.

The same was probably true with telling Estelle about the incident at the old ranch. It would be painful for him to revisit, but she had to know. The sooner he got it over and done with, the sooner they could move on and he wouldn’t be keeping a secret from her.

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One thing that Michael enjoyed seeing was that Estelle still hadn't lost the joy of riding Orion. Their bond had only become greater over the past several days and she was excited for another day of riding, though Michael told her that this day's ride wouldn't be like the previous one.

"Why not?" Estelle asked.

"I got a place in mind to go to."

"Where?"

Michael sighed. "The old ranch. The one me and Jacob were at before this one."

Estelle didn't respond to that. Her silence suggested that, at least on some level, she understood.

"This is going to be tough but, I think, if you're going to be married to me, it's a place you're going to need to see for yourself."

They trotted along in relative silence. Just like with the snake bite, Michael wanted to hurry it along and get there as soon as possible so he could do what he needed to do and head back home, never to return.

At the same time, there was something terrifying about actually arriving there and having to say the words and explain everything. He didn't want to think of it, and he didn't want to prepare. When they arrived, he believed, he'd find the words. Then again, maybe he wouldn't need to. Maybe just seeing what was left of everything

would speak for itself.

When they arrived, the sun hadn't quite made it directly overhead yet, though it was close enough that shadows were thin and spare across the sand. The same could be said of the ranch itself. What used to be a fully functioning, organized farm was now reduced to a few lonely walls and several unconnected fence posts, all charred and so brittle that a gentle touch could break them apart. The ranch's distance from the town square, away from human contact, was the only thing that prevented the removal of the leftover pieces of this relic and, along with them, the last evidence of Michael's past.

It wasn't just the structure of the building remaining. Some furniture and mementos had survived, as well. There was the rocking chair where Michael's father would read the paper and smoke his pipe, though it was lying sideways on the ground and one of the legs had broken off. Assorted china littered the floor, broken, along with the cast iron stove, perhaps the only item remaining completely intact.

Michael looked over at Estelle, who sat atop Orion, her mouth agape.

"There was a fire," he said.

"I see that."

He pointed over at a piece of a wall, still standing behind a small pile of debris.

"That there was our barn. I ended up letting the horses free, same with all the animals. Some of them ran off, like the chickens and the hogs, but Orion came back." He patted his horse. "Buttercup, too."

"What happened? How did a fire even start all the way out here?"

He was going to have to explain it, after all. His voice felt shaky, but they had ridden all the way out here so he might as well tell the story. She had to know what happened if she was going to know him at all. “There was a storm out over yonder, the first one in months. We didn’t get the rain here, though. Not much, anyway. What we got here was the lightning.

“I’m still not sure exactly where it struck, but I can tell you it was louder than any gun I ever fired and so bright that, for less than the blink of an eye, it looked like daytime. Brighter, even. It started a fire, and it was so dry out here that it spread through the brush and wood and hay. There was no stopping it. I made a mistake—I went to save the animals before I checked on my family. I figured Ma, Pa, and Jacob would be able to fend for themselves.”

Michael shook his head. “I slept downstairs, whereas everyone else was upstairs. It turns out that it’s a lot easier to escape from the ground floor. They were trapped up there by the flames and the smoke. I ran back inside and told Jacob to climb down and I’d catch him, but he couldn’t climb. The smoke was so bad he couldn’t manage to hold his own weight. So, I just had him fall down, and I caught him and carried him out. By the time we got to safety, it was just too hot and too smoky, and I was too out of breath to go back in for my parents.

“Every night since then, I look back in my mind and wonder if I could have made it. It would have just taken a minute or two, and I could have saved them.”

Estelle frowned. “Or you could have ended up killing yourself.”

“Or that,” Michael said.

She rode up next to him and touched his arm. “You saved Jacob,” she said. “Focus on the man you saved instead of the people you couldn’t.”

“Yeah, I saved Jacob, but if you ask him, I should have just let him burn. Every day, he lives his life feeling like I traded our parents’ lives for his, and that’s not how it was. He was just the first person I grabbed.”

He wondered whom he would have grabbed, given the choice, but he wouldn’t have wanted to have to choose. He couldn’t have chosen.

“I just wish I had checked on all of them before running off to save the animals.”

They sat on their horses, looking at the debris. It was as lifeless as anything else in the desert, fitting in as well as all the cacti and boulders. The only thing that made it different was the memories and, if Michael was going to be honest, the memories sitting in his head couldn’t prepare him for how he felt right now looking at it. Actually being there added vivid details to his memories that he wished he had forgotten. The screams he’d heard that night were now back in his head as if coming through his ears at that moment, and he felt the radiating heat from the house that had long since been extinguished by the storm.

Michael had come and shown Estelle the house and even told her what had happened to the best of his ability. He did it because he felt it was important, but it was too much. He turned around to head back to the house and Estelle followed right behind him, silently.

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The sight of Michael's old ranch was horrifying to Estelle and she couldn't imagine what it must have been like for him that night. One day, everything was normal and then, without warning, it all got taken away from him for no reason. There was no maliciousness by anybody, nor was it a result of incompetence. It was just an act of nature—nothing could have prevented it.

It was so different from what she was hiding. She was hiding a past she'd run away from on her own. It was a choice she'd made in response to actions taken from other people. There were villains in her story, though the main villain was the person she cared about the most: her father. If only he had listened to her, their relationship could have been saved. But he hadn't—and it meant that, until he learned to accept her new life, he'd be just as dead to her as Michael's parents.

"Did you ever know your family?" Michael asked Estelle as they rode back to the ranch. He looked over at her and noticed she avoided looking back at him. She concentrated on the path ahead of them, but she did not respond.

"I know you were orphaned," Michael said, "and I can understand if it's a touchy subject, but I want to know about you. Everything. The good and the bad."

He waited for a response and could see there were thoughts moving around in her head. Maybe she was going to tell him. He'd sprung it on her all of a sudden, but they'd been together long enough at this point that she should have expected a question or two about her past.

She opened her mouth to speak. "Look there," she said.

Estelle pointed across the prairie at a mountain goat eating a plant at the edge of the canyon. It looked over at them with curiosity, tilting its head as it chewed. The two riders were far enough away so as to not pose a threat.

“Yeah, that there’s a mountain goat,” Michael told her. “They’re rare, but you see them from time to time, especially out here.”

He sighed. The mountain goat was just a distraction. She wasn’t going to tell him about her past right now, and possibly ever. He could have told himself it didn’t matter and, so far as he could tell, there wasn’t any good reason that it should. But he wanted to know and so long as she didn’t tell him, there was a part of her that was closed off to him and she remained, to some degree, a stranger.

He still had hope, however. A lifetime together could be a long time and, though it felt to Michael like they’d been together a while at this point, it hadn’t been more than a month or so.

Patience, Michael, he thought. It was just like she was saying about Jacob. He needed to give her some space and not push her. If she ever felt like telling him, she’d do it. And, until then, there was nothing he could do to make her.

They arrived back at the ranch and Estelle put Orion away on her own. She was a quick learner—Michael only had to show her how to do it once. Then she went upstairs and closed the door to her room while Michael sat downstairs waiting for her to return. She did come back down around supper time to cook, but she didn’t say anything to Michael during that time until he asked her if she wanted help, which she politely declined.

Michael knew she wasn’t being rude. She was thinking. He’d looked at her and thought he could sense how she felt because he’d been in her position not too long ago. The story of the fire and what happened to his parents had been stuck in his

stomach, begging to come out, but no matter how much he'd felt he needed to tell her, he just couldn't do it.

After supper, she returned to her room, closing the door on Michael once again.

He waited for her to come back down, playing solitaire with a worn deck of cards to pass the time. She did return a couple hours later, but only for a moment.

"Michael," she said, as she came up behind him, nearly startling him.

"Yes?" he asked, hoping that maybe the time she'd spent alone with her thoughts would lead her to giving him anything about her past.

"I just wanted to say goodnight," she said.

I guess I won't be hearing about it tonight, Michael thought.

"Goodnight, Estelle."

And she went back to her room, closing the door for the rest of the night.

Chapter Fourteen

Grafton Town seemed busier than usual when Estelle headed toward the general store to pick up some bread. While the town center typically had a few stragglers wandering around, now there were teams of people piling wood together and building, hammering away and making a terrible ruckus.

There were half-built booths and what looked like it could be the beginning of a stage, with one overworked police officer frantic in his attempt to direct horse and foot traffic around all the construction.

She almost didn't see Calvin, as she was too distracted by the commotion.

"Morning, Estelle," he said, sitting in his usual spot by the front of the store and keeping an eye on everything.

"Good morning, Calvin. What's going on here?"

"Michael hasn't told you?" Calvin asked.

"I don't believe he has."

His eyes lit up and the man, who had to have been in his 60s, suddenly had the face of a child. "Why, it's the town fair!" he said, in a voice higher in pitch than what Estelle was accustomed to. "Last year's had to be canceled on account of the rain, but this year, there ain't a cloud in the sky. It's fantastic fun!"

“What is it?”

“Have you not been to a town fair before?”

Estelle couldn't say she had. Was she supposed to have been to one? Was this something that she had missed out on by being in the city all her life?

“Not to the best of my recollection,” she said.

“Oh, well, then it'll be a surprise for you. Ask Michael to take you. You aren't going to want to miss it.”

“You know,” Michael said, “it's been so long since I've gone that it completely slipped my mind.” He looked at her, his eyes wide and sincere. “It's not so much fun when you don't have anyone to go with.”

“Let's invite Jacob, as well.”

“Well...” Michael looked away, down at his right foot, which was scraping against the floor as if that would somehow generate an answer for him. “I'm not so sure he'd want to go.”

Estelle was beginning to get frustrated with Michael's inability to communicate with his brother. “There's no harm in asking and, even if he says no, I'm sure he'd appreciate the offer.”

“The thing about Jacob—” Michael began, but Estelle sighed and cut him off.

“I’ll ask him, then. Come on.”

She took his arm and dragged him up to Jacob’s cabin, where she knocked on the door.

“Jacob?” she called.

For her, he opened the door. With a smile, even. When he saw Michael, however, his expression changed.

“Yes?”

“Would you like to join us this evening for the town fair?” she asked directly, spitting it out as if she was taking a survey, with no emotion involved. It was a simple yes or no question.

Jacob looked over at Michael, who stood there not saying a thing, shaking his head and wiping the sweat off of his brow.

Estelle could see it in Jacob’s eyes: he knew he was being invited, but didn’t feel like Michael wanted him there.

“That sounds like an awfully good time,” Jacob said, though his voice didn’t make it seem like much fun, in his gruff monotone, “but I’d rather stay in, if it’s all the same with you.”

Estelle looked over at Michael. Perhaps she shouldn’t have had him join her.

“Well,” she said, “you’re welcome to join us if you change your mind.”

Jacob closed the door and returned to his cabin.

Michael turned his head toward Estelle. “He usually doesn’t enjoy doing these sorts of things.”

Estelle fumed. “Of course, he didn’t want to join us. Everything in your actions and the way you were standing, not saying anything, made it seem like you didn’t want him there.”

Michael shrugged. “What do you want me to do?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “Knock on the door and tell your brother, with sincerity, that you would like him to join us.”

Michael sighed. He knocked on the door and Estelle walked a few paces away to give him space.

“Jacob?” Michael called out.

“What is it?”

“Could you open the door, please?”

Jacob did so.

Michael put his hands together and took a deep breath. “I would really appreciate it if you’d join us tonight. I think it would be a good time for all of us.”

Jacob grunted, clearly not convinced.

“And I think it would be really good for you,” Michael continued. “I went with Estelle to the old ranch yesterday and it brought back memories. And, you know, feelings, too.”

It was clear to Estelle that he was listening to her advice. Michael struggled, but he let the words out and they came from the heart.

“What happened there, way back when, was an honest-to-God tragedy, no matter how you slice it, but I happen to believe there’s always a reason for these things. And I don’t think God burned down our ranch so we could spend the rest of our lives sad about it.

“No, I think it was a test. It’s easy to just be upset and angry and miss the people you care about. The harder thing to do, the way to pass the test, I think, is to feel all those bad things and still go on and have the best life you can live.”

Michael took another breath. “That’s what I think, anyway.”

Estelle was impressed. It was rare to see a rugged man like Michael show any level of emotion, but here he was, exposing his feelings for Jacob. She almost felt bad. She was worried what would happen if Jacob said no. Michael was at his most vulnerable at this moment—if Jacob turned him down, Estelle thought Michael may not open up like this ever again.

“And another thing I think,” Michael said, “is that it’s what Ma and Pa would have wanted, too. I think you know that.”

He looked up at Jacob, waiting for a response, but it didn’t seem like he was going to get one.

“Anyway,” Michael said, “Estelle and I would both like to see you at the fair. And I think it would be really good for you, too. So, please, feel free to join us if you’re up for it.”

He walked away, his eyes red, but not quite tearing.

“How was that?” he asked.

“Perfect,” Estelle said. They walked close as they returned to the house and, for one tiny moment, the back of their hands touched. Neither of them said anything; they just pulled their hands away and acted like it didn’t happen. But it did happen, and it made Estelle smile.

It looked as though everybody was there, crammed into the town center, cheering and talking over the band playing jubilant and familiar tunes on the stage. It was absolutely joyous. Estelle looked around in all directions, but she couldn’t find a single face that wasn’t stuck in a smile.

There were booths where men fired guns at targets to win a cigar and others where children tossed rings onto poles in an effort to take home dolls. Interspersed with these stood food stands with barbecued meat, filling the air with the smell of seasoned pork, steak, and chicken. And, of course, in front of the stage was a floor where couples, young and old, danced across from each other, performing do-si-dos in time with the music.

However, what caught Estelle's eye first was a flash of light off in the corner of the town.

"Look there," she said, pointing. "Let's get a photograph!"

She took Michael's arm and led him to the photographer.

"I don't know," Michael said.

"No," Estelle insisted, "let's do it before it gets too late. I want to remember this night forever."

There was a short line to get to the front.

"Oh, this is ever so exciting!" Estelle said. Michael glanced at her with a smirk on his face. "I mean," she amended, "this is wonderful! Is that how you'd say it?"

"I'd probably add a 'here' in there somewhere, but you're getting better. Starting to sound more like you belong."

"And that's a good thing?"

"You know," Michael said, "maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Maybe what I like about you is that you're not from around here. I reckon I like the way you talk."

Estelle blushed.

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“Still, you could stand to loosen up some. Just relax. Talk however feels right for you, at least tonight. Let’s have some fun.”

They made it to the front of the line and the photographer ushered them in front of the camera.

“Mind if I cut in?” a voice asked.

They both looked over to see Jacob, who had decided to join them after all.

“Oh, Jacob!” Estelle said. “Yes, please. Come join us.”

Jacob stood to the other side of Michael as the photographer gestured for them to move a bit over. Then he said, “Okay, now, hold real still.”

There was a flash of light, blinding Estelle momentarily, then causing her to see bright red rings every time she blinked.

“That’s it,” the photographer said. “We’ll get it developed and you can come pick it up from me later in the week.”

They walked away and Estelle took everything in as best as she could. It was overwhelming. The air was full of the sounds of people having fun over the upbeat music, as well as the smells of smoked meat and sauces. Fireworks exploded overhead, shining a bright white light on all the faces of the people of Grafton, celebrating their town and everything they loved about it.

While she was lost in everything, Michael turned to Estelle and asked, “What’s next?”

Estelle looked from booth to booth and all the activities available to her, but the center of the square, with the stage, musicians, and joyful couples dancing called out to her.

“Next, my husband, you ask me to dance.”

His face turned red as he looked down to his boots. “I don’t know about that,” Michael said.

“Oh, come on now,” Estelle said. “I promise to say yes.”

“I ain’t much of a dancer.”

“Neither am I, but it’s fun.”

The band ended their song to a brief applause, then started a new song—a kind of Western ballad, slow and sweet.

“Oh, now you must ask me to dance,” Estelle said. “Look at them. All they’re doing is standing next to each other and rocking back and forth. You practically do that every day riding the horses.”

“She’s got a point,” Jacob put in. “Ask your wife to dance.”

“Oh, all right,” Michael said. “Mrs. Estelle Holden, would you dance with me?”

She batted her eyes. “Well, since you asked so nicely, I’d be honored. Come on.”

They walked over to the dance floor and Michael took her in her arms.

“Closer,” Estelle said. “You could fit a whole person between us. Maybe two.”

He moved closer and she wanted him closer still. They were husband and wife, married before the eyes of God; surely, this wasn’t a sin. She pulled him closer so their torsos were touching, and she could feel Michael’s breath on her neck. It was warm and, yet, it sent a pleasant chill through her body.

“This feels nice,” Michael said.

It was a sensation that came over her all at once. She knew this was a marriage of convenience, a marriage that she was using to escape from a life of misery. For a second, though, she asked herself, what if this is more?

She pushed the thought from her head. Men were powerful elixirs, especially men like Michael, with his toned body and chiseled jawline, and feeling his light stubble graze against her cheek made her want to surrender herself to love—though she dared not even think the word.

Just enjoy the moment, Estelle told herself. Enjoy the feeling, illusion though it may be. It won’t still be here in the morning.

And so, she did. She allowed herself to do just as Michael asked: she relaxed.

“Yes,” Estelle said. “Yes, it does feel nice.”

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He looked her straight in the eyes, their lips nearly touching, and Estelle wondered if—hoped, really—he would cover the remaining distance and let her have another kiss.

Perhaps he was going to, but the band finished their song and Michael let his hold on her loosen as he took a step back.

“You know, Michael,” Estelle said, “you lied to me.”

He looked shocked, taken aback. “What?” he asked. “How?”

She smiled. “You’re actually quite a wonderful dancer.”

“Oh,” he said, smiling back. “So are you.”

“Come on,” Estelle said. “Let’s go see what else there is to do here.”

She had a smile on her face because she was happy, but she was still anxious. Estelle had jokingly called Michael a liar, but she knew, deep down, that she was the real liar.

Chapter Fifteen

The rooster crowed at dawn and Estelle wanted to stay in bed. The riding had finally caught up to her; her body was sore. Additionally, they had come back late from the town fair and she could have used a couple more hours of beauty sleep.

Still, seeing the sunlight pass over the mountains through her windows, along with the majesty of all the open land, made her sure that this life she had chosen was the one she wanted to live. Her body may have been a bit slow to get up, but she remained excited about the day ahead of her, working on the ranch.

She went downstairs to start work on breakfast and managed to put together a pretty good meal, if she said so herself, of fresh eggs and potatoes. Michael arrived at the table just as she finished.

“Mornin’,” he said. “Smells good.”

“Thank you.” Estelle put his breakfast on a plate and handed it to him.

“Good, hearty meal, and we’re going to need it today.”

She sat down beside him and began eating. “Why is that?”

“Well, Winston McClelland said he was in need of some meat, so we’re gonna need to get it to him.”

Estelle felt the air leave her body. She’d performed many of the duties at the ranch, but she hadn’t yet had to kill any of the animals. She knew it was part of life on the ranch, but it didn’t mean she had to like it.

“So, do we have to... take their lives?” Estelle asked.

“No,” Michael said. “We just do what’s known as a cattle drive. We get a bunch of them and lead them to Winston’s. He takes care of the rest.”

It still didn’t sit completely well with Estelle.

“Look, Estelle, you need to understand that we all need to eat. Part of our job here is to give all the animals as good a life as we can. If they were out in the wild, they’d be killed in unimaginable ways by wolves or cougars, if they didn’t starve to death first.”

“I know that,” Estelle admitted. “I just don’t much like it.”

Winston had requested nine cattle, so that was what Estelle and Michael brought together. With the assistance of Daisy and Buckley, the Australian Shepherds, as well as Buttercup and Orion, the two horses, they headed toward town, circling the cows and keeping them in a tight group, carefully ensuring they all stayed in their place and none of them got spooked.

It wasn’t far to the town circle, perhaps a mile or so, but the short ride filled Estelle with dread. Still, she had a job to do and she knew that not every job on the ranch would be glamorous. She shoveled the horse manure and she was leading the cattle to the butcher. It was work, and it was the price she had to pay in order to live this life.

She looked at the cattle, moving in their small herd, occasionally offering a soft “moo” as they walked as if they had all the time in the world. Each one of them would feed dozens of people. In a perfect world, they could just live like people and die when it was their time, but that wasn’t the world she lived in.

Estelle rode up next to one of the cows and patted it on the head. She could almost see it smile at her, lifting its nose in the air and closing its eyes.

Perhaps they were off to a better place, just like humans. These were good cows and deserved a heaven all their own, with sunny day after sunny day and all the grass they could graze. That thought comforted Estelle and, despite the chore, she felt a smile creep across her face as she wiped away a tear.

A bush up ahead, maybe thirty yards or so, shook a bit. Estelle thought it might have been the wind, but it was too isolated.

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“Michael!” she shouted.

He was riding up toward the front, keeping an eye on the cows while steering them forward.

She pointed toward the bush and he saw it, pulling Buttercup to a halt and stopping the cows.

“Come on up here, Estelle,” he said.

She rode Orion up toward the front, where Michael handed her Buttercup’s reins as he dismounted.

“What is it?” Estelle asked.

“I’m going to check it out. Could be a field mouse or a rabbit. Could also be a snake.”

He walked toward the bush as Estelle watched him, worried. If it was, indeed, a snake, and it bit him, she didn’t know what she would do. Michael was experienced out here and could possibly walk her through it, but she couldn’t stand the sight of blood and had a terrible fear of snakes.

No, Estelle, she told herself, that was the old you. That was city-girl Estelle. You’re now country Estelle and there isn’t anything that frightens you.

She considered the thought for a second and corrected herself.

There ain't nothin' that frightens you.

Michael continued down the path toward the bush that had rustled before, then stepped away from the trail, the tall weeds covering more than half his body. She could still make him out, but the distance and the brush made it difficult for her to discern features.

She clenched the reins tightly, more out of nervousness than fear that Orion would run. She was hoping that she wouldn't hear Michael scream, but expecting it to happen any moment.

Be brave, Estelle, she told herself. You might need to be strong to save his life. You can do this.

She pictured herself running over to him and somehow dragging his body out onto the trail, holding her head over him and asking him how she could help.

What if there was no way? What would she tell him, knowing that he perhaps only had moments to live?

What if this was like Michael and his parents—one instant, they were alive, and the next they were dead?

In her imagination, Michael's breath became short and he was barely able to speak. The scene took hold of her mind. What would she do?

She would kiss him. Not for him, but for her. It would be her last chance to experience that kiss again. And, from there, she didn't know what she would do. Another tear formed in her eye, and she brushed it away.

Be brave, Estelle. It's probably nothing. And if it's something, you can probably save

him. He's not going to die.

But what if he did?

What if he died right here, in the middle of nowhere and I was stuck with two horses, two dogs, and nearly a dozen cattle? What would I do then?

Her imagination failed her. She would have to abandon the cattle if she couldn't get them back to the ranch, and perhaps Buttercup and the dogs, too.

And then what? She'd have to run the ranch by herself? Or with Jacob's help? It was very likely she'd have to return to Pennsylvania. She couldn't make it out West on her own.

She squinted in the distance, trying to get a glimpse of Michael, but she didn't see him. Estelle thought maybe she could leave the cattle there for just a moment while she went to check on him.

He's probably fine, she told herself. It's only been a moment or two.

She agreed to count to thirty in her head and, if she made it all the way there, she'd go check on him.

One, two...

As she counted, the image of him lying in the field after a snake had bitten him burned in her mind. She closed her eyes, trying to push it away, focusing on the numbers.

Eleven, twelve...

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But what if he was there? Suffering, right now, because she didn't go over to rescue him? He could die, and it would be her fault.

Wait, what number was I on?

It didn't matter—she was going to go over and check on him.

But just when she made the decision, she heard his voice.

"It's nothing!" Michael said, walking out of the tall grass and back to the horse. "Just a little gopher snake. I nudged him away so he didn't spook the cattle."

Her eyes must have been red because when he got closer, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Estelle nodded her head. "Yes. I was just thinking about the cows again." She wiped away the tears. Why was it so difficult to tell someone how you felt? Was he this worried about her dying? It seemed impossible.

"Let's go," she said.

And they drove the cattle the remainder of the way to town.

On the way back, Estelle asked Michael how he managed to run the ranch after his parents died.

“I imagine they were in charge before the fire, weren’t they?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Michael said, “and, to be honest, I didn’t know what I was doing at first. Or, at least, I didn’t think I did. But the fact of the matter is, they’d shown me everything I needed to know. I just had to find the confidence to do it.”

“Do you think, if I had to, I could run the ranch just like you did?”

Michael adjusted his hat to get the sun out of his eyes. “Estelle, you’d be amazed what people can do if they absolutely have to do it. Why, I heard of a fella who was out in the middle of nowhere out here, maybe five miles from anywhere, when he was thrown from his horse. Doctors later said he cracked two ribs.”

Just the idea of one broken rib sent phantom pains into Estelle’s chest. “How did he make it back?” she asked.

“I’ll tell you how. He got right back on that horse like it was nothing and he trotted his way into town in unspeakable pain. I talked to him about it and he made it sound like it was nothing. It wasn’t nothing. But you put yourself in a situation like that, where it’s do or die, well... you’d better get busy doin’, ‘cause the alternative don’t sound too appealing.”

Michael looked over at Estelle and gave her a smile that filled her with warmth. “So, you’re asking me if you could run the ranch? Well, you’ve still got a lot to learn—you ain’t even been here a whole season yet—but you’re a smart woman and pretty resourceful. If you really had to? If it was do or die like the man on the horse? Yeah. I’d bet you could run the ranch on your own.”

Estelle blushed. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, ma’am. On my mother’s grave, I believe it with all my heart. You’re a tough’n,

Estelle. And you got a mind to match. I expect it won't be long before you start teaching me the right way to do things around here."

She didn't fully believe him, but she had to admit it was nice to hear. And, if she was being honest with herself, she had improved around the ranch. She'd adapted and turned what once felt like a fantasy into a reality. It wasn't so long ago, she was stuck indoors all the time and her biggest concerns were what dress to wear and what book to read.

Now, her days were full, and she actually felt like she was living life instead of just letting time pass.

She looked at Michael and felt her heart flutter. It wasn't just him, though she found him even more handsome than the day they'd met—it was what he represented and what he offered her.

She stopped herself. From the way she was thinking, it almost sounded like she was in love.

Don't confuse yourself, Estelle. You're in love with the life, not with him.

A few quick breaths to calm herself and get her mind back on track let her focus on the riding.

She did get one more quick glimpse at Michael, with the sun behind him, offering a light silhouette. It looked like the vibrant scene of a painting.

Yes, she thought, this life is what I'm in love with. Not Michael. I can't love him and, no matter what he thinks, he can't love me. As long as I hold a secret and, so long as I do, I'm betraying him.

Chapter Sixteen

When Estelle came back into the house, ready to lie down after the long ride, she saw the envelope on the floor. The handwriting was unmistakable. She picked it up and ascended to her room, where she tore it open and sat at her desk.

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There was no point in wasting time. The longer the envelope sat unopened, the longer it would nag at her, causing her to worry that her life on the ranch was threatened.

Estelle –

I've tired of your childish games and demand you come home at once. Ethan and I would come to you if our business concerns weren't so taxing and necessary, currently. Ethan is a wonderful man who will provide you with a fulfilled life of opulence.

This may be difficult for you to understand, but you must listen to me. Right now, perhaps, you're enjoying your life because you're young, but it won't always be that way. One cold winter or especially dry summer can ruin the life of a rancher. Old money, however, provides security in even the worst of times.

Will Michael still care for you when you're older? Or when he's older and can no longer perform his duties on the ranch? How much longer will you be able to continue? I assure you, it is much more difficult to push a wheelbarrow or milk a cow when you're eight months pregnant.

I am willing to reason with you. If you want a horse, I will happily purchase you a horse. If you would like a garden to tend, that can be arranged. However, you'll need to return to Philadelphia first.

If you are not here by May the fifteenth, I will be forced to take matters into my own hands and fetch you myself.

Please let me know if you need funds to purchase a train ticket and expedite your return.

Your father,

Richard Williams

May fifteenth was only three weeks away. Certainly, she could be home by then if she so desired, but there was nothing she wanted less. The things she wanted weren't things that her father could bribe her with. Yes, of course she wanted a horse, but that wasn't all she wanted. She enjoyed tending to the vegetables, though a garden couldn't scratch that itch.

The truth was that she liked herself out in Utah. And bringing Estelle back to Philadelphia would leave that version of her behind. The life of a rich girl who was constantly spoiled with whatever she wanted struck her as dull. She no longer wanted to be spoiled. She wanted to earn everything she got instead of just having it handed to her.

She grabbed a sheet of parchment paper and a pen, dipping it in ink, and began writing before she even considered what she was going to say.

Dearest Father,

I do not wish to disappoint you, but I cannot return home. I would be miserable trapped inside the house again, married to a man whom I detest, especially after experiencing what I can be out here. Perhaps city life is what you would prefer, but it is not for me.

I do hope you will visit me here, but not to take me away. Instead, I could introduce you to Michael and all of the animals and show you the wonderful things that I do

here on a daily basis.

I've been riding horses and feeding hogs and growing my own vegetables, then cooking them. Meals taste so much better when I've made them myself. I can prepare them exactly to my liking and feel proud for having made them.

I beg of you to respect that I am happy here and wish to stay. And I ask for you to please understand that this is what I want. I know you want what is best for me, but I must make my own choices and, if they turn out to be mistakes, then they're mine and mine alone.

Please accept that I am married to Michael. Until you do, I'm afraid there will be more than just physical distance between us.

Sincerely,

Your daughter, Estelle Holden

Estelle folded up the letter and placed it in an envelope before giving herself the chance to read it over. She refused to cry. Her father may continue to deny reality, but she refused. Estelle was a married woman, and her marriage was no less real just because it was one of convenience. Indeed, many would consider their marriages to be far from "convenient," particularly those who were forced to wed someone they actively despised.

The first step to accepting reality was letting Michael in on her past and admitting that she had lied to him. Estelle needed to come clean and let him know everything to make sure that he was still on her side. And, if he wasn't, it at least gave her time to get away from the address her father knew and head further west, maybe even make it all the way to the coast.

She decided there wasn't time to wait. It had to be now. Estelle left her room and went downstairs, rehearsing in her head along the way what she would say and how she would say it. It had to be presented in a matter-of-fact way, and she had to let him figure out how he felt about it without trying to push him one way or another. His reaction would tell her everything she needed to know before he even said anything.

But Michael wasn't downstairs, where Estelle had expected to find him. She left the house and looked around outside, thinking that perhaps he was performing ranch work. He wasn't.

Instead, he was up at Jacob's cabin, talking to him through the doorway and, from the sounds of things, getting quite upset.

"It was years ago at this point, Jacob," Michael said, stern-voiced and loud, though still not shouting. "During that time, I've done all the ranch work, tended to all the animals, and supported you. You're not the only one who lost their parents that day. They were my ma and pa, too. Are you listening to me?"

There was no audible response from Jacob. It didn't take a genius to know that this was a difficult subject for the two of them, but Estelle saw that Michael wasn't maintaining the essential level of calm in order to have a real discussion. She climbed the path toward the house.

"I know you're in there, Jacob. You can't just hide from the world forever, tip-toeing out every couple of weeks or so until things start to look serious again."

Estelle went up to Michael. "What are you doing?" she said, her voice sotto, but quick.

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Michael turned toward her, lowering his voice as well, thinking Jacob might not be able to hear them. “We have a night like last night, where he finally comes out of his cabin and walks into town to do something fun, but the next day, he’s locked right back up in his cabin, like he’s never left at all.”

“You’re not going to get him to come out like that. If you want to talk to him, you’ve got to encourage him, not scare him away. Why is he going to want to talk to you if you’re talking to him like that?”

Michael let out a breath. “Are you blaming me for this? For the way he’s acting?”

“No, Michael.”

“Because it sounds a little like you’re taking his side here.”

That wasn’t the case. Estelle knew that Michael had been extraordinarily patient with Jacob and that, eventually, patience could run out.

“Michael,” she began, but she didn’t know if she could tell him what she wanted to tell him. If he’d known she wasn’t an orphan, she could tell her about her life growing up and how she was constantly dragged in fancy dresses to smile and do things she didn’t want to do. It seemed as though her room was the only way to escape the dull parties and boring conversations her father would have.

No, it wasn’t the same, but she understood being in a world where someone would mostly only want to be alone. Because if the people around you wouldn’t let you be yourself, then it felt lonelier to be with them than by yourself.

That was what she would have told him, if he knew she wasn't an orphan. But this moment wasn't about her and, as such, it wasn't the time to tell him. It would have to wait just a little bit longer.

"Yes?" Michael asked.

"Do you want your brother back?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your brother. The one you love. Not the brooding one who won't speak to you."

"Yes," Michael said, "of course."

"Then you need to believe me," Estelle said, "he's not going to come back if you force him to. You need to encourage him, and you need to reward him, just as you do when training the animals. Stop blaming him for isolating himself and, instead, praise him for the times he does come out. Tell him that it was really wonderful to see him at the fair last night."

"Okay, fine."

Michael turned toward the door.

"No," Estelle said, "not now! Give him some space. Come back later and apologize, and then tell him that it was nice to see him."

Michael grunted and turned back away from the cabin, toward the house.

After he walked away, Estelle knocked on Jacob's door.

“Jacob? It’s me. Michael left.”

“Go away,” Jacob said.

“I just came here to say that it was nice to see you last night and that I hope we get to do more things like that together.”

“Did you hear me?” Jacob demanded. “I want to be left alone. Go away.”

He obviously wasn’t in any kind of mood to talk. Whatever was going on, she was likely best off staying out of it as much as possible. Michael already accused her of taking Jacob’s side and, with the way Jacob was responding to her, he wasn’t too keen on her, either.

She walked away from the cabin, but instead of going back to the house, she went to the horse stables and fed Orion some hay.

I guess all of us could use some alone time right now, she thought.

Orion let out a soft neigh, then licked the side of her face as she fed him more hay and pet him. At least someone around here was in a good mood. And he was a good listener.

“Orion,” Estelle said, “I have something I need to tell you.” She said it softly, just in case somebody was listening. “I’m worried that once I tell you, you won’t think of me the same way, but it’s the truth and so you need to hear it.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m not an orphan,” she said. It was that easy. “I’m not an orphan. In fact, I lived with my father my entire life. And I would say he was a good father to me, always making sure that I had everything I needed and lived a life of comfort.”

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Orion watched her intently. It really did feel like he was listening. And it was easier to say all this than Estelle expected.

It helped that Orion wasn't the least bit judgmental.

“But one thing he did is he chose my husband for me when I was only eleven years old. He didn't even want my input on the man I was going to spend my life with. And the man he picked was absolutely awful: a disgusting, rude, immature young man who only thought of himself. Just the absolute opposite of Michael.

“And so, I responded to Michael's advertisement. Now I'm worried that my father will come and take me away from here. I don't want to leave you or anyone here behind.”

And that was pretty much everything. She breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't so hard. Now she just had to try it on a real human being.

She could do it.

When the time was right, of course.

Chapter Seventeen

Jacob sat in his cabin, frustrated and angry with himself, wondering why he kept pushing away the people who were closest to him. Michael had saved his life, risking his own in the process—yet every time Jacob looked at him, he felt a rush of sadness, remembering that the only reason he still existed in this life was because Michael had

picked him over their parents.

He didn't deserve it.

He sat at his table, eating a bowl of cold grits without even tasting it, just mechanically taking one bite after another. There was no sense of enjoyment or disappointment or awareness that he could be eating something better.

Jacob wondered how Michael could look at him and not feel the same frustration he did. How is it, Jacob wondered, that he doesn't regret every second I'm wasting when he could have saved Ma or Pa instead?

The next scoop of grits came up empty and Jacob looked down at the bowl. It was mostly gone, but he scraped the rest of what was left off of the sides and took one final spoonful before walking away from the table and over to his bedroom.

It was early yet—the sun hadn't even set—but there wasn't anything much left for Jacob to do to occupy his time, save for the stack of letters sitting on the nightstand beside his bed. He'd been reading them over and over again to the point that he could recite them from memory. They were the only things bringing him any joy, and every time he left the cabin, it was from him thinking about the letters. It wasn't just that they made him happy—it was that they made him want to be happy.

They were, of course, the letters from Megan. Every time one came, he ripped the envelope open and read it as quickly as he could, like a hungry dog devouring its dinner as soon as the food is put in the bowl. And once he finished, he read it over again more slowly, trying to appreciate every word. Then, he was left hungry for more.

In that sense, he felt something resembling jealousy toward Michael. Michael didn't need to wait weeks to talk to Estelle. They were constantly around each other, sharing

experiences and living life together.

One day, he'd want that with Megan. Who was he kidding? If he could have had her right at that moment and for the rest of his life, he'd say yes in an instant. Life wasn't that simple, though.

Megan was in Philadelphia and showed no signs of leaving. He could ask her to marry him; that was something he could do. He could write the words on paper, as he'd done hundreds of times before. And, every time, he'd throw those letters away. Because he knew if he sent them, he'd have to wait upwards of a month to hear her response. And what if she said no and never wrote to him again? He couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

He looked at the latest draft of his current letter:

Dear Megan,

The fire has been on my mind quite a bit as of late, perhaps because I feel that, slowly, my brother and I are rekindling our relationship. There's something I want to tell him, though I don't quite have the words yet. In his mind, he believes he saved my life, but I didn't want to be saved—at least, not in the moment, and not until the day I met you.

He wasn't a poet and it often took him several attempts to find just the right words and turns of phrase. Sometimes it would take him all day to do so, but he had the time and it allowed him to truly express how he felt—as well as explore his own thoughts, reaching conclusions that wouldn't have occurred to him had he just sat around thinking to himself.

Estelle was also writing to Megan. Perhaps she was writing to Megan right now. Right after Jacob had been so rude to her, telling her to go away. Twice. What if

Estelle was, right now, writing to Megan and telling her about everything that had happened? Maybe that alone would get Megan to stop writing back.

He had to apologize. Eventually, he would have realized it was the right thing to do, but the thought of Megan made him reach that conclusion sooner. He dragged himself down the pathway to the house and walked inside.

“Hello?” he called, knocking on the half-open door.

Nobody responded, but the door opened on his knock. He saw that the room was empty, though there was a desk with a pen, some ink, and a small pile of paper.

If she wasn’t in now, he could at least leave her an apology note. With his letters to Megan, he noticed he’d felt more comfortable communicating using longhand than with spoken words.

When he sat down, he removed the top piece of paper from the pile, which already had writing on it. He knew it was none of his business and he shouldn’t read it, but once he saw to whom it was addressed, his curiosity got the better of him.

Dearest Megan,

I fear that not telling Michael the truth is going to hurt me in the long run and possibly tear us apart. My father is demanding I come home at once and is threatening to come get me here himself if I don’t. I must tell Michael everything, but I don’t know how. I don’t have the words. And I fear that he will no longer wish to be married to me when he learns that we wed under false pretenses. Please help, in any way that you can. If you can talk some sense into my father and let him know I’m happy, I’d

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It stopped right there, in the middle of the sentence, but Jacob had read enough.

Secret? Father? He thought Estelle was an orphan. Was that what the secret was? And why would her father want to come all the way out to Utah to get her?

“Jacob?”

He turned around and saw Estelle in the doorway.

“What are you doing in here?”

Estelle saw the paper in Jacob’s hand and, in an instant, knew that he knew.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He put the paper down, an apologetic puppy dog look on his face. He wasn’t upset, but when he took a step toward Estelle, she took one back in response. She didn’t want Jacob any closer to her than he already was.

“I came here,” he said, “to say that I was sorry for telling you to go away.” He looked back toward the desk. “I was going to write you a letter... It doesn’t matter. I tried coming here to make things right and I read something I wasn’t supposed to, so I just ended up with another thing I owe you an apology for.”

Estelle was furious, clenching her fists together. She closed her eyes and bit her

tongue, like her father had taught her whenever she'd had anger spells, and calmed down enough to think clearly.

Maybe this was better. She hated having to hide her secrets from everyone, particularly the people who had become her family. Now that it was out to Jacob, she could at least get an idea of how Michael might react and the best way to tell him.

So, just like she told Orion, she told Jacob.

"I'm not an orphan," she confessed. Jacob nodded. She was sure he had questions, but he kept them to himself—at least, for now.

"In fact, I come from a very wealthy family in Philadelphia. My father wanted to marry me off to someone whom I not only didn't love, but actively detested. That wasn't the life I wanted for myself, so I did whatever I could to get away from it all. And that brought me here."

Jacob's face was completely blank to Estelle. If he had any thoughts about what she had just said, she couldn't read them. She allowed the pause to fill the room until he eventually responded.

"Have you told Michael?"

"No."

Jacob sat down on the desk chair as Estelle moved over to her bed, taking a seat at the edge.

"But I intend to," she added.

Jacob considered this. "He'll know you're hiding something," he said. "You've been

around him long enough and, to be honest, you don't come off as the orphan type."

That was something of a relief. It wouldn't come as a complete shock because he already didn't believe her.

"I think you should just tell him. Just like you just told me," Jacob said. "Michael's an understanding guy, most of the time."

Estelle thought about Michael raising his voice at Jacob through the cabin door, losing his temper, and wondered if that was the real man she married. Perhaps everything else was an act. He might have seemed to be understanding, but what if he wasn't?

"Perhaps, but I don't think he wants to be married to a liar."

"Well, I don't want to be rude, but he is married to a liar. And the longer you don't tell him the truth, the longer it is that he'll be married to a liar. The good news is once you talk to him, he won't be married to a liar anymore, will he?"

That made sense to Estelle. Why was it that she thought telling him the truth would make her a liar? It was the exact opposite.

"I'll tell him when the time is right," she promised.

Jacob stood up. "And when might that be?"

"Soon," she said.

“Soon,” Jacob said. He mulled the thought over in his head. “Well, please take this in the spirit of what I mean, but I think you’re a mighty fine woman and my brother is lucky to have you. You’re telling me ‘soon’ and so I’m going to believe that that’s the truth. But just like I came in here to apologize and only did something else to say I was sorry for, I hope you’re not making yourself a bigger liar by telling me that.”

He tipped his hat to her. “I’m gonna head back to my cabin. It’ll be dark soon enough. You have a good evening.”

“You, too, Jacob,” Estelle said.

She had meant it when she’d told him that she would tell Michael soon, but he was right. If she didn’t actually do what she said she was going to, then that’d just be another lie, wouldn’t it? Estelle didn’t think of herself as a liar, but the problem with lies was that once you told one, you ended up having to tell more and more. A single lie was like a snowball rolling down the hill—if you didn’t stop it while it was still relatively small, it’d just get harder and harder to deal with.

Chapter Eighteen

Something changed in Michael the night of the town fair. It stuck with him as he tended to the chickens, pulling the eggs out of their nests and placing them in his basket for later.

The night was magical, and there wasn’t any better way for Michael to describe it. As a child, he’d loved going to fairs—he always ate as much as he could fit in his tiny belly and played all the games until eventually he passed out from sheer exhaustion, a

smile plastered on his face as he slept.

As he grew, however, the fair began to lose its charm. Every year was the same and, as a young teenager, all of the joy was gone. He knew what to expect and there wasn't ever anything new. So, he'd go, as it was only once a year, and enjoy watching Jacob having fun, but once Jacob reached his teenage years, they stopped going.

But this time was different because there was something new.

And that something was Estelle. She brought back something inside him that he'd thought was gone forever. To say he felt like a child would be incorrect, because he was still very much an adult. But he was an adult with hope and dreams and a sense of fun. It had been so long since Michael had enjoyed honest-to-goodness fun that he assumed it was just a feeling that left once one became an adult.

But it was very much there. Sometimes, it just took another person to find it.

Being alone on the ranch for so long with only Jacob had drained him of everything except for his day-to-day duties.

Of course, there was more to life than that. And Estelle was the embodiment of it. There was a word in his head that he was scared to even think because it didn't feel appropriate. It felt even slightly illicit, like he was somehow committing a sin by even considering it, or violating a personal oath.

But there wasn't anything wrong with the word and, at the fair, he'd felt it even if he didn't think it. Only after the fact did he consider that this one word could summarize his feelings.

The word, of course, was love.

And love was a sneaky devil. It had a tendency to sneak up on you, then lodge itself in your heart. He had felt it on the cattle drive, too. Just being around her made everything brighter. He was excited to start the day, and even if all he was doing was the same routine, having Estelle with him made it seem fresh and exciting again.

Why had he closed off his heart to love?

Because he didn't think he'd be able to have it, and sometimes a little hope could be worse than none at all. It placed him in a very dangerous situation because he felt that Estelle might have similar feelings for him. But it wasn't part of their arrangement, and what if she didn't? What if she was just a naturally sunny person who made everybody's lives better? She'd made more progress with Jacob in just a few weeks than Michael had in years.

Michael wanted to share his feelings with Estelle. In a perfect world, she'd respond in kind, saying she felt the same way.

With his basket full of eggs, Michael returned to the house to drop them off. Along the way, he considered the response he feared. What if, instead of mirroring Michael's feelings, Estelle told him that she didn't feel that way and was, perhaps, offended since that wasn't what she had agreed to when she'd come out to the ranch.

And then she'd leave.

Those weren't the only two possibilities, but they were the only two that Michael's mind could consider without getting overwhelmed. It made telling her a gamble. If he didn't say anything, she would stay at the ranch indefinitely and they would stay married and he would have her. But if he told her, there was a chance she could love him, too, and they could have a true marriage, the likes of which Michael had never dreamed of.

On the other hand, he could also lose her forever. Was it worth it? Was he willing to risk the possibility never seeing her again for the chance at a life of love?

He went to go check on the cows, wondering what they thought had happened to their friends that had left them forever. They didn't seem to mind. They continued to graze, chewing their cud, which was a pretty good life for a cow. One could have a good life in general, just doing what they were made to do.

The Michael of a few months ago felt a bit like the cows. Day in and day out, he'd do the same routine, and there was comfort in that. What if one of the cows he'd taken was in love with one of the other ones? Were cows capable of love? They could certainly express affection to each other, as well as to people, but could they truly love the way that a human could?

No, Michael thought, love had to be human. And, of course, godly. He turned toward the sky, sending a mental prayer to God, asking for guidance, but God couldn't make the choice for him.

He loved his parents and they were abruptly taken from him. And his brother, though not taken, wasn't the same brother that he'd known. People could change and people could leave. If he woke up to learn that Estelle had run off or vanished off the face of the Earth, he knew he would regret not telling her and not knowing.

That gave him an idea.

The night of the fair, he'd felt that Estelle truly loved him. They had danced together, and he'd never been so close to another person. It was as if all of the people were on the other side of the world and the music existed just for them to enjoy in each other's presence. There was more than one way to say, "I love you," and, in their dancing, he had felt Estelle was saying it to him.

He thought he'd seen it in her face, too. It was a bigger and truer smile than he'd ever seen on anybody before, and it was contagious. The event had gone by in an instant, like the flash when the camera took their picture. And yet, every single moment was still ingrained in his head—if he closed his eyes, he felt like he was right back there with her.

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But were the memories real? They felt real, but they also had a dreamlike quality as if he had imagined the whole thing in vivid detail. He wanted to go back and live it all again to make sure it was real.

There was one problem: The fair wouldn't return for another year.

It wasn't the only adventure they could have, though. It was a new world that he lived in with her. Everything that had brought him joy when he was younger, only to die down like a fire at the end of the night as it lost its novelty, could be given new life if he saw it through her eyes.

He needed to give her another experience like the fair, and only through that could he see if she still felt that she cared for him. In that moment, he could confess his feelings for her. If, however, he determined that it wasn't actually love in her eyes, he could keep his heart hidden in his chest. He'd be able to still spend his life with her, but there would always be a wall, albeit a thin one, between them.

God looked down from him from the sky and Michael remembered an adage that his father had always told him as a boy: God helps those who help themselves. God worked in mysterious ways, perhaps, but you needed to do the heavy lifting in order to be worthy of his help. If Michael and Estelle were meant to be, God would make it work.

But only if Michael put in the work to allow His help.

Chapter Nineteen

The handwriting on the envelope wasn't familiar to Estelle this time, though there was a postmark from Philadelphia. She took it to her room and opened it, expecting it to contain yet another secret she'd have to confess to Michael sooner rather than later.

It didn't.

It was the same secret she'd dealt with ever since before she left for Utah. The only difference, as the envelope suggested, was who wrote it.

Dearest Estelle,

It's beginning to look like you're not going to return to Philadelphia of your own volition, forcing your father and me to take matters into our own hands. I do not feel as though my request is unreasonable: I am asking for you to accept my kindness and live a life of luxury under my support. As I'm sure your father noted, this life you're living now may seem exciting, but it is not sustainable and, sooner or later, I fear that you will regret it.

I have been told by many that I am an attractive young man with wealth and success and, as such, many women would give anything to marry me. And yet, of everybody, I have chosen you. I would expect you to be flattered by a man such as myself asking for your hand in marriage above all others, and yet you have made every effort to distance yourself from me, including moving nearly all the way across the country to be with a man whom you hadn't even met.

If I may be blunt, men out in those parts of the country are not respectable. I've met several in my travels and they all speak with crass, unspeakable words and are perfectly content not only wearing work clothes, but being seen in them. The very idea that a man is expecting you to do physical work around foul animals is outright madness and it boggles the mind that you can't see it for yourself. A woman such as yourself deserves to be treated like the delicate flower you are, basking on a couch as

servants feed you grapes as though you're a goddess.

That's what I believe, but now I hear from your father that you're handling pigs and shoveling manure? This is absolutely outrageous, and I won't stand for it. You cannot possibly be happy in this life you live and if you cannot or will not return, we are coming to get you. This is your final warning.

I hope to see you soon. In Philadelphia. Not Utah.

Your fiancé,

Ethan Fitzgerald

This was not a letter worth rereading or even saving. Estelle crumpled it up and tossed it in the wastebasket.

There was a knock at the door.

"Estelle?" It was Michael.

"Yes?" She opened the door and he stood there, a bashful look on his face.

"Would you like to go for another ride today?"

The bad feeling in her gut left by the letter immediately disappeared. "I'd love to!" she said.

It was moments like these that reminded her why this was the life for her. No matter what else was going on, something as simple as a ride with Orion out into the plains to discover somewhere new could cheer her up and allow her to escape from her fears.

It hadn't lost any of its charm. The sun on her face and the wind pushing her hair back made Estelle feel like the world was all hers to explore. The land appeared barren at first glance, but she'd gotten better at spotting all the life around her. It wasn't just the cacti or the squirrels; it was also the lizards and the occasional mountain goat. Even the snakes, which frightened her to some degree, were an important part of nature—and, in that sense, she loved that they were out there. She still had no interest in seeing one.

Of course, the most exciting life out here was the man riding with her. It was nothing but serendipity that brought them together—he really could have been anybody, and yet she couldn't imagine anyone else she'd rather be with. It was strange to be married to a man to whom she was so attracted and yet feel like little more than an acquaintance. She stared at his broad, muscular shoulders, flexing while holding the reins of his horse. He turned his head toward the side of the canyons, and she could see his effortless smile indicating that the desert brought him as much joy as it did her.

Michael was relaxed while riding. There were always chores that needed to be done at the ranch, but they always stayed at the ranch. Out here, they were the furthest thing from his mind. He could get away from his work—unlike her father or Ethan, who seemingly lived only to do their jobs, as if money was the only important thing in the world. As if those sheets of paper in Ethan's wallet could be used to buy her.

No. She had grown up with money and she couldn't care less about it.

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Estelle looked around once more at the plain and noticed the shadows stretched across the landscape.

“Are we going to be okay?” she asked. “The sun’s starting to get pretty low.”

It was moving toward the horizon, spreading the colors of fire into the sky, giving everything a beautiful glow and allowing the brightest of the stars to come out, albeit faintly.

“We’ll be fine,” Michael said. “We’re almost there.”

He was right. It couldn’t have been much more than a quarter mile when Michael dismounted and asked Estelle to do the same so they could tie their horses to a tree.

“I want you to close your eyes,” Michael said. “Tight.”

She looked at him and he nodded.

“You trust me, don’t you?”

She did.

“Now, walk forward slowly, one step at a time. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

She did so.

“Stop!” Michael said. “Now, take a deep breath. I’ve got you, okay? Slowly open

your eyes.”

Estelle opened her eyes and her first reaction was fear. She jumped up and Michael held her to keep her from falling.

They were at the edge of the cliff, with a sharp drop off perhaps hundreds of feet down.

“Like I said,” Michael said. “I’ve got you.”

And he did. She felt reassured in his arms and looked forward. Her heart still raced, but what she realized was that it felt like she could see everything for miles off into the distance. It was all illuminated by that red-hued light, as if a painter wanted to put as much beauty into the image as he possibly could.

“Make sure you remember to breathe,” Michael said.

It must have been half a minute or so without a breath. She took in the air while looking out at the sunset and the plains of Utah. It made her realize how cluttered cities felt, with everything crammed into as small an area as possible. There was so much land out there. And this was just one state. Part of one state. She couldn’t imagine how big the Earth must be.

“This is remarkable,” she said.

She thought back to Ethan trying to buy her love and realized no matter how rich he was, he couldn’t afford this much land. But, at this moment, without paying a penny, she felt as if it all belonged to her. There weren’t any other humans around claiming it. In fact, the only other human around was Michael.

He turned her around and looked into her eyes as she stared back, seeing the

reflection of the world in his. And she was at the center of it.

The wind blew her hair around, so Michael reached forward and pulled a strand out of her face. He leaned forward, closing his eyes, and softly kissing her on the mouth.

This afternoon had already been unbelievable for Estelle, one of the best of her life, and now, with one simple kiss, Michael removed any competition. She had never been happier in her life.

When he eventually pulled back and looked at her, he said, "I've been wanting to do that again ever since our wedding night."

Estelle blushed, "So have I." She giggled, feeling like she was ten years younger. "I wish you'd have done it sooner."

"Me, too," he said. "I guess we're going to have to make up for lost time."

He kissed her again.

The first time he kissed her, time stopped. The second time, her heart exploded with happiness. This third kiss not only killed her with inner joy and contentment, it also brought her back to life.

"I'd like to stay here forever," Michael said, "but it's going to be getting dark soon, and it's going to get cold. We'd better get back while we still can."

Estelle was disappointed. She wanted the day to last forever, and the setting sun wouldn't allow it.

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“Fine,” she agreed. “But once more, please?”

He kissed her again and, at that moment, her brain gave in and listened to what her heart had been trying to tell her for weeks.

Being in love frightened Estelle. She rode the way back both elated and nervous. This had once just been an escape from her old life and a way to get out of an inevitable marriage to a man she hated. If things didn’t work out, she could always leave because she didn’t have anything to lose.

That was no longer the case. Her eyes kept drifting to Michael without her thinking about it, and her heart would skip a beat. She knew when she left that she could never return to Philadelphia. Now she knew that she couldn’t leave Grafton Town, either.

Things were too good here, and her father and Ethan were threatening to take it all away from her.

She had to tell Michael the truth—and time was running out. It was just never the right time. And she feared it might never be.

Chapter Twenty

Michael couldn’t have hoped for a better afternoon. As he rode back with Estelle, the only disappointment was that it had to end. However, with this day ending, the next one could begin anew—and he sensed that things would be different between him

and his wife from then on out. It was incredible what a single kiss could do.

And it had happened right on the Jefferson Cliffs, no doubt the prettiest place in all of Utah—if not the world, so far as Michael was concerned. He'd always gone riding there as a teenager, once his parents trusted him to go off on his own, and now it had an even more special place in his heart. It wasn't the first place he'd kissed his wife, but it was the first place he'd kissed her on her own and not just as part of a silly little ceremony.

Did she mean the kiss as much as he did? It sure felt like she did. He knew she'd enjoyed spending time with him, but always wondered if it was really him that she was enjoying. She had a secret or two in her heart, still, and it made her difficult for him to read. Of course, sometimes it could take a lifetime to truly know somebody and, even then, they might go off and surprise you. That was the case with Jacob. No matter how Michael tried, he couldn't understand his own brother. It seemed like Estelle knew him better than he did sometimes. Things had been shaky the night before, but she had helped bridge the gap that existed between the two brothers.

Was this what he had expected from married life? Yes and no. And both in the best of ways. Yes, he no longer felt lonely every day and had someone to talk to, though they weren't talking on the way back to the ranch. There was the slightest hint of tension, as if saying a word could break the spell and ruin what was already perfection. Just being around Estelle made Michael feel more complete.

And, in that sense, married life was not what Michael had expected. It was better. Estelle wasn't just a person to spend the day with—she was the person he wanted to spend every day with.

Michael wondered if he should be the one to break the silence. He wanted to keep talking to her and know what was on her mind, but it scared him. She was thinking right now, and maybe she was thinking that the kiss was a mistake.

He thought he should say something, but he didn't know what. As he was thinking, Estelle broke the silence for him.

"Snake!" she said.

And Orion took off, running through the plains at top speed, spooked by the sight.

Michael kicked Buttercup's sides so she would chase after him. He looked back and saw the rattler slithering through the sand away from the horses. It wasn't a threat. The fear was the threat.

Estelle screamed a horrifying yell that brought a tear to Michael's eye. He couldn't stand to see her in fear, and he couldn't tell her what to do. She needed to stay calm and relax while holding on tight. The problem, however, was that people tended to tense up when they're frightened, which made it harder for them to stay on the horse.

Add to that the fact that Buttercup just wasn't as fast a horse as Orion and wasn't filled with the fear that pushed Orion faster and faster, which was another concern of Michael's. It wasn't unheard of for scared horses to run until their hearts gave out.

"I'm coming!" Michael shouted, though he doubted Estelle could hear him.

He saw, up ahead, something that could either be good fortune or terrible luck: a herd of wild cattle, dark and peaceful, grazing while minding their own business. It was likely that, unable to get through the cattle, Orion would slow down and realize that he was far from the original threat.

It was equally likely, though, that Orion would frighten the cattle, who could stampede. Cattle were, after all, easily spooked. At that point, if Estelle fell off, she'd be trampled.

“Come on, Buttercup,” Michael said. “Top speed.”

He leaned forward and kept on urging her faster, but it was clear she was at her limit and tiring out quickly, as her dwindling pace made clear. Still, Estelle was in sight, still very visible to Michael, though it didn't look like Orion was easing up as he approached the cattle.

Take your own advice, Michael thought. Stay calm.

He was worried, because he wasn't a hero. The fire proved that. Yes, he had managed to save his brother, but at the cost of his parents. He hadn't been brave enough to go back in the house and get them. And his parents had suffered for it.

Now he only needed to save one person. And he didn't know what would happen if he failed. Not after Jefferson Cliff. Not after the sunset kiss.

Michael and Buttercup closed in on Estelle. She was still a good quarter mile away.

Orion made it to the front of the cattle herd and bucked, essentially standing on his hind legs.

Time froze for Michael.

Hang on, Estelle, he thought. Hang on for your life, I'm coming for you.

For a second, it seemed like she was going to make it. She had grabbed onto Orion's neck even as her feet slipped out of the stirrups and hung in the air. So long as Orion came straight down, it looked like she was going to stay on.

But that wasn't what happened.

Orion came down at an angle and Estelle seemed to bounce off the saddle and hang over the edge, holding onto the horse's neck. She still might have been able to stay there if Orion hadn't charged into the cattle and pushed her off.

Michael didn't think, he just rode. The cattle began moving, slowly in response to Orion, and he and Buttercup covered the distance between them, keeping his eye on where Estelle fell.

Even though the herd was slow, the cattle weren't looking and they could still trample her. And, if they picked up speed, they could take Buttercup in the shuffle and she might throw Michael down to the dirt alongside Estelle.

He had to risk it. It might kill him, but he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He charged into the cattle, weaving his way through them, trying to reach the spot where Estelle had fallen. But he didn't see her there. He looked around—had she been taken away by the herd?

No, she was trying to move her way forward out of it. He saw her arm and pushed Buttercup forward until he got her in front of Estelle and blocked off the cattle. Then he reached out his arm.

“Come on,” he said.

She grabbed his hand and she jumped as he pulled up, letting her sit behind him on the saddle.

“Hang on,” he said.

She wrapped her arms around him as he weaved his way through the remaining cattle.

“You saved my life,” she said.

He was out of breath and sweating.

“You’re a hero.”

He didn’t feel like a hero. He felt like a fool who had nearly lost his wife just when he realized he had genuine feelings for her.

“I’m your husband,” he said.

She laughed. “So?”

“So, if I don’t save you, who will?”

She held him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Dearest Megan,

Something amazing happened today. Oh, if only I had the words to express it. Michael took me to the most beautiful place I've ever seen, a cliff overlooking a canyon where I could see everything for miles. And he took me there at the perfect time, where the sun was setting and seemed so large on the horizon that I could almost touch it.

And then... it seems so unreal, I don't know if I can even write it. It's as if I'm remembering a dream. It must have been a dream, for such things can't happen so perfectly in real life.

In this case, though, it did.

He kissed me, and I felt it through me with the warm sun on my face as he took me in his arms. This wasn't what I asked for. This was so much more. God himself brought us together; I can feel it now. Everything has a purpose. If Ethan hadn't been such a vile and repulsive dolt, I never would have run away from home. Or even considered the very notion of becoming a mail-order bride.

Because I did and almost unknowingly put my faith into His hands, I've been rewarded with a better husband than I could have ever even imagined. However, just as every cloud has a silver lining, every diamond has imperfections and every bit of goodness I have comes with a caveat.

Yes, I think I may be in love with Michael. And he thinks he's in love with me. He put his life in danger to save me. We were riding home and there was a snake (a snake!) that frightened poor Orion (my horse), who then ran full speed as far away as he could, then threw me into a herd of stampeding cattle.

Michael took his horse and rode as fast as he could, then pulled me out of that terrifying situation. He risked his life for me, and I can't imagine him doing that if he didn't think he was in love with me.

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But he's not in love with me. No, he's in love with the person he thinks I am. Because I kept the secret for so long, I've managed to make him fall in love with somebody who doesn't even exist—and I fear if I tell him the truth, he'll realize that I'm not the woman he's in love with.

Oh, it's so complicated!

I need to tell him, and I want to tell him. I'm just waiting for the right time. It will happen soon, I know it. I just hope it happens before my father and Ethan try to come and get me.

And I hope against hope that Michael will understand, even if it means we have to start everything over.

I wish you were here to help, Megan. I wish I could be telling this to you in your ear instead of through mail. It's very possible that, by the time you receive this, I've already told him. I should hope that's the case.

However, it's also possible at this point that, by the time you receive this, my father and Ethan will be on their way to me. It's even possible that, as I write this, they're heading my way.

I have faith, though. Our late afternoon tryst reignited my faith in the very idea that things will work out for the best. Even if I don't understand exactly how that is.

If I truly have faith, then there should be nothing to be afraid of. I need to tell him. In fact, I will tell him right now. No more procrastinations: I'm going to go downstairs

and tell Michael exactly who I am. And he will accept me for that.

No excuses this time, because I'm not scared. The moment I finish this letter, that's when I'm going to tell him—and because I'm telling you, it means I will absolutely do it, or it will make me another liar.

So, I must tell him. There's no reason not to.

I'm procrastinating, aren't I? I'm using this very letter to keep from doing it.

Wish me luck, Megan. I will tell him right now.

Sincerely,

Estelle

Chapter Twenty-One

The letter felt like a contract for Estelle. Because she had written down that she was going to tell Michael, it would make her a liar if she did not. Unless, of course, she didn't send it.

So, she put it in an envelope, addressed it, and added a stamp before heading downstairs and putting it in the mailbox, then wandering around the ranch to find Michael.

If she was being honest with herself, she'd admit that she was terrified of talking to him and having the conversation that she'd practiced with Orion. Orion was going to accept her no matter what she said.

She'd also had the conversation with Jacob, and that had put her completely on edge.

At any point, he could tell Michael. Fortunately for her, they weren't talking to each other very much these days.

It was going to be on her to tell him, which was both something of a relief, because it was in her control, and frightening, because it meant she was the one who had to do it.

But she'd promised Megan and she wasn't one to break a promise to a friend.

Michael was with a cow among the herd, sitting on a stool beside a tree, milking her and talking to her in the process. His back was to Estelle, so she had a bit more time before he'd notice her, but she didn't want to wait. She wanted to let it all out.

But then she started listening to his words, and they were a bit strange.

"I realize that I could be doing a better job understanding you."

He was saying that to the cow?

"And I apologize for raising my voice the other day. You didn't deserve that. Honestly, you're family to me, and you're just about the only family I've got left."

If this cow was so special to Michael, Estelle wondered, why hasn't he introduced me to her? Also, is it typical for a man to consider a cow family?

"You're my brother," Michael continued, "and I love you."

Estelle was completely bewildered. Weren't cows all female? And why was it that Michael could say he loved the cow but not her?

"I love you, too," the cow replied in a deep, masculine voice that sounded an awful

lot like...

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Ohhhhh, Estelle thought, feeling her cheeks go red as she laughed at herself.

She moved a bit to the left and saw that Michael had been talking to Jacob, who was standing behind the tree.

Estelle wasn't sure she could approach Michael now even if she wanted to—it was far too embarrassing—but she held back so she could hear the conversation between the two brothers.

It was a difficult conversation for Michael to have, but it was going well. He wished he had made more of an effort to talk to Jacob years earlier.

“I realize that it was unfair to blame you,” Jacob said, “but sometimes the heart works differently than the mind does. You don't know what it was like in there.”

“I have some idea,” Michael said. He had, after all, run back into the burning house after he'd already made it out.

“You think you do, but you don't.”

Michael felt a bit of fire within him at his brother's dismissive comment. “I was there, too, Jacob.”

“No, you weren't,” Jacob insisted, “and let me explain it to you, because I don't think you understand.” He took a deep breath and Michael let him talk.

“The thunder woke me up,” Jacob began. “I remember that. But then I tried going back to sleep, on account it was only thunder. Then, things started getting real warm and real bright inside and I didn’t know what was going on.

“I got out of my room and I’m sure you’d already left by then, but one whole side of the house was on fire, so I rushed into Ma and Pa’s room, and they were stuck in bed. By the time I got them out, the fire was spreading into the hall and we were just trying to get out of the way. It got us into a corner and all three of us were huddled there, blocked from the stairwell, knowing full well and good we weren’t going to make it.”

Michael knew that his family had been inside the house as it was burning, but he hadn’t ever stopped to consider what that must have felt like, knowing they were going to die. That those would be their last moments on Earth.

“You know the weirdest thing?” Jacob said. “It was hot, but no hotter than standing close to a bonfire. The scariest part wasn’t the heat, it was the not being able to see or breathe. My eyes stung, and I kept on coughing. Every breath I took in seemed to only be smoke and I realized, no, the fire wasn’t going to kill me, the smoke was.”

Death by suffocation. Michael had to remind himself to breathe even listening to Jacob tell the story.

“Ma and Pa had passed out,” Jacob said. “Maybe they’d already died.”

“What?” Michael said. Could it be that he was too late to save his parents, even if he had gone back for them?

“It was too much for them. They’re older, I guess, and had a harder time breathing. So, I was sitting there, in the corner, knowing I was about to die while my arms were wrapped around Ma and Pa, who very well might already have been dead. And I

started praying to God, telling Him to just make it quick. Asking Him to give me the strength to get through the next few minutes so I could join Ma and Pa up and heaven, but He didn't do that, did he?"

"No, I suppose not," Michael said.

"No, He sent you instead. I was ready for death. In my mind, I'd already died. And I was okay with that, because at least I wouldn't have to miss Ma and Pa for long. But you took that away from me. You came in and told me to jump."

"You didn't have to jump," Michael pointed out.

"Yeah, I did."

"Why's that?"

"Because if I didn't jump, you would have stayed there until I did and you'da been just as dead as the rest of us. You think you saved my life." Jacob shook his head. "That's not how it went. I saved your life."

Michael didn't respond. He had always assumed that Jacob resented Michael for saving him and not being able to save their parents, but he'd never thought of what would happen to him if Jacob hadn't jumped.

"I didn't understand why I jumped until recently," Jacob said. "I didn't want to, but I felt compelled to. It was only through writing to Megan that we figured it out. And I thought I should share it with you."

Michael got up from his stool and hugged his brother.

"We saved each other," Michael said.

“You’re too good a person,” Jacob told him. “You would have burned to death before leaving that house without me. I should have told you that you couldn’t have saved Ma or Pa. I only wish that you could have said goodbye to them, as I had.”

“Did they say anything before they passed?”

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Jacob nodded. “Nothing too profound. They just told me that they loved both of us and they’re proud of me. And Pa cried a bit. I asked him why and he said it’s because I didn’t deserve to die so young. They’re like you, never thinking of themselves. They were more worried about what was happening to me.”

Jacob looked over and saw Estelle.

“You can come over, Estelle,” he said.

She walked closer. “I didn’t want to intrude.”

Michael waved the thought away. “Nothing being said here that you don’t deserve to know, too.”

She was glad to see them talking and didn’t want to interrupt the tender moment between the brothers. At the same time, she enjoyed watching their reconnection.

“I’m glad you’re not fighting,” she said.

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “Me, too. We couldn’t have done it without you, you know.”

That wasn’t true at all. Estelle knew it. Perhaps she had helped facilitate the moment and encouraged it to happen faster, but their bond was too close for them to stay distant forever.

“You’re too sweet,” she said.

“He’s right,” Michael added. “We would have just gone on living separately like we were doing and probably stay that way until, well, I don’t want to think of it.”

“Well, thank you.” Estelle remembered that she had come here with a purpose and, as usual, it wasn’t the right time. Would it ever be the right time? Looking at the two men, they seemed emotionally drained, and she feared that Michael wouldn’t be ready for another taxing conversation.

But she had written the letter. She had made a promise to her best friend. She had to tell Michael.

“What’d you come out here for?” Michael asked.

Estelle looked at Jacob. He knew what she was thinking, and he gave his head the slightest of shakes to let her know that now was not the time. It was helpful to know that Jacob, who knew Michael better than anyone else on the planet, agreed with her.

“Nothing much,” Estelle said. “I was just wondering if either of you would be interested in having lunch.”

Michael smiled. “Lunch sounds good, Estelle.”

“Will you be joining us, Jacob?”

“Sure thing,” he said.

“I’ll come get you two when it’s ready.” She headed back to the house and, in the process, pulled the letter out of the mailbox. It wasn’t the right time to have the conversation, so she would have to hold off on sending the letter. At least for now.

She brought the letter upstairs and set it on her desk, knowing that every time she looked at it, it would serve as a reminder of the promise she was making to her best friend. The right time would perhaps never come, but she could at least avoid telling Michael at the wrong time.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Michael watched Estelle walk away. The more he was around her, the more he couldn't stop looking at her. He kept on noticing new things. Today, it was the way the long curls of her hair bounced as she walked. It was hypnotic. The days used to blend together, but after the previous day with the sunset and the near stampede, it felt like he would never get to spend enough time with her.

As if she wasn't enough, all by herself, she had also managed to mend his relationship with Jacob. It was only a few short months ago that he'd felt as though he had nobody to talk to or spend the day with, and now there were two people that he cared about—in different ways, of course—that he could be with. It seemed as though loneliness was impossible, so long as the two of them stuck around.

It was still baby steps with both of them, but he trusted in the Lord and felt silly for having ever felt for even a second that He wasn't leading Michael on the right path.

Michael turned back toward his brother. "Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For talking to me."

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They ate lunch with Estelle and took a ride for old time's sake. Jacob rode Orion, his old horse, while Michael took Buttercup again, and they raced each other through the open plains, laughing and playing like they were children again. To Michael, it felt like making up for lost time and evoked a feeling he'd thought he had outgrown. He'd become so accustomed to work and the daily routine that he'd forgotten how important it was to have genuine fun and play for the sake of playing, just as the animals did when left to themselves.

They took the ride back to the ranch a bit slower, though, and focused on talking to each other.

"She's special," Michael said. "Estelle, I mean. She arrived here and she was so beautiful, and unlike any woman I'd ever seen outside of pictures with that fancy city dress. She's completely transformed from that woman since then and I think she's even more beautiful now."

"She's helpful around the ranch?"

"Like you wouldn't believe. She's smart as a whip and picked up everything real quickly. Even the tasks she wasn't so excited about at first, like cleaning the stables or feeding the hogs, she didn't make excuses or nothing. She treated them like anything else around here and did a fine job, if I may say so myself."

Michael wondered if she could be truly as perfect as he saw her or if it was just the love talking. Maybe it was her being perfect that made him love her. He looked at Jacob, who offered a light and somewhat awkward smile, as if to indicate he appreciated many of Estelle's good qualities but didn't hold her in as high an esteem

as Michael did.

“She’s quite a special lady,” Jacob agreed.

“That she is.”

Michael knew that if he kept going on about Estelle, he probably wouldn’t stop, so he shifted the conversation toward Jacob and his interests.

“She told me you’ve been corresponding with Megan,” Michael said.

Jacob shifted in his saddle and wiped his forehead as his cheeks got rosy. “Yes, we’ve been exchanging letters.”

“How’s that been going?”

“Oh,” Jacob said, “it’s hard to tell in these letters without getting an idea of how she’s really reacting. It’s all there in ink, but I can’t see that thing that’s between the words like you get in normal conversation.”

Ain’t that the truth, Michael thought. It wasn’t so long ago that his and Estelle’s relationship was solely based on pen and paper. When she arrived, it wasn’t that she had misrepresented herself, but it still seemed like she was a different person. The woman in the letters was almost imaginary, but the one who had arrived and married him felt real.

“You know,” Michael said, “the way you two are getting along, it might be a good idea to propose to her.”

Jacob got real shy, looking off in the distance at the long shadows. “I don’t know about that.”

“If you wait too long, it might be that someone else will snag her.”

“I don’t think she’d want someone like me.”

“Jacob,” Michael said, “I have it on good word that she’d say yes. The question is whether or not you want to marry her. If you knew she’d say yes, would you ask her to marry you?”

“I suppose so,” he said.

“Well, if you only ‘suppose so,’ then maybe I misjudged the situation and never mind.”

The horses trotted alongside each other, clip-clopping their shoes against the dry, hardened ground.

“I’d expect that you’d be a bit more enthusiastic, is all I’m saying,” Michael said.

Michael knew it would be hard to get this out of Jacob and perhaps he was teasing him a little bit, but it was for his own good. Women, he knew, wanted to feel loved and important. And he knew that Megan wanted Jacob to propose to her, though he also knew she wouldn’t say yes if it sounded like a business agreement or something of the sort. She had to feel like she was the most important woman in the world to Jacob.

And, fortunately for her, she was. Jacob just wasn’t very good at expressing it.

His mind, as it had been doing lately, turned toward Estelle and he realized he should be taking some of the advice he offered his brother. How loved could she feel? He kissed her and he had saved her, but what was he doing to tell her she was special every day? Had he ever even told her how beautiful she was?

“All right,” Jacob said, “you got me. Yes, I want to marry her. I can’t imagine why she would say yes, but if she would take my offering to let her be my wife, I’d be the happiest man west of the Mississippi.”

“She’ll say yes, Jacob. I promise you. She’s just waiting for you to ask her.”

“You telling me the truth?”

“I wouldn’t lie,” Michael assured him. “And when she says yes, she’ll be a very lucky woman.”

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“I’ll be sure to see to it that she feels that way each and every day.”

Michael laughed to himself. There was still plenty of work for the two of them to do together, but it was clear that his brother was starting to resemble the one he remembered from before the fire. The man who was perhaps a bit shy, but had an infectious sense of joy that was hard to avoid when you were near him.

A little while down the trail, Michael tested less comfortable waters with his brother, bringing up the main thing that had dominated his mind for the past day or so.

“I went back to the old ranch,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I showed it to Estelle. It was difficult to see again. The memories were all there, but they’d been charred and destroyed. It was hard not to think of Ma and Pa.”

Jacob nodded. “I don’t think I could ever go back.”

“I hear that. Still, there were a lot of good memories I had from there. Nearly everything’s been destroyed, but being there reminded me of all those good times, too. And how I miss them. I’m glad I went and I think, when you feel up for it, you should go for a ride out there sometime, too.”

Jacob visibly tensed as Michael talked to him and Michael took notice.

“It looks like maybe it’s a little too close for you. Maybe it’s not such a good idea.”

“Let’s take this thing one day at a time,” Jacob said.

“That sounds like a plan.”

Michael, by his nature, didn’t much like waiting. Perhaps that was what he appreciated about life on the ranch: there was always something to do. But Estelle had told him that the best approach if he wanted to reconnect with Jacob was not to try so hard and not to push him. He had to control himself and trust that everything was headed in the right direction.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What are we doing today?” Estelle asked as she and Michael finished their breakfast. “Can we go for another ride?”

“I’m afraid not,” Michael said. “We need to tend to the crops. Make sure everything’s growing okay.”

Estelle’s face dropped and she began to pout.

“You know what you signed up for,” Michael reminded her. “Being out here’s a lot of work. If we finish early, we can go riding.”

She felt like a child. Michael was, of course, right, but it didn’t change the fact that it wasn’t what Estelle wanted to do. If it was her choice, she and Michael would just ride the horses all day long, stopping only to eat, sleep, and kiss.

When he got into his work state of mind, he wasn’t very much fun. It almost seemed like he was a different man than the one who kissed her or who showed her the house where he grew up. That man, the one who wasn’t all serious, was the one that Estelle wanted to be married to.

It wasn't even that she minded the work. It was just if she had to do it, she'd rather do it with the Michael she loved and not the one who seemed more like a father figure, telling her what she had to do.

"Okay," Estelle said. "So, let's get started."

She was also aware of the irony that the Michael she loved was the one who let down his guard, while she had pulled a letter out of the mailbox because she still hadn't been able to talk to him about her true past. The letter sat under her mattress upstairs, still sealed and addressed to Megan, with the promise inside still unkept.

Maybe today would give her an opportunity. Maybe today would offer her the chance to tell him. The perfect time to let him know that she'd been holding a deep secret and finding out if he would support her, even if she wasn't the woman he thought she was.

As they walked toward the fields, Estelle was about to speak, but Michael spoke first.

"That was a big deal what you saw yesterday," he said.

"Sorry?"

"My brother and I talking like that, spending the day together like we did. We haven't done that since... well, since before the fire. I've got to thank you for that."

"For what?" Estelle asked. "I didn't do anything. You spoke to him."

"The way I see it, either it's some sort of big coincidence that as soon as you came, he started to loosen up some, or it has something to do with you."

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This wasn't work Michael talking. This was vulnerable Michael, expressing what he really felt.

"Here's what I think it is, maybe more than anything else. I think it's your friend Megan."

"Megan?" Estelle laughed. "She hasn't been here since the wedding."

"That's true, but I don't think a day's gone by that my brother hasn't thought about her. He's writing to her and—tell me if I'm wrong—I'm pretty sure that he's sweet on her."

"Well, of course he is, except she's getting tired of waiting for him to propose. If he waits too long—"

"That's exactly what I told him!" They both laughed at that. Estelle was starting to feel more relaxed around Michael at times like these. She had an idea of how Michael thought, and sometimes they even thought similar things.

"Is he going to do it?" Estelle asked.

"I tried pushing him, but I don't know. I doubt it."

"Do you know what we should do?"

"What?"

It was a devilish idea that crept into Estelle's head, the kind of thing that would never have crossed her mind back in Philadelphia. She smiled at the very thought of it.

"We should write the letter for him."

"No," Michael said, but his voice said he was considering it.

"Oh, yes, put it in the mail and tell him when it's too late to take it back. Or maybe not even tell him. Let her respond and she'll have accepted his proposal before he's even actually made it!"

"It doesn't hurt either of them. It's just making something that they both want happen." Michael was beginning to get won over on the idea.

But, just as he was getting accustomed to it, it started to fall apart in Estelle's mind.

"She'd recognize the handwriting," she said.

"We can send a telegram. That's even better."

"No," she said. "The other problem is the principle. If Megan found out, she would feel tricked. She wouldn't think of Jacob the same way. I know Megan, and if he's not brave enough to ask her, she's not going to think he's good enough for her."

"What if he doesn't tell her?"

"Then their whole marriage will be based on a lie. I think that's even worse." As the words came out of Estelle's mouth, they lost their energy and she realized she could have been talking about herself.

"Listen," she said, "I need to tell you something."

Michael put up his hand. “You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to.”

“No,” she said, “you need to know that I’m not who I said I was.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I do.”

“Estelle,” Michael said. “I accept you for who you are. Whatever it is you need to tell me, tell me when you want to. When you feel comfortable. Or never. I don’t think it makes a difference to me, either way, but it seems to matter to you.”

“You’re wrong,” Estelle said. “It does affect you.”

She was getting close. Maybe she’d be able to mail that letter out, after all.

“Maybe it does,” Michael said, “but we got a long day of work ahead of us. So, let’s focus on that for now and, at the end of the day, if you still want to tell me, we can talk about it then.”

“But Michael—”

“What I’m saying, Estelle, is that I’m not ready to hear it right now, whatever it is. I just spent a day with my brother, the whole time worried that something might go wrong. I don’t want to do that again. You just be you. I don’t need to know anything else about you, other than you’re here with me right now. Because that’s all that matters to me at this moment.”

Then again, maybe she wouldn’t be able to mail the letter.

“Fine,” Estelle said. “Maybe at the end of the day?”

Michael nodded. “Maybe over supper sounds good.”

They arrived at the field, and Michael pointed to the ground. “How do potatoes sound?”

“They sound good.” They really did sound good, but Estelle was disappointed that she couldn’t get it out. But Michael had told her he wasn’t ready—telling him now would only increase the chances of him reacting badly.

“Okay, we’re going to pull the good ones from the ground. You can cook a few and we’ll bring the rest into town to sell at the market.”

Estelle forced a smile. In truth, it did sound like something she would enjoy. It was just now she couldn’t get her lies out of her head.

The entire time as Michael showed her the process, taking the shovel and digging them out one at a time, her mind was elsewhere, thinking about the different ways she could tell him and how he would react.

He told her there was nothing she could say that would shock him, but how could he anticipate that she was arranged to be married and he could possibly receive an unexpected visit from that man? There was no telling what Ethan would do, either. Yes, one on one, if it came down to a fight, Michael would win every time, but that wasn't how it would play out. Estelle knew Michael wouldn't fight anybody. He was too kind and as much as she wanted to believe that he would defend her and keep her safe, she wasn't sure that he would.

What she worried most of all was that her father had a legal agreement with Ethan's father. And she had no idea what that meant. Was what she did somehow illegal? In the back of her mind, she felt guilty. She had disappointed her father and, growing up, that was something she was taught never to do. He'd raised her and ensured she never went hungry and always had whatever it was she wanted.

Is this how she was repaying him?

But, no, she couldn't let herself feel guilty. She was doing what she needed to do to be happy. And if her father didn't want her to be happy, well, too bad for him. This was her choice to make and she made it.

She just hoped that Michael would be on her side, as well.

That night, Estelle, Michael, and Jacob ate their dinner together. Afterwards, Michael had to tend to the horses, so Estelle and Jacob sat on the porch together, looking at the stars.

“You haven’t told him yet, have you?” Jacob asked.

“I tried,” Estelle said. “I really tried. He said he wasn’t ready to hear it. Then, by the time we got back, I was too tired to have a full conversation about everything from my past.”

“I know you’re not looking for no advice from me,” Jacob said, “but maybe you need to tell him whether he’s ready for it or not. The way I see it, you’re going to want to be the one to tell him—if he finds out from someone else, it’s going to be much worse.”

Was that a threat? It sounded like it could be a thinly veiled threat, but that wasn’t like Jacob at all.

“Do you mean you’re going to tell him?”

“Well, I think it’s a bit unfair for you to ask me to keep a secret from my only brother, but I’m still not planning on telling him anything. I suspect your pa’s getting mighty tired of waiting for you to come home on your own and, sooner or later, he’s going to take things into his own hands. And it could be any day now.”

Estelle knew he was right.

“How do I do it?” she asked.

“You just open your mouth and let it all come out. Secrets are fragile things. Once you tell a little bit of it, the rest’ll start pouring out. He’ll ask questions and you’ll fill in the blanks and, before you know it, it won’t be a secret anymore and you’ll wished you had told him earlier.”

Estelle thought about it for a moment.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she said.

“I’m listening.”

“I will tell Michael everything on one condition.”

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“And what’s that?” Jacob asked, though he clearly had a sense that he knew what was coming, based on the sound of his voice, slow and cautious.

“You propose to Megan.”

Jacob recoiled as if Estelle had just hit him in the face with a sack full of bricks. “I can’t do that. I don’t even know how.”

“It’s real easy, Jacob. You’ll take a pen and write, ‘Will you marry me?’”

“Don’t you think I ain’t already done that?” he asked. “And every single time, I end up throwing the paper out. I can’t just ask her to marry me. I need to lead into it and write the most romantic letter I possibly can, so she has no choice but to say, ‘Yes.’”

“She’ll accept your proposal. I promise.” He didn’t look convinced. “Do you hear me, Jacob? I said I promise. If you ask her, she’ll say, ‘Yes.’”

“Are you sure?”

“As long as you don’t wait forever, I am. The sooner you do it, the better.”

Jacob grunted a sound of frustration.

“I want her here just as much as you do,” Estelle said. “But I can’t propose for you. Believe me, I’ve tried. You need to do it.”

After a long sigh, Jacob said, “Okay.”

“We have a deal, then?”

“Yes, ma’am. We have a deal.”

They shook on it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The telegram Estelle received was somewhat cryptic:

Estelle STOP I’m sorry STOP I’m heading to Utah STOP Your father

Was he apologizing for his behavior over the past several months, or for even suggesting that she should marry Ethan? Or was he apologizing because he was going to come and get her, which he knew she didn’t want? She wouldn’t have been writing to her father if she didn’t think that, eventually, he’d come around and see things from her point of view. Still, it seemed unlikely that he’d suddenly had a change of heart.

The telegram came without any kind of envelope and Estelle couldn’t keep it hidden from Michael.

“It says it’s from your father,” Michael said, his voice confused and uncertain. “Were you abandoned as a child? Is he intending to reconnect now that you’ve grown?”

He was trying to make sense of it, but he wouldn’t on his own. He’d have to know that she was lying first. But now was not the time to talk about it.

“No,” Estelle said. It was never the right time, but now her hand was somewhat forced. She had to come clean, at least a little bit. “I haven’t been telling you the whole truth,” she said. “I’m not actually an orphan.”

Michael was stunned at first, but he didn't seem as surprised by that as she thought he might be. "That makes sense, actually."

Now, what could he possibly mean by that? Estelle thought.

"The way you held yourself and talked. The way you wrote. None of it seemed like what I would expect from an orphan." He paused and considered the idea some more. "Was that it? Was that your big secret?"

No, she thought, only part of it. "I don't have time to discuss this right now, Michael. I must go to town and respond to this telegram immediately." Then she stopped herself, realizing her tone. "I'm sorry," she said, calming herself. "I don't mean to be rude, but this is rather urgent, and I need to take care of it as soon as humanly possible."

"Why settle on humanly possible?" he asked. "Take Orion."

"Wonderful!" she said, heading out the door. "Thank you, Michael!"

She ran down to the stables and pulled Orion out, feeling comfortable saddling and mounting him on her own by this point.

With a kick and a yell, he took off and they rode toward the town center, quiet and uneventful, with only a few people walking between the shops—a sharp contrast to the urgency in her stomach.

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She entered the telegraph office, where she sent a message:

Father STOP Please don't come STOP I'll go to Philadelphia in one week's time
STOP Estelle

She had no intention of actually following through with the promise, but at least it had the potential to buy her just a little bit of time. Unless, of course, her father had sent the telegram as he was leaving for Utah, in which case he wouldn't receive the response until he returned home.

The ride back to the ranch was much slower than the ride there, partially due to the lack of urgency and partially due to Estelle needing to think about things some more. Part of the cat was out of the bag now. He knew she wasn't an orphan, though it sounded as though he must have suspected that by his response.

She could tell him the rest of it, but it was too much to unleash in one day. It was certainly a good sign that his response to her having parents was so positive, but she worried that telling him about the arranged marriage might not go so smoothly. Estelle wasn't an orphan, but even if she was, it was all in the past. The fact that she had an arranged marriage to a man from her childhood and that her father was coming to take her away was something that was still affecting her and, as a result, could affect Michael, as well.

As Estelle arrived back in the stable at the ranch, putting Orion away, she saw Michael stacking the hay.

"I want to tell you something," she said.

Michael set the hay aside and took a seat on it, then gestured to another bundle for Estelle. She accepted the offer and sat next to him.

“It’s a story,” she said. “About my mother.”

“Well,” Michael said, “let’s hear it, then.”

“My mother did die when I was young, and I don’t remember her particularly well,” Estelle said, “but she was a beautiful woman. Taller than me, with similar hair. I wish we had a picture of her because, as a little girl, I remember wanting to grow up to look like her. And my father said I did.”

Michael blushed a little bit, as if he was thinking something but didn’t want to interrupt her.

“As a girl, she would always read me stories. I remember, in particular, her reading me Cinderella, have you read it?”

“Can’t say I have.”

He listened on with interest as Estelle regaled him with the tale her mother must have read her hundreds of times.

“This poor woman is mistreated all her life by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters, but because she does what she’s supposed to do, one night, a fairy godmother dresses her up like a princess and she meets a handsome prince and they fall in love and get married and birds peck out the eyes of the evil stepsisters.”

He appeared shocked and confused. “She read you that as a child?”

“Oh, yes,” Estelle said, realizing for the first time just how morbid the image was.

“But it was the lesson in there she was trying to get through to me, that we try to get through to all little girls—if they behave and do what they’re supposed to, they’ll find their sweet prince who will love them the rest of their lives.”

“I like that,” Michael said, smiling, no doubt happy that she was finally opening up to him. He obviously didn’t know where she was going with this story.

“So, think of that as the preamble. As I said, my mother died when I was young. When she was dying, the doctors came to bleed her in an effort to save her. As they did, her voice took on an airy quality and she always seemed half in a dream. I would talk to her and she would always respond slowly, but she was also the only adult who talked to me like an adult and listened to me like I was an adult, and she told me something.

“She told me, ‘Estelle, I have a secret for you that no adult will ever tell you, but we all know it’s true.’ Her face was pale and, looking at her, even as a child, I knew she wasn’t going to be with us for very much longer. She said, ‘There is no such thing as true love, and you will never find a man who loves you as much as you deserve to be loved.’”

Michael looked as though he just smelled an unpleasant odor. “Do you believe that?”

“I don’t know if I believed it, then, but I trusted my mother and thought it at least had the possibility of being true. It was something that stayed in my thoughts and, truthfully, the more I grew, the more I realized that it made quite a bit of sense. How many wives actually seem happy to be married to their husbands? Young people, sure, but older people? I don’t recall seeing any. At most, they seem comfortable with each other.

“So, the older I got, the more this idea cemented itself in my mind, because I couldn’t find anything that went against it—and I think that’s why I came out here. Because

she said you can't truly love a person. But she didn't say you couldn't love a lifestyle."

"That's true," Michael said. "I've been out on the land all my life, and I'm still in love with it."

"I see that, but there's another thing," Estelle said.

"What's that?"

"I think she may have been wrong."

Michael was listening intently.

"Perhaps," Estelle said, "I'm not sure right now. What I do know is she was telling the truth. Her truth, anyway. She felt that she deserved to be loved and she did, but whatever my father was doing wasn't enough for her. I was just a girl and she was telling me that she didn't love my father, and it wasn't until I got out here and had a chance to think for myself that I realized, even if she didn't know it, what she was saying."

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Estelle felt herself starting to tear up. She was just talking now, letting everything come out. If there was a point to the story or everything she was saying, she wasn't sure what it was, but it was all things she'd never told anybody and she was tired of keeping it all inside.

"I got along with my mother much better than I ever did with my father. In that sense, I was orphaned. And I see what my mother meant. My father did the best job he could to love me and give me everything he thought I wanted. He tried to help me live the most comfortable life, but that wasn't what I wanted. He couldn't love me just like he couldn't love my mother. At least, not in the ways we needed to be loved.

"And I don't know about you, Michael. I think I love you and I think you love me, but what I know is right now, you're loving me exactly how I need to be loved. I think that's rare. I think most people don't ever get that. And it wasn't from hard work. It was from luck."

Michael shook his head. "It wasn't luck, Estelle."

"It wasn't?"

"No such thing as luck, if everything has a purpose. We were meant to be together. The things that happen, well, sometimes it's hard to understand what God had in mind. But with you and me, it's clear. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

And she felt the same about him.

He leaned forward and kissed her, through her tears. She couldn't imagine belonging to anybody else.

And, yet, as she held her sobs in, she wondered if that would be the last time they kissed. She tried to savor it. Would he still want to kiss her after hearing the whole truth? Michael was a forgiving person, but even the most forgiving person had their limits.

She let go of the kiss and looked at his face, the look of somebody who was in love with her, and she wondered if she'd ever see it again.

He had to know the truth—that she was engaged to another—but she still feared losing everything by telling him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Estelle ran up to Jacob's cabin. Time was running out and her future with Michael was up in the air. Her father was coming and there was no telling when he would arrive, but she knew it wouldn't be more than a few days. Michael already knew a little bit, but he still didn't know about Ethan and Estelle feared that would be the part that finally broke him.

Not being an orphan surely complicated things, but it didn't necessarily affect Michael, not directly. With her engagement, Michael was unknowingly involved in a violation of a legal contract and, should her father choose to act, could potentially cost Michael more money than he had. And that could lead to his losing the ranch.

Estelle knocked on Jacob's door and he opened it.

"I'm not good at secrets," Estelle said. "I should be happier than I've ever been, but the secret is holding it back. Can I come in?"

“Sure,” Jacob said, and gestured for her to take a seat in the living room.

Estelle hadn't been inside Jacob's cabin before and had only glanced at it through the window or open doorway. The wooden chair in the living room had a thin layer of dust on it, which she wiped away before sitting on it.

“I apologize for the condition,” Jacob said. “I don't get very many visitors.”

Aside from the dust, the cabin was tidy. She wondered how Jacob spent all of his days. Perhaps he remained in his room for the bulk of the day, reading letters from Megan and writing back to her, but that wasn't enough to fill a whole day. She looked at him and noticed the sadness on his face, not because he was particularly sad now, but because he'd been alone for so long that it had engrained itself on him.

Estelle unfolded the telegram from before and gave it to Jacob, who looked at it and read it aloud.

“‘Estelle, I'm sorry. I'm heading to Utah. Your father.’”

“What do you think ‘I'm sorry’ means?” Estelle asked.

Jacob pulled a chair in from the kitchen and sat down beside her. “He's your father,” he said. “I couldn't tell you. What do you think?”

“I don't know,” Estelle said. “Either he's coming to bring me back and he's sorry that he has to do it because he knows it's not what I want or he's genuinely sorry that he ever expected me to marry a pathetic excuse for a man like Ethan and is coming out to apologize.”

Jacob pondered the two options for a second. “Why would he come all the way out here just to say what he could say in a letter?” He shook his head. “No, I think he's

got to be coming to try and take you back.”

“But he can’t do that, I’m married,” she said.

“I’m no expert in legal matters,” Jacob said, “but if I know one thing about the law, it’s that the lawyers can make it mean whatever they want. Your father has money?”

“Yes, quite a bit of it.”

Jacob looked at Estelle and said his words slowly. “He wouldn’t come out here unless he was sure he’d be able to get you to go back with him. We don’t have much use for a strict and rigid law out here. We mostly settle things on our own. If somebody steals something from someone, we make ‘em give it back. If somebody breaks something of someone else’s, we make ‘em fix or replace it. We’ve got a jail, but don’t have much use for it. Rules and laws are mostly for city folk.”

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“What are you saying?”

“We don’t have a court and the sheriff does what he can to make things right. If some city people come in waving a piece of paper, Sheriff Ron’s going to need to settle things by the letter of the law and I suspect that means he’d side with your father to keep the peace.”

Estelle had come to Jacob for reassurance, but instead, all she got was support for the fears that she’d kept pushing back to the furthest regions of her mind so she could try to focus on her optimistic hope that the problems would just vanish.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“You need to talk to Michael and let him know what’s in store. I can’t help you much. I’d always relied on him to deal with the big issues that came up. But he won’t be able to help if you don’t let him know what’s coming.”

“Why is it that it sounds so simple and easy when you say it, then when I go to actually talk to him, I tense up and nothing comes out of my mouth?”

Jacob shrugged. “You’re asking the wrong man,” he said. “I don’t understand it either. I went years barely talking to him and now we’re talking again. Why did I wait so long? I don’t know. But I do know that once you tell him, it will get easier.”

Everything he said sounded so reasonable to Estelle. She just had to remember it all to convince herself once the moment came.

“I’m going to go talk to him,” she said.

“Do it,” Jacob said. “Tell him as much as you can.”

“Okay.”

She left Jacob’s cabin and began walking back toward the house. Along the way, she saw a rock in the path and realized somebody could trip on it if they didn’t see it, so she moved it aside. It didn’t look quite right there, so she moved similar rocks around it to create a nice simple circular design.

Looking at it, she smiled at her work and began back toward the house, but stopped herself. Maybe she could place some flower petals around the rocks to add some color to the display.

Before too long, she realized she’d devoted the better part of the afternoon to her impromptu art project. With every bit she added, she felt that it needed one more thing to make it right, but it never quite satisfied her. Estelle was, after all, a perfectionist.

Jacob came out of his cabin to check on her.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just putting a little something together.” She looked up at him, seeing the disappointment in his eyes.

“Estelle…” he began.

“I know,” she said, “you don’t need to say anything.” His look said it all. She knew what she was doing, which was delaying the inevitable and giving herself an excuse

not to have to talk to Michael.

She put down the final petal she was working with and fought the desire to move it just a bit over to the right for symmetry.

“Good luck,” Jacob said.

“Thank you.”

I don't need luck, Estelle thought, I just need the strength to blurt out the difficult part. Once that's over, it's all out of my hands.

The house was so close to her that every step towards it filled her with more and more dread, with ounce of her wanting to turn around and leave the conversation for later. There will be more time, the voice in her head seemed to say. The voice was wrong and, in her head, Estelle kept shouting back at it.

There isn't much more time! We need to do this if there's any hope of staying with Michael at all.

Estelle reached the door, then forced herself to open it, pushing herself inside so she wouldn't back down.

But Michael was nowhere to be found. Of course he wasn't in there while there was still light in the day.

She walked outside and looked around the ranch, then spotted him by the hogs, feeding them their slop.

You can do this, Estelle, she told herself. Let's just do this and get it over with.

She held her chest high and walked deliberately towards Michael, telling herself everything she needed to hear right now.

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You are strong, Estelle. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. This is just like getting on the train back in Philadelphia: you didn't think you could do it until you actually did it. You can talk to him. You need to talk to him. And whether or not he takes it well, he needs to hear it.

Michael was too involved in his job to notice her and the hogs focused on him. Though she still hadn't warmed to their smell, she had warmed to their personalities. They were like fat, hairless dogs, with smiles on their faces, eager to please and make friends with you, assuming you had food for them. It was always a delight to visit them with some scraps and see them light up and trot their big, chubby bodies over to the fence to see what she had.

It was just another reminder of how much she loved the ranch. Nobody was ever that happy to see her back in Philadelphia, not even Megan and certainly not Ethan. And, here, while Michael didn't necessarily get as excited as the pigs when they first saw each other every morning, he had a look in his eyes and a smile reserved for her that she never noticed him having around anybody else.

Michael heaved a handful of half-eaten carrots into the pen and the five hogs scurried towards it, grunting with joy along the way. When Estelle was alone, she liked to imitate them. It made her laugh.

She wasn't in a laughing mood at the moment, but the image of the hogs cheered her up and energized her in a way that her inner soliloquy hadn't.

"Michael," she said, and he turned around.

“Oh, hi there.” There was that smile on his face and the special look in his eyes.

You can do it, Estelle, her inner voice told her.

“I had something I’ve been meaning to tell you.” She looked down at her shaking hands, as if somehow it would be easier if she didn’t need to see his face while she revealed her truth.

“Just a second,” Michael said. He set down the bucket of scraps and removed his gloves, then walked over to Estelle.

“Would you look at that?” he asked, pointing over towards the sunset. “God is quite the gifted painter, isn’t he?”

She followed his finger toward the horizon.

“It’s strange, I see it every day. Probably every day of my life, just about. And twice if you count the sunrise. Yet, every time I do, I can’t help but be amazed at it. It’s my reward for a hard day’s work. And on Sundays I get it for free.”

He was right. There was a beauty in the sunset that words could never convey. Poets had tried for centuries, eying the same exact phenomenon, as had painters, and none of them had even come close to capturing the feeling of awe that she felt when looking at the sun leave the sky.

It’s something she’d never appreciated until coming out to Utah. Did sunrises and sunsets even exist in the city? They must, but Estelle couldn’t remember ever having seen one.

“It’s beautiful,” Estelle said.

It was a distraction, though. And she needed to do what she had set out to do otherwise, it would continue to burn on her conscience.

“Michael, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She looked over at him at his face, so content in the red and orange hues of the setting sun. It was a shame that she was about to take that contentment away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The sunset had always been Michael’s favorite time of day. Even as a child, he recognized its beauty and, as he grew older, believed he’d never see such beauty matched by anything in the world. He was glad to be wrong.

Estelle’s face, with that hint of sorrow in it, was facing away from the sun and so fell in a soft shadow, giving her a soft, angelic quality. Michael’s head felt lighter and he had an intense desire to wrap his arms around her and hug her as hard as he could, but he was filthy from having finished working with the pigs and held himself back.

“Michael, there’s something I need to tell you,” she said. He could tell from her expression that something was on her mind. Likely a fear that he wouldn’t love her as much if he knew something about her.

“No,” Michael said, “there isn’t.”

He took her hands, but kept his distance in order to keep his muddy clothes from touching hers. The gloves had at least kept his hands clean and allowed him some reassuring contact to tell her what he needed to say.

“I don’t care who you think you were,” Michael said. “I care who you are. And the woman who’s been on this ranch the past couple of months? Well, she’s the one I

married. The one you left behind in Philadelphia I don't much care what she did."

"It matters," Estelle said.

"I'm telling you right now," Michael said, "that it doesn't, and I don't want a perfect sunset leading into a perfect evening ruined. Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow because I've got a plan for us for tonight."

"You do?" she asked. "What is it?"

The sadness in her face dissipated as she waited for Michael's response. It was exactly what he wanted to see, but the truth was he was nervous. Just like she had something to tell him, he had something to tell her, but the difference was what he had to tell her was actually more of a question and it was actually about the two of them.

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“Well, Estelle, it’s kind of what you might call a conditional plan. I’ve been thinking a lot over the past few weeks and I’m a bit scared to tell you what I’ve been thinking.”

The fear shot back into her face. “What do you mean?”

“Oh,” Michael said, “nothing bad. Just... scary. For me.”

He looked at her, trying to gauge how she felt at this moment, but there were too many emotions going on at once. Did she feel the same way he did? It certainly felt as though she did, but he wondered if that was all in his head.

“I don’t want to be jerking you ‘round left and right with this, so I’ll just try and get it all out. Sorry if the words aren’t exactly right.”

He took in a deep breath and continued.

“So here goes: When I sent out that advertisement for...” he paused, considering how he would say it, “...well, I guess it was for you, though I didn’t know it yet. When I sent that out, I wasn’t expecting too much in the way of a response. My best hope was someone who I could spend the days with and talk to so I didn’t get lonely out in the fields.”

“Have I not been doing that?” Estelle asked.

“Oh, you’ve been doing that. The problem, if you could call it that, is you’ve been doing more. See, I wasn’t looking to...” He didn’t know if he should say it. It was the

moment of truth. He closed his eyes and let it come out. "...love her." He opened his eyes again and looked at her reaction. Was it surprise on her face? Embarrassment? Joy? Excitement? He couldn't tell. It could have been some of them, all of them, or none of them.

Michael cleared his throat. "But it turns out, I think I do." Still no readable response. It looked as though he was going to have to wait for her words. "And I'm hoping she feels the same way."

He'd reached the end of what he wanted to say, but she didn't answer quickly enough for his taste, so he kept on talking, nervous as he was.

"And so that's the conditional. If you think you love me just like I'm pretty confident I love you, well, then I was thinking we could have a nice romantic evening together. If not, then I suppose, I'll just head off on my own somewhere for the night."

Her mouth didn't move. Perhaps she was considering what he said and how she could respond. Or, perhaps she was searching for the words that would hurt him the least.

"So," he asked, "do you think you might love me, too?"

Her face changed at the prospect of an actual question that required an answer from her.

Her lips pursed as she began to speak and, in that instant, Michael's heart experienced all the ups and downs that came from considering all her possible answers:

"No, I don't."

"Yes, I absolutely do!"

“I might, but I’m not sure.”

“Perhaps, though I doubt it.”

“Not at all.”

And then, perhaps the worst possible answer of all, which would be dead silence followed by her ignoring the question. Whatever the answer would be, Michael wanted to hear it, even if it was bad. Uncertainty wasn’t fair to his heart, not after he had revealed his feelings to her.

Before the words came out, though, Estelle’s face finally revealed her feelings. Her cheeks raised in a grin as her eyes lifted with a shimmer that could only come from her loving him.

Then she looked down, embarrassed, shy, perhaps even a tad coy. Michael thought it would be easier for her to respond once he said something, but she still struggled. It was difficult to reveal your feelings for someone and exposing yourself, putting it out in the open like this.

“I’ve been thinking this over for several days now as well, Michael,” she said. “And it frightened me so that you might not feel the same. But, yes, in so much as I can tell, I do love you. And I want to be with you. This is the life I want.”

Fireworks went off in Michael’s heart, just like those he saw at the fair the other night. The feelings overwhelmed him and he didn’t know what to do with them. He was covered with mud and so he’d kept his distance, but at this moment, he didn’t care. He wrapped his arms around Estelle and kissed her, with the sunset shining into the side of his eyes. Her clothes could be cleaned or, if necessary, completely replaced. This moment was too important for him to worry about what happened to the white blouse she wore.

The kiss filled Michael with warmth and sent a chill down his spine at the same time. He'd been lonely for so long and knew what that felt like. This was the exact opposite. It was as if God answered a prayer that he wouldn't even dare say out loud.

They'd been married now for more than two months, legally speaking. But this was the instant where he and Estelle married emotionally. It was the moment where he realized that she wasn't just a person who would serve a role in his life. No, she was the person who would give his life meaning.

Michael released from the kiss and looked her in the eye. "Let's go back to the house and get changed. I have a bottle of wine we can share and some salted bison and deer meats I've been saving for something special like this. How's that sound?"

"I think it sounds perfect."

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“A perfect evening for my perfect wife.”

It was a warm, early summer night, with clear skies overhead and a full moon shining down on them, providing just enough light so they could enjoy their meal under the stars without needing any candles. Michael moved the table outside and brought out the glasses, silverware, and plates. Everything was in place by the time Estelle came down. He pulled out her seat for her to sit down, then poured her a glass of 1872 Zifandel.

“Where is this from?” Estelle asked, gesturing to the bottle.

“This was a gift, actually. A wedding gift from Calvin. He’d picked it up in California and had been holding onto it.”

Estelle laughed. “Of course it was Calvin,” she said. “He might be the sweetest old man I’ve ever met.”

“He’s a pleaser all right,” Michael said. “That’s where he gets his joy in life. I figure everybody’s got their one thing that makes them happy.”

Estelle grabbed her knife and began cutting at the meat on her plate.

“Hold on,” Michael said. “I’m not always the best at remembering to do it, but I think, especially tonight, that we say grace.”

“By all means,” Estelle said.

Michael closed his eyes and held his hands in prayer. “For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly grateful. Amen.” And, in his head, he added a few more lines, “And thank you, oh Lord, for all you’ve given me. I promise to never question your ways. Amen.”

“Let’s eat,” he said.

Estelle carefully cut into the meat, taking a small piece and taking a bite. “Delicious,” she said.

Michael smiled. He never had the desire to eat the best meats or drink fine wine just for himself. Food was just something he needed to power through the day. Estelle gave him a reason to, however, and as he took a bite of his own, he realized how much he’d been depriving himself.

“No kidding,” Michael said. He took another bite, allowing it to sit on his tongue as he savored the tender bit before swallowing. “This may be the best meat I can remember having. At least since I was a child.”

“It’s quite good,” Estelle said.

“Before we get too distracted by the meal,” Michael said, “I need to let you know that I’m going for a cattle drive tomorrow.”

“Can I join you?” Estelle asked.

He sighed. “I’m afraid not. It’ll probably be a couple of days and somebody needs to look after the farm.”

“Can’t Jacob?”

Michael shook his head. “Jacob’s getting better, but I still don’t know how reliable he’d be. It’s been a while since he’s done any farm work.”

“Oh,” Estelle said, clearly disappointed.

“I’ll make it as quick as I can,” Michael said. “We can work on getting Jacob up to speed with everything once I get back so next time you can join me on the longer trips.”

“That sounds fine,” Estelle said, though the subtext was that she still wished it wasn’t the case. She took a sip of the wine, tasted it for a moment, and said, “This wine is quite good.”

“Calvin wouldn’t have given it to us if it wasn’t,” Michael said, happy to move on with the conversation. “He’d be ashamed to.”

“As you said, he’s a real pleaser,” Estelle said, then took another sip.

“That’s right. He loves making other people happy and bringing up their spirits.”

“Right. What makes you happy in life?”

“You make me happy,” Michael said with a smile.

“No, really,” Estelle said. “What’s the reason you get up in the morning? If Calvin lives to make other people happy, what do you live for?”

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Michael thought for a minute, but once he realized the answer, he knew it was obvious.

“It’s this,” he said, gesturing all around him. “It’s the cows and the hogs and the crops and the chickens. All of it. You know, there’s always something going on and I don’t think I’ve ever had a dull day in my life. What about you?”

“I think it’s the same and it’s miraculous that I found it. I don’t think I would have been able to answer that question several months ago. The truth was that I didn’t have anything to wake up for and every day was duller than the last. I suppose Megan was the only bright light in an otherwise uneventful life.”

She considered the thought for a moment, taking in the stars and everything around her.

“And,” she continued, “I have you to thank for it. At first I thought it was just everything here that was making me happy, but that was only half of it. The truth is you are just as important to me as anything on the ranch. And I really hope to never lose you.”

She looked like she was about to cry. Michael handed her a napkin to dab her tears.

“There, there,” he said. “It’s okay. I promise not to leave you.”

“I know,” Estelle said. She closed her eyes and looked at the sky before forcing a smile on her face and wiping away her tears.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Estelle said. “Like you said. Let’s have a good night. It can wait for tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Michael said, “it can.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The previous night had solidified Estelle’s feelings for Michael and instilled confidence in her. He assured her that no matter what she had to say, it wouldn’t affect how he felt about her and, in doing so, strengthened their relationship. She didn’t know what was going to happen, but there was a sense in her heart that things would ultimately work out.

She awoke early and rode Orion to town to pick up some chicken feed and fresh bread while she was at it. On the ride, she took in the cool early morning air, appreciating it for what it was, knowing that the temperature would likely hit the high 90s before the sun was directly overhead.

She kept her eye out on the plains, spotting the usual animals: rabbits and a bunch of birds, mostly, though there were a few large lizards and even a coyote heading off after a night of hunting.

When she made it into town, she tied Orion to a post and headed toward the general store.

Calvin sat at his usual spot in front. Just seeing him there always brought a smile to her face and she could never resist when he’d pull her into a conversation.

“Good morning, Calvin!” Estelle said. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Good morning, Estelle,” he said. “It certainly is.”

“We had that wine that you gave us for our wedding last night,” Estelle said. “It was wonderful.”

“I’ve been saving it for something special,” Calvin said, in that way where his words sounded like laughter. “I’m glad I did.”

“Well, thank you very much.” She sat down on the other chair as he filled his pipe and asked, “What’s the latest?”

It was unfortunate that Calvin, one of Estelle’s most reliable sources of happiness and comfort, was the one who had to give her the bad news.

It was even more unfortunate that he didn’t realize that that’s what he was doing.

“Well, funny you should mention it,” he said. “Turns out there’s a new stranger here in town. Came here all the way from Philadelphia, if I’m not mistaken.”

Estelle’s heart jumped up to her throat and nearly fell out of her mouth. She felt ill and dizzy in a very specific way. It was the exact same way she felt the night that her father introduced her as an adult to Ethan.

She was very glad to be sitting down.

“Really?” Estelle said, trying to keep the emotion out of her voice. “Did you happen to get his name?”

Calvin shook his head. “No, ma’am. Just something that Earl Johnson mentioned in passing. I didn’t make the connection until after he left. That’s where you’re from, isn’t it? Philadelphia?”

It could just be coincidence, Estelle thought. Philadelphia is a large city. It isn't necessarily Ethan. Or my father.

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“I am, yes,” she said, “but I actually didn’t know many people there.” She struggled to keep talking without revealing the fear that echoed in her mind, telling her to get out of town and back to the farm as soon as she could. “It’s not like it is here,” she continued. “Not everybody knows each other.”

“Oh, of course,” Calvin said. “Still, it was pretty nifty, I thought. We don’t get too many visitors around these parts. What are the odds that we have one from the same city as the newest member of our little town?”

Estelle forced a small laugh. “It’s a funny world, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is. Maybe you’ll run into him and he can catch you up on what’s been happening over there since you’d left.”

In that instant, Estelle realized there wasn’t anything she planned on getting from the store that she couldn’t live without for at least a few days. There was only one thing on her mind and that was doing what she could to get out of town and back to the ranch as soon as possible.

“Oh my,” Estelle said, “I just remembered that I’ve forgotten to feed the dogs this morning. They can get aggressive when they’re hungry and you wouldn’t want them getting into the chicken pen like that.”

“No, you certainly wouldn’t.” He seemed a bit disoriented by her sudden urgency and unclear how to respond.

“I apologize I can’t stay and talk some more, but I should go take care of that. Have a

wonderful day, Calvin.”

“Uh, right. You, too, Estelle. Say hello to Michael for me.”

“Of course,” she said as she walked off toward the horse posts, glad she had taken Orion rather than walked.

The ride back was frantic. If she hurried, perhaps she could get back before Michael left on the cattle drive. But she felt as though she couldn't get Orion to run fast enough. Why, she thought, didn't I just tell him? I could have told him before I even arrived or even shortly thereafter. I knew this day would come, why didn't I let him know?

She took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself, but they didn't manage to do much more than provide a few seconds of distraction. Even mentally insisting that it was going to go okay and that Michael was still at the house didn't seem to help.

As long as he's home, it's all going to be fine, right? Michael won't leave me. I don't think he will, anyway. He'd support me and defend me against Ethan. But what if that's not enough? He can handle horses and farming, but what does he know about people like Ethan and my father? It's a completely different world than what he's used to. He can't just make his way out of it through hard work like he usually does.

The beautiful day which she had awoken to was now wasted on her. The cool, early breeze barely even registered on her skin as her mind was preoccupied with getting back to the ranch and falling into Michael's arms, apologizing and hoping that he could help.

When she made it back to the ranch, she couldn't find Michael anywhere. He wasn't

in the house or the barn or the stables, or even on the fields.

She ran up to Jacob's cabin and knocked on the door, frantic and out of breath.

"Jacob?" she said through the door. "Jacob!"

He opened the door. "Estelle? Is everything okay?"

"No, Michael's gone!"

Jacob nodded. "Right. He said he was heading out over to Salt Lake."

"Salt Lake? Where is that? When will he be back? When did he leave? I need him, Jacob!" All the words seemed to come out at once, with one sentence merging into the next, not giving Jacob a chance to respond.

"He probably left before sunup this morning, but he'll be back soon enough. Just a few days usually." He paused and looked at her. "Estelle, are you okay?"

She had to fight the tears in her eyes.

"Estelle," Jacob said, "I need you to calm down just long enough to tell me what's going on. Deep breath and one word at a time."

She took his advice and allowed herself a few seconds to center her mind before responding. "It's Ethan. I think he's come to town."

"Ethan?"

"The man I was supposed to marry."

“Oh,” Jacob said.

“I don’t know it’s him,” she said. “It’s a stranger from Philadelphia, but it’s got to be either him or my father. Whichever one it is, though, I need Michael here. I don’t want them to take me away. By the time he comes back, I could be halfway to Philadelphia.”

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Jacob shook his head. “You’re married to my brother. While he’s gone, I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

She looked at him, feeling a quiver in his voice.

“How?” she asked. “How are you going to keep them from taking me?”

Jacob paused for just long enough for Estelle to realize he had no idea.

“You don’t know,” she said, “do you? If Ethan walked up to this ranch right now and tried taking me away, what would you do?”

She could see the sweat form on Jacob’s face as the reality of the situation became clearer inside his head.

“I’d tell him to get off of my property.”

“Or what, Jacob?”

He shook his head. “Or else I’m going to have to hit him, I guess.” He made a fist with his hand.

Estelle looked at Jacob. It was clear he had an intimidating presence, at least for those who didn’t know him well.

“Have you ever punched anyone in your life, Jacob?”

“No,” he said meekly. “But if it comes down to it, I’ll do it. You make my brother happy. You make me happy. That’s worth protecting, isn’t it?”

His words were convincing, but she wasn’t sure he’d rise to the occasion when she needed him to step up and defend her.

“Can you sleep in the house tonight?” she asked. “It’d make me safer. You can take Michael’s room. I’m sure he’d understand.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

“Come help me on the farm?” she asked.

“Let me get dressed for the day,” he said. He was still in red pajamas. “It’ll probably do me good. Go ahead and get started and I’ll meet you out there.”

“If it’s okay,” Estelle said, “I’d rather just wait out here.”

Jacob nodded. “I understand. I’ll just be a minute.”

He closed the door and Estelle watched the path that led from the town to their ranch. It was empty for now and she hoped it would stay that way, at least until Michael came back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Michael dropped the cattle off at the butcher in Salt Lake and took the opportunity to look around the city. It was much busier than Grafton, with men and women walking around, not paying much attention to each other, and tall, indistinguishable dark

buildings surrounding the narrow roads. It was a soulless place, compared to the ranch, but there was also beauty in its uniformity. Everybody had a plan in Salt Lake and so everything ran efficiently. But nobody had the time to stop to appreciate the day or even pause and offer Michael directions.

He had wanted to come back with a gift for Estelle to let her know that he was thinking about her while he was away. Because the truth of the matter was that he hated being away from her, even for the day or two that he had to head out to handle business.

The majority of the cattle drive, like most cattle drives, wasn't particularly eventful, and left him alone with his thoughts, which were almost entirely devoted to Estelle.

He wished that she could have joined him. She could have helped — she always helped — but even if she hadn't, it would have made the trip go by faster. But he needed her to look after the ranch. And, also, going alone allowed him to pick out a gift for her.

With his cash in hand from the sale, he walked into the local jewelers and looked at what they had available. There were necklaces and bracelets and rings of all sorts, but it was difficult to know where to start. Estelle didn't get much of a chance to wear jewelry when working on the farm, but perhaps he should give her opportunities outside of the daily work when she could wear it. He could always take her into town and make a day of it, now that Jacob was willing to help with everything.

With each piece of jewelry, he imagined what it would look like on Estelle. And, as he went from piece to piece, he couldn't help but think that none of them held a candle to her beauty.

“Can I help you, sir?”

It was a woman, perhaps in her early 50s, smiling at him as he looked from piece to piece.

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“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I’m looking for something to bring back for my wife.”

The woman nodded. “Is there anything piquing your interest?”

“This all here is nice, but I was wondering if you had anything extra special that I could take to her. Maybe something you don’t keep on display?”

“Something for a special occasion?”

Was it a special occasion? In its own way, it was. Not an anniversary or birthday or anything of that sort. No, it was the kind of special occasion that one couldn’t plan for. Something Michael never could have expected. What could possibly be a good enough gift to your wife to celebrate that you both realized that you love you each other?

“Yeah,” Michael said, “I’d say it definitely qualifies.”

“Wait here one moment,” she said, then walked through two doors separating the store from the back, where the bulk of the inventory was kept. When she returned, she had a necklace with a deep red stone hanging from it, large, but not so large as to be gaudy.

“This,” she said, “is a necklace with an almandine garnet stone.”

He looked at it and saw how the light reflected through its body, a seemingly perfect shape with tight edges and smooth faces.

“This particular piece was made in the late 1700s in what was then known as the Ottoman Empire. It belonged to the wife of a soldier, who wore it every day, waiting for him to return from war. She wore it until the day she died, when she passed it on to her daughter. That daughter eventually passed it onto her daughter, who one day sold it to my father, who bought it off of her for his personal collection and never intended to sell it.”

“Can I hold it?” Michael asked.

The woman handed it to him and he felt the weight in his hand, moving his fingers along the silver clasps holding it together. There was something about it that just felt right. Not too heavy, but still solid, and cool to the touch. He could imagine the gem resting on Estelle’s chest, reminding her that he was with her, right by her heart.

“I could let you have it for \$80,” she said.

Michael had taken in \$20 from the butcher for the cattle he brought in, but also had money he’d been saving, including a hefty chunk of savings left to him by his parents. The necklace was pricey, but still something he could afford as a luxury purchase for Estelle. It would be his wedding gift to her.

“You’re willing to part with it?” Michael asked.

“I’m not particularly sentimental,” the woman said. “This is a lovely piece, but it’s just been sitting in a drawer, like much of my father’s personal collection. Something like this belongs around the neck of a beautiful woman and, from the look in your eyes, it sounds like your wife fits such a description.”

“She does,” Michael said. “Very much so.”

“This is a very good deal I’m offering you,” she said, “I hope you realize that. Take it

to any other jeweler out there and they may offer you twice as much for it, but you don't look the part of someone who would resell it."

"If you can get twice as much for it, why not sell it to them?"

The woman brushed away the thought. "I didn't get into this business to make money. It was handed down to me from my father. His job was making money. I just fell in love with the pieces: their beauty and their history. Too many people, my father included, don't respect the jewelry. They buy it and hide it away until they die. For what? You can't take it with you."

She shook her head.

"I love this piece," she said. "I am running a business, but if I see an opportunity to give it a good home, I'll take that opportunity. I think we both end up with what we want out of the deal."

Michael considered the necklace, looking at it in the light some more. Then, as he had with the other necklaces, he imagined what it would look like as he draped it over Estelle's head and clasped it in the back.

This is it, he thought. This is the one.

"I'll take it," he said.

"Very good," the woman said, taking it back. "Let me wrap it for you. Do you need to stop at a bank?"

"No, ma'am."

Michael pulled out his billfold and took out four twenties, fresh from the butcher,

then placed them on the counter.

“Wonderful,” she said. She placed the necklace in a small box, which she wrapped with thin tissue paper, then handed it over to him.

“Take good care of her,” she said. “Both of them, actually. Your wife and the necklace.”

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“Of course. You have a lovely day, ma’am.”

“You as well, sir.”

He put the necklace inside his jacket pocket as he walked out the door. Remembering he was in the city now, he looked carefully both ways to see if anyone was watching him before making his way over to Buttercup. Thieves tended to target men and women walking out of jewelers.

He began his long ride home.

Once the sun set and it got too dark to continue, Michael set up camp in the middle of the desert, putting together a small fire for warmth and safety. Then, he lay down facing the sky, using a rock as his pillow, and allowed his mind to wander.

As usual, it turned toward Estelle. Her face had burned itself into his mind so that he saw her every time he closed her eyes. But every time he truly saw her, in person, he realized how poorly he remembered what she looked like. He had her features down, the hazel eyes and every single freckle on her nose, but they never fully came together to recreate the magic of seeing her in person.

It was just like he remembered how it felt to kiss her, but still wanted to do it again and again. It was strange how vivid memory could be and, at the same time, so inadequate.

As he'd gotten to know her, though, he'd fallen in love with more than just how she looked. He loved the way she never gave up and how she refused to settle for "good enough" with anything. When she first arrived, she had been a terrible cook. Michael would have been happy if she merely practiced enough to put together a satisfactory meal. But, no, that wasn't her way. She'd quickly moved to meals that required her cooking multiple elements at the same time. And he loved her for it.

He thought about the other day, when Estelle had come to him because she had something urgent to tell him. Michael felt his stomach drop when he realized he'd left in the morning without giving her a chance to tell him what it was. The day before, he had dismissed it because it didn't matter. She had already revealed that she wasn't an orphan, what more could there be? How many different ways could he convince her that these things about her past didn't matter? Or, to put it another way, they did matter, but wouldn't change the fact that he cared about her.

He had taken her to see the old ranch because he wanted her to know about his past. At least, that was part of it. The other part was because he wanted to go back. A part of him knew he had to face the most horrible evening of his life if he was going to ever get past it. By taking Estelle with him, he allowed her to be the support he needed to face that nightmare.

As he thought about the way she made him feel that day, like he was supported, he felt guilty for shutting her down the night before, even if it was with the best of intentions.

When he returned to the ranch, he promised himself, he'd ask her about what she wanted to talk about. Perhaps the moment had passed for her, but he at least wanted to give her the opportunity to talk to him without interrupting her.

He pulled the necklace out of his jacket pocket and looked at it as it reflected the light from the fire. Estelle hadn't even received it yet and already it reminded him of her.

At the store, it called to him as soon as the woman told him its history. Perhaps that's what made the connection in his head.

Before this necklace, Michael hadn't considered that jewelry could have a story. It was the same as Estelle. To him, she came into existence the moment he first saw her. Even the letters didn't seem to make her real. It was actually meeting her in person that did it.

And she was beautiful.

But as he got to know her, he learned that there was more to her than just her beauty. And her history, whatever it might be, would make her even more beautiful to him.

He knew it.

Michael returned the necklace to its box and rewrapped it in the paper for Estelle before placing it back in his jacket. He rolled over and looked at Buttercup, reins tied to a stake in the ground.

"Goodnight, Buttercup," he said.

But she was already asleep. It had been a very long day for her.

And for him, too, he realized as soon as he shut his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The day had passed slowly for Estelle, who remained by Jacob's side for most of it, working on the farm and going through the usual motions, though all of it was done knowing that, at any minute, Ethan could come down the trail to the house and take her away forever. It made the work more exhausting than usual and, by noon, all she

wanted to do was lie down and rest.

Jacob motivated her to continue, however, in a light, gentle way, and, just as she usually did with Michael, they finished right around sunset. Estelle took the opportunity to look at the sun falling below the horizon and appreciate that Michael was probably looking at it right then, too.

Come home soon, Michael, she thought. Please.

Jacob did sleep in the house with her, but it didn't help much. She still spent the evening tossing and turning. The few moments when she fell asleep, half-remembered nightmares woke her up, leaving her shaking and scared.

As a result, Estelle didn't get much rest that night and got out of bed at dawn, thinking about the same thing that had been occupying her mind for what must have been weeks by now.

I have to tell Michael, she thought. I need to get it out of my mind. I need him back here so I can tell him.

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It was past the point where she had any choice in the matter. Now, it was completely a matter of necessity and he wasn't here to tell. She got to work making herself a quick breakfast of eggs and potatoes, wishing she had just spent the extra few minutes the day before to bring home fresh bread, then began the daily duties on the ranch, starting with the hogs.

She kept one eye out at the entrance path to the house with everything she did, hoping that Michael would arrive before Ethan. Ideally long before.

The work around the farm occupied her mind and calmed her a little, though there was still a feeling in the pit of her stomach that kept her on edge.

Eventually, a shadow did appear off in the distance, coming down the trail towards the house.

Which man was it? Estelle stopped her work cleaning out the stables to watch the figure slowly approach.

It was a man on a horse. Did Ethan know how to ride a horse? Likely not, but it was possible.

However, when the figure made it close enough for Estelle to make out his broad shoulders and relaxed manner, she knew it was Michael. She ran out to greet him.

“Howdy, there,” Michael said, a cheerful look across his face. “I missed you.”

He dismounted the horse, came over to Estelle and kissed her cheek. She nearly broke

down and cried. Were they happy tears? Sad tears? Likely a combination of both. She'd been so focused on needing to talk to him that she didn't realize how much she missed him. His face, rugged with a thin layer of stubble, instantly filled her heart with happiness, even though it was also full of fear.

All the emotions were building up inside her simultaneously and she didn't know how to handle them. Yes, she was happy to see him, and madly in love, but she was also nervous and scared, worried that she may never see him again. Mostly, she was queasy at the thought of having to interact with Ethan, the man she thought she'd escaped for good when she came out to Utah.

"I missed you, too," she finally said to him.

They walked Buttercup back to the stables together.

"I've got a surprise for you," Michael said, reaching into his jacket.

Just blurt it out, Estelle. Close your eyes and just shout it. He needs to know. Every second he doesn't know is another second that you're lying to him. Another second wasted which you both could spend trying to figure out what to do next.

Michael stopped his hand when it was in his jacket.

"Wait," he said. "Let's wait until we get to the stable."

He picked up his pace and Estelle kept up with him, running at his side, trying to keep up. "Michael, could you slow down?"

"I'm excited, Estelle! We're almost there."

They reached the stable and Michael put Buttercup in her stable.

Now's your chance, Estelle thought as she was catching her breath.

She closed her eyes, but the words wouldn't come out, no matter how hard she tried. It felt like she was pushing the words to her throat, but there were so many that they got stuck, like too many cattle through a small entranceway into a barn.

Michael put something in her hands.

"Take a look," he said.

She opened her eyes and saw a long box, wrapped in thin paper. Michael smiled at her and gestured for her to open it, which she did methodically.

Once the paper was gone, she opened the box and saw a beautiful necklace, chained with what looked like silver, and a beautiful gem in the center. It was a sweet gesture, but not one she needed or expected from Michael. Perhaps Ethan would use such a thing to try and buy her love, but it would mean nothing from him as he had more than enough money to cover such a luxury item. Michael did not. This may have cost him several months worth of income to purchase. And she did appreciate the gesture.

But it was the kindness and devotion of the gift that hurt Estelle more than anything. How could Michael love her so much when she'd been lying to him from the moment they met?

"It's lovely," she said, looking back and forth between the gem and Michael. In both, she could see his love for her, but it was love she didn't deserve and she felt wrong accepting it. He didn't truly know her. And she'd dragged him into a mess of a situation.

Start slow, Estelle. You can do this.

This was it. It was going to happen. She was finally going to tell him.

“Michael,” she began, “I need to tell you something.”

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“That’s right,” he said. “I remembered that, too. I promised you could tell me in the morning, but then I was gone. I’m sorry about that, too.”

“Michael!” she said, much louder and stronger than she expected. She said his name again, softer. “Michael. Please. I need you to just let me talk. This is difficult for me.”

Estelle sat down on a bale of hay for a second before standing back up, holding the open box in her hand, unable to keep her eyes off of the shiny representation of Michael’s love, stabbing her heart every time she glanced at it.

She was too anxious and couldn’t stay seated, so stood back up and started pacing before stopping and centering herself, focusing all of her attention on Michael.

This isn’t how it’s supposed to go, Estelle thought.

Another thought interrupted that one: Just let it all out. Once it’s out, it becomes his job to handle it. You don’t need to do anything once you tell him. It’s not that complicated.

She took a breath, then looked at Michael, who was nodding his head. “I’ve been keeping something from you. Something important.”

He began to open his mouth, but she put her hand in front of him, in order to stop him.

“Please, Michael.” The tears built up in her eyes. Why does this need to be so hard?

He put his hand on her shoulder and looked at her. Carefully, he opened his mouth and, after a second of silence, he said, “Whatever it is, you’re still my wife and I’ll still care about you.”

“That’s the problem!” Estelle said. She pushed his hand away. What am I doing? she thought. Why am I shouting at him? He doesn’t deserve this.

She looked back at him and he stood there, patient and loving, the perfect husband even when she was screaming like a lunatic.

Deep breath, Estelle. Close your eyes, count to ten, and just shout it out.

One, two...

It was so easy.

...three, four...

She just had to say, “I’m engaged to somebody else.”

...five, six...

And she was going to do it. Once she reached...

...seven, eight...

There was a knock on the barn.

“Pardon me. Am I interrupting anything?”

She knew from the voice alone that it was Ethan, but Estelle opened her eyes anyway

to be sure. He stood in the stable entrance with the sun behind him, placing a shadow over all his features, giving the appearance of something almost demonic. As he walked closer, Estelle could see him more clearly and noticed that his mouth was in the shape of a smile, but it wasn't friendly. As he walked closer still, she could see his eyes, which were always his most disturbing feature to Estelle.

They looked like the satisfied eyes of a predator who had just caught its prey.

Chapter Thirty

It had taken Ethan the better part of two days to track down his fiancée once he made it to Grafton Town. Local residents seemed familiar with her and had even said they'd seen her around town. One man in particular — with a long white beard and a penchant for dragging Ethan into conversations he didn't particularly want to have — seemed to know quite a bit about her and encouraged Ethan to just wait around town.

"She was just here this morning," he said. "She usually comes in every few days or so. Wait long enough and I'm sure you'll run into her."

That didn't suit Ethan particularly well. For one thing, he didn't want to stay in this dusty undeveloped part of the country any longer than he had to. The other was that if Estelle made a scene — which she had a tendency to do — it'd be easier to deal with it in private than in public.

It wasn't until his second day in Grafton Town that he realized he'd been going about it all wrong.

He went back to the old man in front of the general store, the one who loved to talk.

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“How ya’ doin’?” the old man said. “How’s our little town treating you?”

“Quite wonderfully,” Ethan said, lying through his teeth, the only part of his body that didn’t seem to be covered in dust.

“I bet you don’t have barbecue like this back there in the city. Am I right?”

Ethan gave the man a half-hearted chuckle. “You certainly are.” The truth was that Ethan wouldn’t be caught dead eating any of the meat offered to him here. They didn’t have any standards. Whereas in Philadelphia, he could get a fine steak, served medium rare, that would practically melt in his mouth, out here, they would just char any cut they could find and douse it in salts and sauces. It was an assault on Ethan’s tastes. The smell alone made him nauseous. In fact, everything in the town made him want to vomit. He couldn’t wait to get his wife and bring her back to the city with him, where they could live amongst other dignified adults.

That was enough small talk for Ethan. He jumped straight to why he was talking to this man. “You haven’t happened to see Estelle around town, have you?”

The man pondered the thought for a moment, then shook his head. “I can’t say I have.”

“Or her husband?” Ethan asked. “I apologize, I can’t recall his name at the moment.”

“It’s Michael,” the man said. “Michael and Estelle Holden.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Ethan said. “Michael Holden.”

The man hadn't seen Michael either, but Ethan had what he needed.

"I must be going, then," Ethan said.

"Wonderful talking to you," said the old man, but Ethan's back was already to him.

He walked into the post office and rang a bell sitting on the counter. A kid, he couldn't have been much more than 16, walked up to the desk.

"Can I help you, sir?" the boy asked.

"Excuse me, young man," Ethan said. "I need to find Michael Holden, would you be able to direct me to his ranch?"

"I'm sorry, but we don't generally give out that information," the boy behind the desk said.

"I understand," Ethan said, "the issue is that I need to get in touch with him immediately. It's in regard to an inheritance of a distant family member. If I don't contact him before I head back to Philadelphia this afternoon, it could be months before he receives it."

The postal worker did understand and drew Ethan a map of how to get to the Holden ranch.

The directions were clear and the ranch was within walking distance, though perhaps longer than Ethan would have preferred to go by foot.

As he approached down the path, the ranch itself was impossible to miss. As he got

closer, he saw Estelle and the man who had stolen her away from him. They were talking and walking a horse to a tall, open building. He slowed his pace, knowing that he could take his time. They didn't see him approach and when he got to the building, he knocked on the frame.

"Pardon me. Am I interrupting anything?" he said, surprising both of them.

Estelle looked as though she was on the verge of crying and the man, a large oafish thing who could use a shave, shower, and actual tailored clothing, just had a blank look on his face.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"I think you can," Ethan said. "You see—"

"Ethan," Estelle said. It may have been the first time he felt she was talking directly to him. "You need to leave."

"You know him?" the man asked, looking back and forth between them, then extended a hand to Ethan. "I apologize, my name is Michael. May I ask your name?"

Ethan shook the hand, glad to be wearing his gloves.

"Ethan Fitzgerald," he said.

Michael had a firm grip and dry, leathery skin from the daily farm work, no doubt. These were not hands that should be touching Ethan's porcelain doll wife.

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“Pleasure to meet you, sir,” Michael said. “And, I’m real sorry, but who are you exactly? How do you know Estelle?”

Ethan laughed and looked Michael in the eyes, establishing dominance.

“She’s my wife.”

Michael stared right back at the man from the city.

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“He’s lying,” Estelle said, then looked at Ethan. “We never got married, Ethan.”

“No,” he said, speaking calmly and slowly, the pace of a man with confidence who firmly believed he was in the right, “but it was arranged and agreed upon by all the parties involved.”

He reached into his coat and pulled out a sheet of paper, folded in three, that he handed to Michael, who read through it.

On this date of May the 1st, 1871, I, Richard Williams, do offer my daughter, Estelle Williams, to wed Ethan Fitzgerald upon her 18th birthday, or shortly thereafter, in exchange for a payment of \$1500 and a 10% ownership of the Fitzgerald Family Bank & Loan Company...

The text continued and Michael didn't understand much of it, but what he did understand was in line with what Ethan was telling him. But it didn't make sense.

"It sounds to me," Michael said, "that you better take this up with Richard Williams. I don't see Estelle's signature on this."

Ethan took the contract back. "As she was only a child at the time of this agreement, her father signed on her behalf. Her father and I still have a deal. It's Estelle who's broken her end of it."

That didn't make a whole lot of sense to Michael, but the man spoke with the authority of someone who knew what he was talking about. He wouldn't have come out all this way if the contract wasn't legally binding.

"Well, I'd love to help you, sir, but I hate to tell you that she and I have already gotten married. She can't very well be married to two people, can she?"

Ethan smiled at that. "That's why it's good you and I are speaking. You see, because she was already engaged to me, it makes your marriage to her invalid. You've been living in sin with this woman and I've come to correct that."

Now that was something Michael did know something about.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," he said. "You see, we were married in a church in the eyes of God. Now your little contract there may hold up in a court of law, but that's not the court that I need to answer to. Far as I'm concerned, she's my wife."

"My issue is not with you, sir," Ethan said. "My issue is with her. While God will certainly forgive you, Estelle knew well and good that she was engaged to another when she said 'I do.' That invalidates your marriage, I'm afraid, both in terms of the law and in the eyes of God."

Michael looked over at Estelle, who looked crushed.

“I’ve wanted to tell you,” she said. “Really.”

But you didn’t, Michael thought.

Michael turned toward Ethan. “So what do you propose as a solution?”

“I suggest that she come back to Philadelphia with me. Then two of us will be out of your way and you won’t need to deal with us again.”

Michael felt hurt and defeated, but mostly conflicted. He did love Estelle, but at the moment, he was also upset with her. However, he could deal with his feelings later. Right now, he had to honor his commitment to protect his wife. In as calm and confident a voice as he could muster, he said, “That doesn’t work for me.”

Ethan laughed. “I’m afraid you don’t have a choice in the matter. A deal’s a deal.”

“The way I see it,” Michael said, “is you’re an uninvited trespasser on my property. And I’m kindly asking you to leave. Without Estelle.” Michael and Ethan were staring at each other, neither daring to break the gaze. “And then you go on with your life and we go on with ours.”

Ethan broke the gaze and stepped back, not in a sign of weakness, but exactly the opposite. “I’m sure you fancy yourself a rugged, tough man and I admire that about you,” he said. “If I lived in this world with you, I’m sure it would come down to a hand-to-hand fight that you almost certainly would win.

“But I don’t live in this world and, though you may not realize it, you live in the United States and need to abide by the laws of this land. You’re right about this being your property, I’m sure. And if you ask me to leave, then I have to leave. But I assure

you, I'll be back with lawyers and you'll wish that you just let her go peacefully.”

Ethan walked out the door and waved to them. “Wonderful meeting you, Michael. And always a pleasure, Estelle.”

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Michael looked towards Estelle, but didn't say anything for several counts of "Mississippi" in his head.

"I can't hold him back, can I?" Michael asked.

Estelle shook her head, on the verge of tears. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"I'm disappointed," he said. "You kept this a secret from me. If I had known about it, we could do something about it, maybe. I don't know what, but we would have had months to figure it out."

"I thought we had a life together, Estelle. And now you're telling me that you could be swept away by someone else at any moment. How can you do that to someone? How can you do that to me?"

She didn't say anything. A tear fell from her eye as her lips pursed together and shook. He wanted to hug her and tell her everything would be okay, but his heart was struggling, feeling betrayed by hearing Ethan say, "She's my wife."

At the same time, he was furious at her. How could he be so angry with somebody and love them so much at the same time?

"What I need," Michael said, "is time to think and figure things out. I refuse to lose you and if there's any way I can keep that from happening, I'm going to do it."

Her face brightened a bit and the slightest hint of a smile started to form.

“But I’m still mad at you.”

The smile returned to a pout. Michael was sending her on ups and downs and the more he spoke with her, the more he was going to do it. The kindest thing to do for her was to get away from her while he figured things out.

“I think it’s best if you go back to the house,” Michael said. “I’ll come get you when I need you.”

“What if we only have a little bit of time left together?” Estelle asked. “Do you really want to spend our last day or so away from each other?”

“No, I don’t. But I don’t have a choice. The first thing I need to do is to not be angry with you. And I’m not going to be able to do that while you’re around.” He looked at her with sincerity, holding his ire inside even as it threatened to break out in a scream. The last thing Michael wanted to do was scream at Estelle when she already felt guilty. It took all of his love to hold it inside. “Please, Estelle. Go to the house.”

“Okay,” she said, then started to walk away, watching him the whole time.

He hated seeing that look on her face, so he just looked down to his boots, clenching his fists in an effort to keep his anger inside for just a few more seconds while she left.

Chapter Thirty-One

Michael couldn’t help but wonder whose fault it was. Was it her fault for not telling him or his for not letting her? He knew there were several times she tried telling him and he just told her to wait. Looking back, he should have just let her tell him, but she always seemed so upset about her secrets and he didn’t think it mattered. Her past was over and done and she’d started a new life with him.

He didn't realize that her past wasn't entirely past.

Michael left the stables and walked around the perimeter of the ranch. It was everything that he'd worked so hard to create over the past couple of years. Looking at it gave him a sense of pride and, yet, he would trade it all if it meant he could be with Estelle.

The marriage was supposed to be a sham. That was the first mistake. He shouldn't have let himself develop feelings for Estelle, but he just couldn't help himself. Every time he looked at her, he felt like a more complete person. The world was brighter with her in it and the days had purpose.

This wasn't right. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. He was a praying man, who believed in the Lord and didn't dare question His divine plan, but what could he possibly be doing by giving him Estelle only to take her away? Was it all a test, like with Job? Wasn't everything a test?

If it was a test, then Michael had to prove that he wanted Estelle bad enough to keep her from being taken back. No doubt Ethan would return, and, when he did, he would take Estelle away. And no matter how much Michael wanted Estelle to stay, Ethan would be able to take her back. Because he had the law on his side.

It made Michael feel like such a fool, pouring so much emotion into this woman and doing everything he could to treat her right, buying her jewelry and taking her on those horse rides. He let her look into his soul when he took her to the old ranch. That's not something he would have done if he knew she was leaving soon.

Maybe those rides were the answer. Perhaps that's how he'd be able to keep Estelle: by giving everything else up.

Michael, Estelle, and Jacob could run away, leaving everything behind. No, Michael

thought,somebody would need to stay and care for all the animals...

That meant that Jacob had to stay behind and watch the ranch while Michael and Estelle took the horses and rode further west. Would he be able to, after all these years? He'd have to. There wasn't another choice.

Michael and Estelle would find a small town and set up a new ranch from some of the money that Michael had saved. The two of them could stay quiet so nobody would find them, maybe even use different names.

They couldn't let Jacob know where they were going. If Jacob knew, he'd be able to tell others where Michael and Estelle left to and possibly lead Ethan to finding them.

That meant Michael would be saying goodbye to everything: his ranch, his animals, and the only family he had left.

Was he willing to do it for a woman he'd only known a few months?

He had the choice between possibly never seeing her again and throwing away everything in his life to be with her. He didn't like either option, but the second one was the superior one.

Michael walked over to Jacob's cabin. Jacob had to, at the very least, be told about what was going on. But Michael really didn't want to tell him and he dragged his feet as he headed up the path.

Where would he even start? Well, he could start by letting him know that Estelle was actually engaged to somebody else. But eventually, Michael would have to get to the part where he told Jacob that he was choosing her over him. Jacob wasn't going to like that and, frankly, neither did Michael. He was going to abandon his brother at the moment they'd finally reconnected after the fire three years ago.

Michael knocked on Jacob's door. Jacob opened it and invited Michael in.

"Jacob," he said, sitting down in one of the wooden chairs in the kitchen area, "I've got something important to tell you."

"I'm all ears." Jacob took another chair and sat across from him, listening intently.

"Estelle isn't who she said she was."

"She finally told you?" Jacob asked.

The question took Michael by surprise. “Told me what?”

Jacob paused for a second, realizing he’d spoken too soon.

Michael felt the rage grow inside him as Jacob leaned back in his chair. “Jacob, you’re my brother. What do you think she told me?”

The words came out of Jacob’s mouth slowly and quietly. “She’s... I believe... as I understand it, she’s engaged to somebody else. From Philadelphia.”

How did Jacob know? More importantly, “How long have you known?”

“A week,” Jacob said. “Maybe two.”

He could understand Estelle keeping a secret from him. She shouldn’t have, but he could understand it. Now Jacob had been keeping the same secret, lying to him just at the very moment where Michael had thought he’d broken through to his brother. Right when Jacob seemed to have finally opened up to Michael. Where did his loyalties lie?

“Two weeks?” Michael asked. He was angry, unable to process the words and completely lost as to how to express his anger.

“That’s about right.” For his part, Jacob remained calm, sitting down, talking carefully in a soft voice. “I’m sorry, Michael, I really am. I begged her to tell you. I didn’t want to keep a secret from you, but...”

“But what?” Michael clenched his fists, trying to keep his voice at an appropriate level, knowing that an outburst could push his brother back into solitude.

“But I thought it would be better for you to hear it from her.”

The plan had changed in Michael's mind. It had flipped in an instant.

"Let me tell you something, Jacob," Michael said. "I was just about to come in here and tell you that Estelle and me were going to do what we could to get away from here. Far, far away where nobody would find us. Not even you because you'd need to stay to watch the farm."

Jacob's face slowly dropped and Michael could see his heart slowly breaking. Michael could feel his own heart break as he was saying it.

"It killed me to even consider it," Michael said, "but it was the only way for me and Estelle to be together. Now I don't even know what to think. Now I'm thinking maybe I should just go on my own and leave the two of you to figure things out."

"Michael..." Jacob began.

"No, Jacob. I thought you and I were brothers and I thought she was my wife. And now I hear that the two of you both betrayed me? And for what? It's just the three of us here. You couldn't let me in on the secret?"

Jacob shook his head. "I felt powerless, Michael. Really, I wanted to tell you."

"Then why didn't you?!"

Michael stood up.

"I thought we had a family," he said. "I thought we had a home. I don't know what this was, but it doesn't matter much because I'm pretty sure I wasn't even part of it."

He walked toward the door.

“Michael, wait,” Jacob said, standing up.

Michael ignored him. He’d said his piece and closed the door behind him. Whatever it was Jacob wanted to say he could have said weeks ago if it was so important.

Michael continued walking around the ranch, until he made his way to the sheep. They were getting to the point where they were in need of a shear, but that wasn’t his business today. It would have to wait, just like almost everything here. For the first time in his life, at least for as long as he could remember, he didn’t much feel like tending to the farm or doing his daily duties.

There just didn’t seem to be a point to it all. Every day, he fed the animals, tended to the crops, milked the cows, and worried about the hundreds of other little things that helped keep the ranch working properly. He had done it partially for himself, though there were easier ways to make a living, but mostly to ensure Jacob was taken care of and the family tradition continued. After all, his parents were farmers and their parents before them. It was the reason the Holdens initially traveled west: millions of acres of land, free for the taking.

When the ranch burnt down and nearly all of Michael’s family died, he took it in stride: everything was a test. He could keep on moving forward. After all, there was still plenty of land for the taking in Utah. He didn’t even need to travel very far to get it.

With Estelle, Michael finally thought he knew where his life was headed. He'd passed all the tests and now he could move forward, enjoying life day by day. Of course, what he didn't realize is that his entire existence on Earth was a test. It wasn't until he eventually left that he would reap his rewards.

And there was another thought he considered:

What if he wasn't being tested? What if God was trying to tell him something else? Maybe this was all a sign that, though ranching was important in his family's past, it wasn't the right path for him. He could go out on his own and live off the land for as long as it took for him to discover what his true calling was.

The problem is, if he was to be honest with himself, Estelle felt like his true calling. And though she had kept an important secret, in effect lying to him, he still more than anything wanted to be with her.

What he needed right now was guidance, and he knew exactly where to find it.

He returned to the stables and grabbed Orion, allowing Buttercup the day to reset, then rode out to the old ranch, the one burnt down. It was a long way to go, but he needed the ride to help clear his head.

Upon arriving at his former home, full of ash and crumbled remains of his childhood, he walked to his mother's and father's graves, each marked by a crude wooden cross formed with two thick sticks. The home had been taken over by the cacti and vultures in the short time since he left. It had only been three years and change, but it looked as though nobody had lived there for decades.

He took a knee in front of the graves and closed his eyes.

"Mother, Father," he began, "I'm sorry for not visiting you more often. As you know,

even if I'm not physically here, you're always on my mind and, in everything I do, I ask myself if it would make you proud.

"I married a woman. A beautiful woman named Estelle. I think you'd both love her. She's kind and caring and one of the hardest workers I've ever met. She went from city girl to rancher in a matter of only two months."

Michael knew his parents were listening, but also that they couldn't respond directly. The best he could hope for was a sign and, even then, the message would often come through ambiguously, in ways that were difficult to interpret.

"I can't imagine being with anybody else," he said, then paused on the thought. "I don't want to be with anybody else." He paused again as the thought came fully formed into his mind: "I refuse to be with anybody else."

Estelle wasn't just somebody whose company he enjoyed or who made life better. She made life worth living and he couldn't keep going unless she was with him.

Maybe he didn't need a sign. Maybe all he needed to do was focus on what mattered. "I suppose that means the decision's already been made then. I'll accept any outcome and any sacrifice I need to so long as, in the end, the two of us end up together."

He tipped his hat to the graves of his parents.

"I miss you, Ma," he said. "I miss you, Pa."

Michael mounted himself back on the back of Orion and headed back to the ranch, prepared to lose everything so long as it meant staying with Estelle.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Michael had walked out of the stables, leaving Estelle to think over what had just happened, still holding the box with the necklace in her hand. It was worse than she could have possibly imagined. Why? she asked herself. Why did Ethan have to arrive at just that moment?

She was just about to tell Michael everything so that it wasn't sprung on him. It was true that she had probably waited much too long, but why couldn't Ethan have been delayed by even a few minutes so that Michael could hear the words from her rather than from him? Why couldn't she have explained everything?

Estelle could have told Michael how the agreement was from a very early age, when she was just a little girl. She could have let Michael know how downright repulsive this man was and how she had left nearly everything behind, including her father and all of his wealth, not to mention her best friend, just to avoid being Ethan's wife.

Yes, it was true that she ended up marrying Michael, the best man she could ever hope to spend her life with, but she was still willing to marry someone practically at random in a state where didn't live, just to get away from this awful man who her father was forcing her to marry.

Could he possibly understand what that meant?

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Estelle returned to the house and walked up to her room, placing the necklace on her desk before she laid in her bed, staring at the ceiling. She let her inner thoughts consume her.

To her, the worst part of the situation was that the last chance she had to spend with Michael, which would end up being the final memory she ever had of him, would be of him mad at her. She'd live the rest of her life believing that he hated her because she wouldn't have the chance to fully apologize, nor would he be able to tell her that he forgave her.

And that was likely because he wouldn't forgive her and Estelle didn't blame him.

She began to cry in bed, feeling even worse than she had before she had left, before she had any hope. This was a cruel bit of irony: for her to experience just a tiny taste of joy in her escape before she lost it for good and, as an added measure, knowing the only man she could ever love now hated her.

Estelle wasn't one to pray nightly, or even much at all, but she closed her eyes and sent her thoughts straight to God, begging for him to allow Michael to forgive her and let her have just one last kiss to remember him by before he left.

And yet, was it worth the risk? What if, instead of kissing her goodbye, Michael told her he wished he'd never met her? Perhaps it would be best if she just left on her own.

She dragged herself out of bed and fetched the suitcase out of the closet, the same one she arrived in. Her clothes were hung and she looked at them one at a time,

wondering which should even take with her.

The answer was it didn't matter. Whatever she wanted, materially, would be hers when she returned to Pennsylvania. She could have any article of clothing her heart desired, all she had to do was ask. All the same, she put three changes of clothing — the first three outfits she pulled out without even looking — for the ride home.

It would be best to pack light.

There wasn't anything left to take, though she looked at the desk and the box with the necklace on it. Michael had bought her that gift and she opened the box to take another look at the silver-chained gemstone. It truly was beautiful. Of course, Ethan and her father would buy her more expensive jewelry, but she wouldn't love them nearly as much as this piece, since it came from Michael.

She stared at it. Should she take it?

On the one hand, she could take it with her to always have something to remind herself of Michael.

On the other hand, it may just remind her of this day, the day she had to leave him behind.

But perhaps there would be a day not too long in the future where she'd look back on this day with some kind of fondness as, though it was her worst day with Michael, she suspected that it would be better than any day she was forced to endure life with Ethan.

She would have to keep the necklace a secret. If Ethan ever discovered where it came from, he'd likely take it from her. He was a jealous man, from what Estelle could gather about him. She never felt like the object of his desire in any sense more than

he desired to own her. He didn't come all the way out to Utah because he loved her. He came because his property had been stolen.

The necklace would remain a sign that she didn't fully belong to Ethan. Though he would have her in his presence, her heart would remain at Holden Ranch.

Would Michael be upset that she took the necklace with her? Perhaps. He spent a good amount of money on it, she was sure, but he had given it to her as a gift and she had accepted it into her hands. It was no longer his to take back. And if he knew that it was her way of remembering him, he would understand. At least she hoped he would.

She placed the necklace into the suitcase below one of the outfits, in an effort to keep it hidden between the layers of silk so nobody would find it. Then she closed the suitcase and walked down the stairs and out the door.

Looking at the ranch, with the sheep and cows out grazing, and the stable off in the distance where Orion stayed, and the fertile ground with the crops, everything made her feel sad. She knew that soon this would all only exist in her memory and soon fade with the passage of time, as all memories do. She kicked a small rock on the dirt, thinking that no matter how she tried, she'd never be able to remember every stone that made up this magical place. It was impossible.

Estelle returned to the stables to say goodbye to Orion, but he was gone. Michael must have taken him for a ride to get away from her. She could say goodbye to Buttercup all the same.

Buttercup stood in the corner stable and Estelle walked over to her, grabbing a carrot from a nearby basket.

"Here you go," she said, feeding it to the horse, sighing to herself. Buttercup looked

happy to be getting the carrot as Estelle pet her on the nose. Part of Estelle wished she could explain what was going on to Buttercup, but perhaps it was for the best. She got to be happy in this moment and witnessing the horse's happiness brought a little warmth to Estelle's heart when she needed it the most.

"Thank you," she said. Buttercup was just being a horse, but sometimes that was enough to make somebody feel better.

Buttercup made short work of the carrot so Estelle gave her another, which she also ate quickly. Then Estelle kissed the horse, wishing she had gotten to know her better, before heading over to Jacob's cabin to say goodbye and tell him that he was right: She should have told Michael about her past long ago.

When Jacob opened the door, Estelle could see in his face that he already knew.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. All I know is this whole thing is a mess and I must've played some part in it."

Estelle responded with the softest of smiles. "This is all because of me, Jacob. It has nothing to do with you or Michael."

"I could have told him for you," he said.

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“But I asked you not to. You aren’t to blame. This is my problem to solve.”

“Maybe,” Jacob said, “but now he’s mad at the both of us. He’s my brother. I should have told him.”

“Jacob, please. Michael will forgive you. I forgive you. Be kind to him for me.”

Jacob nodded.

“We’re going to miss you,” he said.

“Please don’t,” Estelle said. “Be happy knowing that you gave me the best two months of my life. I wouldn’t have traded it for anything in the world.”

She wasn’t fully sure she even believed what she was saying. Of course, it was the best two months of her life, but sometimes things could be too good if you had to give them up.

When she left Jacob’s cabin, there wasn’t much else for her to do, so she grabbed her suitcase. It felt so heavy when she’d first arrived. She couldn’t even lift it. Now, the combination of it being not nearly as full and the work she’d gotten used to on the ranch had given her enough strength to carry it. She was confident she’d be able to make it to Grafton Town circle where she could find Ethan and return to Philadelphia.

She left the house and saw a stagecoach coming down the path to the house. She thought it must be Ethan, coming to take her away before she could even say goodbye

to Michael, but then the stagecoach stopped and a man got out. It wasn't Ethan at all.

It was her father.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Michael arrived back at the ranch and saw both Estelle and Jacob laughing along with a third party, whom he didn't recognize.

Laughter? Michael thought. What did I miss?

As he rode Orion closer, the three noted him and Estelle ran over to him.

"Michael," she said, "come over here and meet my father."

Her father?

He dismounted Orion and tied him to a post, then extended his hand to the older gentleman guest: Estelle's father.

"Richard Williams," her father said, meeting Michael's hand and shaking it.

"Michael Holden," Michael said, tentatively. The day had been a series of ups and downs and it wasn't clear where he stood with this man. Michael remained polite, but slightly withdrawn, unclear if this laughter was genuine or some kind of an act. When he'd left, the ranch had been nothing but high drama, full of secrets and lies, and a man who was making serious threats. Michael had already come to terms with having to make sacrifices for the woman he loved, but the jovial nature of everyone took him by surprise.

Could it be possible that this was all some kind of misunderstanding?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Holden,” Richard said. “Or should I call you son?”

“You should call you whichever you prefer,” Michael said.

“Michael,” Estelle said, “it’s all right. Father has arrived with some wonderful news. Go put Orion away and I’ll make some lemonade for us all. We have much to discuss.”

Michael was confused and cautious, but he took his wife at her word, walking Orion back to his stable and providing him with some hay and a gentle pat on the nose as he returned to the house.

“It takes a big man to admit when he was wrong,” Richard said, “and I was wrong. I realized that shortly after Estelle left, but I couldn’t admit it out loud or in writing because I signed an agreement and I’m a man of my word. If I could do it over again, I wouldn’t have made the deal for a number of reasons, the most important being I care about my daughter’s happiness.”

He gestured toward Estelle and smiled at her.

“It is good seeing you again, Estelle, you’ve been greatly missed back at home,” Richard said.

Estelle smiled back and blushed. “I’ve missed you as well,” she said.

“Everything seems to be okay,” Michael said, “but I don’t understand. Are you saying that Estelle is not arranged to marry Ethan?”

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“Well, she is and she isn’t,” Richard said. “It was a conditional agreement dependent on the fact that Ethan’s father, Ethan Sr., still owned the bank, which he did not.” Richard shook his head. “As a matter of fact,” he continued, “Ethan’s father never owned the bank at all.”

Richard pulled out a notarized document from the Philadelphia City Hall and handed it to Michael.

“It says it belongs to one Phineas Templeton,” Michael said, “and prior to 1875, it belonged to Andrew Knight III.”

“Correct,” Richard said, “and he built it with his own two hands using money bequeathed to him by his parents.”

Michael couldn’t make sense of it. “Then why did you think that Ethan or his father owned the bank?”

“Because his father told me that he did.” Richard said, making it sound simple, but Michael still didn’t understand.

“And why would he say that?”

“Because, my boy,” Richard said, slapping Michael’s back, “the man was a fraud!”

“Tell him what he was trying to do, Father,” Estelle said.

“I followed up on this and it was quite too complicated to explain in a letter, let alone

a telegram, which is why I came out here as soon as I found out,” Richard began. “You see, the Bank of Philadelphia, rumor had it, was facing some difficulties. Loans they provided were coming due and payments weren’t coming back in a timely manner. They were holding onto people’s money without the cash to back it up. Ethan’s father planned on buying out the bank when it went bankrupt.”

“What would be the point of owning a bankrupt bank?” Michael asked. “Who would put their money there?”

“Nobody, of course,” Richard said, “but he planned on using it as a foot in the door to acquire my bank. The agreement was for the two families to merge their banks together. So long as he had the Bank of Philadelphia, the agreement was he would marry Estelle and acquire the Williams family bank as well.”

“This is my favorite part,” Jacob said. “Guess why he couldn’t buy the bank.”

“Did they not end up declaring bankruptcy?” Michael asked. He was baffled by the complexity of all of this interaction. Was money so important out there in Philadelphia that people would devote their whole lives to it? It’s true, he was prepared to marry someone out of convenience, but it wasn’t merely to use her as a pawn in some elaborate plan to line his pockets. It’s because he genuinely needed somebody to connect with on some level.

“No, they did,” Richard said, “but it turns out that Ethan’s father wasn’t the only one with the plan. The Templeton family had a remarkably similar idea to the Fitzgeralds and they also had more money to buy it when the bidding started.

“It’s why Ethan was in such a rush to marry Estelle as soon as she came of age. Once they were married and our bank belonged to him, the agreement was no longer necessary. He was worried that we’d find out before the wedding day. By running away and marrying you, Michael, Estelle forced me to look for some kind of loophole

to get her out of the arranged marriage. What I found, instead, was that he is a fraud. From a family of frauds.”

Estelle hugged her father, tightly, the smile on her face completely genuine. For the first time, he saw his wife as she was, telling the truth, and not trying to hide behind a secret. She practically glowed.

“I also managed to find,” Richard said, “that virtually everything I thought I knew about the Fitzgeralds was a complete fabrication. I was told Ethan received top marks in all his classes at the University of Pennsylvania. It turns out that he was never enrolled there. The Fitzgeralds went so far as to produce a counterfeit transcript for Ethan. Out of curiosity, I spoke to Sheriff Granger, who informed me that transcripts weren’t the only thing they were counterfeiting.”

“Money, too,” Estelle said.

“That’s right,” Richard said. “Both Ethan Jr. and Sr. have spent time in jail for their fraud.”

This was all horrifying to Michael. If Estelle hadn’t acted as quickly as she did, not only would Michael never have met her, but she would have ended up with a criminal for a husband. With Michael, Estelle learned how to tend the farm and that became her life. What would she have become if she married Ethan?

“So what now, then?” Michael asked.

“I suppose we have at least two options,” Richard said. “We can either let Ethan know what he’s up to and let him move on. Or we can let him know that we know and turn him in. I have a preference, but I’d like to hear what you all have to say.”

“Turn him in,” Estelle said.

“Turn him in,” Jacob said.

Michael thought for a moment. Sending a man to the police wasn’t something to consider lightly. There was a sense in which Ethan hadn’t actually harmed any of them, as they caught him before he could marry Estelle. If no harm came to them, then why should they harm him in return? Why take away his freedom out of spite? It certainly wasn’t what Jesus would have preached.

It was rage and vengeance for what could have been that was fueling Michael’s desire to ensure that Ethan faced appropriate consequences, but perhaps he could step back and think more rationally for a moment and see if it was morally justifiable.

Ethan had been arrested for fraud before, but didn’t seem to have learned his lesson. Once he learned that Estelle and Richard were onto his scheme, he would no doubt move on. Where would he move on to? Likely some other family, just as naive as Richard had been, with a daughter as innocent as Estelle.

“Let’s turn him in,” Michael said. Not for vengeance, but to protect the next person Ethan intended to defraud.

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Ethan bought a bouquet of red roses from the local shop, and paid with a dollar bill he'd made himself. When he received his change, it was genuine US currency.

"Thank you, kindly," he said to the shopkeeper, and smelled the flowers as he walked into the sun. If there was anything Ethan had learned in his life, it was how to appear unassuming and respectable. Fresh faces that saw him wouldn't be able to rely on reputation to judge him and, as a result, he had to provide comfort to them. And nothing did this better than a bright smile and the appearance of wealth. After all, why would a man with money be trustworthy? Why would anybody steal something if they could just buy it and have it legally?

The other element was to ensure that the other person thought they were getting the better end of the stick.

That's what his father taught him so many years ago. The Williams family didn't have a son to carry on the family business, so that was the offer his father made to Richard: Ethan would carry on the bank in the form of a merger that would ensure the success of the Williams name for years to come. It was win-win for Richard. The only hard part was convincing him that it wasn't too good to be true.

That was easy, too. Ethan needed guidance, his father said, and if Richard could serve as a mentor to teach him how to run the bank, that would make things even. Through the process, Ethan continued to convince Richard that he was the son Richard always wanted.

And it was all about to come to fruition. Ethan took a stagecoach ride back to the Holden Ranch, with the roses in hand, ready to take Estelle away with him to marry.

After arriving at the ranch, he knocked on the door to the house, and Michael answered.

“Please, Ethan, come in,” he said.

Ethan smiled and walked through the door. Immediately, he felt two hands on his wrists. They forced him into a chair and, before he knew it, a rope had been wrapped around him and Richard came out from behind him.

“Hello, Ethan,” Richard said, pulling a chair across from him. “I think we have a few things to discuss, don’t we?”

“I don’t understand,” Ethan said, squirming in his seat, “what’s going on?”

Richard pulled a document out from his pocket and placed it in Ethan’s face. Ethan skimmed through it and smiled.

He wondered if he could try and come up with an explanation for why his or his father’s name wasn’t attached to the bank. Maybe he could act confused as if the bank had been stolen out from under them.

But they’d gotten him and he was caught.

“Well,” he said, “I guess you got me.”

Sometimes the best move in the game was to take the path of least resistance. If they thought he was cooperating, he might be able to bargain with them. And if that didn’t work, the appearance of cooperation would make it easier for him to escape later.

Chapter Thirty-Four

“I came to a realization,” Michael said to Estelle as they sat in the house, looking at the window, keeping an eye on Ethan, whom they had tied to a tree while Richard left to get the sheriff.

They were at the table together, sipping their afternoon tea, and Michael wished they could truly be alone as they had the conversation. They’d take the horses out as far as they could go and be the only two people for miles in each direction.

As it stood, they were preoccupied with Ethan. How were they supposed to get him out of their minds when they couldn’t allow him out of their sight?

“What was it?” Estelle asked.

“It was me looking into the future and trying to imagine what life would be like without you,” Michael said. “I just couldn’t. I couldn’t imagine my life without you in it.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t be much different than it was before I came into it,” Estelle said, sipping her tea.

Michael shook his head, frustrated. How could he express it in words? It was like the time before she arrived wasn’t real. Or at least it wasn’t him. Before she came into his life, he was a different person. Before her, he didn’t realize what life could be. It was just sand falling through a timer, one grain at a time until, at some point, it ran out.

With her, it wasn’t sand falling through, it was diamonds. Every one more valuable than the next, each one devoid of any imperfections, demanding to be cherished.

“It would be,” Michael said. “I’ve lost people I’ve loved before, as you know, and it changed me. I could barely hold it all together the first time — Jacob couldn’t. I had to stay strong for him. If I lost you, I don’t know what I’d do.”

Estelle smiled. “You flatter me, Michael. Imagine what my life would be without you. Do you see that poor excuse for a gentleman we tied to that tree?”

Michael looked at Ethan, not even struggling underneath the rope. Ethan had accepted his defeat so easily that it made him said. If Michael had been in Ethan’s shoes, tied to that tree, he would fight until he ran out of breath just to spend his life with Estelle.

“I would wake up every morning,” Estelle said, “and that would be the face at the other end of my breakfast table. I would be sealed off like the animals here, forced to remain in my stable without even the hope of a ride through the open desert every now and then. At least Orion and Buttercup have each other to keep each other company. I’d have nothing. Can you imagine how dull it would be?”

In all honesty, Michael couldn’t imagine such a life. He hated being inside doing nothing. To him, a good day was one where he only saw the inside of his house when he woke up and when he went to sleep. And then there were even days, such as those when he’d be performing a cattle drive, where he could sleep out under the stars. Perhaps he’d take Estelle on the next visit to another city and show her what that was like.

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Michael shook his head. "I can't," he said.

"I'd go mad," Estelle said. "I wouldn't be able to take that. I can't imagine how anybody could. I've never felt so free as I have out here with you. Perhaps you don't realize it, but you saved me."

"Estelle," Michael said, "I'd say the same of you to me." He stood up. "Let me go check on Ethan and see if he needs any water."

Michael grabbed a metal cup from the cabinet and walked around the back of the house where he filled it from the well. He then walked over to the tree, where Ethan stood attached to the shady side, with a bit of a smile on his face.

"How are you doing out here?" Michael asked.

"Oh, just dandy," Ethan said.

"I was wondering if I could interest you in any water. It's mighty dry out here."

"And hot, too," noted Ethan. "I'd happily take you up on your offer."

Michael brought the cup up to Ethan's lips and tilted it gently, allowing the water into his enemy's mouth. From an early age, Michael believed if you couldn't extend kindness to your enemy, then you weren't any better than they were.

When Michael removed the cup from Ethan's lips, Ethan said, "Thank you, sir. I don't suppose you'd be able to release my arm from the rope so I could drink it

myself, could you?"

Michael shook his head. "Fraid not. I do apologize for it, though. Mr. Williams should be back shortly with the sheriff. We'll be able to release you then."

"I understand," Ethan said. "A little more water, please?"

Michael rose the cup back up to Ethan, who drank it down until the cup was empty.

"I'm sure you've heard this before," Ethan said, "but the water sure is fresher out here."

"Everything is," Michael said.

Ethan took it in. "This ranch. It's all your work, along with your brother?"

"For the most part," Michael told him. He was a bit put off by Ethan's kindness, making casual conversation while tied to a tree as he was. Estelle was right about Ethan: there was something unnerving about him, but Michael couldn't quite put his finger on it. He almost wished that Ethan would be fighting the rope and swearing at him. It'd feel more honest. The etiquette felt more like a trap than anything else.

"A fine job you've both done," Ethan said. He looked around and back at Michael. "Now that it's just the two of us, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead." Michael felt it. Now was when the real Ethan would begin to expose himself.

"I'm a businessman of sorts," Ethan said. "My job is negotiation. You certainly hold the advantage right now, but that doesn't mean the discussion's over."

Michael looked at him skeptically, his head slightly askew. “What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is I don’t want to be tied here and perhaps there’s something I can offer you to loosen the ropes just a bit,” Ethan said.

“You want me to let you go.” Michael said it matter-of-factly, making it clear he understood what it was Ethan was saying without actually using the words.

“I’m asking you to loosen the ropes enough for me to escape,” Ethan said. “You wouldn’t be letting me go.”

“I believe it’s called aiding and abetting, am I right?”

Ethan smiled. “You can call it whatever you want, but I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“I’m not doing it,” Michael said, standing tall and confident.

“I understand you’re a man of high morals,” Ethan said. “A man of God. I admire that. And, as a follower of the Lord, I do imagine you believe in forgiveness.”

“I don’t recall you asking for forgiveness,” Michael said. “I hear you saying you want me to let you go and it sounds like you’re prepared to offer me a bribe to get me to do so. But there’s something you city folk may not understand about people of the land such as myself.”

Michael waited for Ethan to respond, to ask what it was that he didn’t understand. Ethan didn’t, but Michael answered anyway.

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“You see,” Michael said, “when you live out here, working on the ranch, you already have everything you could ever want. I’ve got land as far as the eye can see, a day filled with responsibilities that give me purpose, and, now, I have a beautiful wife who loves me. The only thing I want is to be rid of the likes of you.”

Ethan seemed to get the message.

“Now, Mr. Fitzgerald, can I interest you in any more water, or should I go back inside and return to my wife?”

Ethan started laughing. “You are pathetic, do you know that? Do you have any idea how much money you’ve just refused? Aren’t you at least curious how much you could get out of me?”

“I’m not particularly fond of money,” Michael told him, “and what money I do have I at least know that I earned.”

“You think you can provide for Estelle with hard work?” Ethan laughed some more. “If she’s honestly choosing you, then she deserves what she’s gotten. I was doing her a favor by marrying her. Look at you, in your scuffed up pants and worn boots. When was the last time you had a clean shave? You’re completely uncivilized. You belong here with the rest of the livestock.”

“Do you honestly think you’re the better man, Ethan?” It was Estelle, coming up behind Michael and taking him by surprise. “Because your daddy left you with more little pieces of paper than Michael’s daddy? Is that why?”

She walked up close to Ethan, closer than Michael believed she'd dare if the rope wasn't restraining him.

"Let me tell you what Michael has that you don't," she continued. "Honesty and integrity, for one thing. The ability to think of someone other than himself, for another. But I believe that, if you tried, one day you may very well have those things. There is one thing, however, that he has that you will never have, no matter how much you try or how much you steal or how much money you throw at the world."

She walked back over to Michael and kissed him on the cheek.

"Come, Michael, let's return to the house," Estelle said. She turned back and walked away.

"Just holler if you need any more water," Ethan said before following her back inside.

"I'm sorry I lied," Estelle said once they walked in the house. "I was afraid that, if you knew my past you wouldn't want to be married to me anymore."

"It's quite a bit," Michael said, "but not nearly enough to make me not want to be your husband."

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Estelle said. "I thought maybe you wouldn't defend me against him. That you'd just turn me over."

"It wouldn't have crossed my mind," he told her. "I would travel to the other end of the earth if it meant I could be with you."

He paused for a second, remembering where he was before all the drama started. "What did you do with that necklace I gave you?" he asked.

“Just a moment,” Estelle said, and ran upstairs.

When she returned, she handed the box to Michael.

He opened it up and pulled the necklace out. “I just remembered that I wanted to do this.”

The silver of the necklace shimmered in the light as did the gem. With a slow motion, Michael took the chain and put it behind Estelle’s neck, clasping it, then taking a step back.

“It looks even more beautiful when it’s on you,” Michael said. He looked at Estelle’s face and her big eyes on the verge of tears. If ever he had any doubts that she loved him, they faded far off into the distance.

Estelle jumped forward and wrapped her arms tightly around him. He’d never felt more whole.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sheriff Ron Jericho had a face that meant business and a thick moustache that ensured if he ever smiled, nobody would see it. Michael saw him approaching on horseback alongside Richard’s carriage.

There wasn’t much crime to speak of in Grafton, aside from some occasional disputes between local business owners or mischief that children would get in, and part of the reason was Sheriff Ron’s no-nonsense approach to the law. No crime went unpunished in his town, which wasn’t to say he wasn’t fair. The punishment still had to fit the crime and the criminal.

When little eight year old Charles “Charlie” Francis was caught pilfering candy from

the local shop, Sheriff Ron put him before a judge in the court of law, demanding a prison sentence of fifteen-minutes for the guilty party. The judge agreed to Sheriff Ron's terms and Charlie served that sentence, crying the whole time. When Charlie was released, he promised to never steal again. And he was true to his word.

Sheriff Ron was a tough man to get close to. Whenever Michael spoke to him, Sheriff Ron responded in quick pleasantries before moving on. Whether the man was married or lived alone, Michael didn't know. What he did know was that whenever Sheriff Ron showed up, something serious was about to happen.

And when the carriage stopped and Richard stepped out with a man wearing a suit carrying a briefcase, Michael was certain this was the most excitement Grafton had seen in quite a while.

Sheriff Ron tied up his horse and approached the house. Michael stepped out to greet him.

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“How are you doing this afternoon, Sheriff Ron?” Michael called.

The sheriff nodded. “Just fine,” he said, terse and without bothering to ask Michael how he was doing in return. He gestured toward the man in the suit. “This is James Harrison, our local prosecutor.”

“How do you do?” James asked, clearly more animated than the sheriff with his friendly smile. Michael shook his hand.

“My job as sheriff is to enforce the law,” Sheriff Ron said, “not to understand its idiosyncrasies. Mr. Harrison has a broad knowledge of local and state legislature and is here to help assist me. I can’t enforce the law without proper context.”

“I understand,” Michael said.

“Is that the man in question?” Sheriff Ron asked, pointing to the tree where Ethan was tied.

“That’s him,” Michael said.

Ethan shouted, “Sheriff, this has all been a big misunderstanding, if you’ll let me explain—”

“I’d stop talking if I were you,” James said. “Any words out of your mouth right now can be used to send you to jail.”

Ethan took his advice and shut his mouth.

Richard stepped forward. “On the way here, James was telling me that Ethan may very well be wanted throughout the country. But based on what’s been going on in town since he arrived should be more than enough for him to serve jail time here.”

“Those weren’t my exact words,” James said.

“What has he done?” Estelle had come up behind Michael.

“Well, it’s a sad thing that some people don’t learn from their mistakes,” James said. “It would seem that Mr. Fitzgerald’s been passing phony bills. I imagine he believed he was going to be in and out of town before anybody noticed, but he didn’t count on the expertise of our banker, Mr. Ross, who spotted them right away.”

“So he’s going to jail?” Michael asked.

“Well,” James said, “probably, but the evidence we have is merely hearsay at this point.”

“It seems highly unlikely,” Sheriff Ron said, “that it’s merely a coincidence that a convicted counterfeiter arrived in town at the same time.”

“I agree,” James said, “but a recent verdict from the supreme court established the concept of proof needing to be ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ in order to determine guilt and I’m afraid we just don’t have it.”

Sheriff Ron gave James a glare so intense, it must have burned.

“This is why you invited me along, Sheriff,” James said with a grin.

Sheriff Ron dropped his glare and nodded, returning to business.

“I suggest you search him,” James continued. “If he has counterfeit bills on his person, that should be more than enough to dismiss any reasonable doubt.”

“Easy enough.” The sheriff nodded and walked over to the tree.

Michael kept a careful eye on Ethan. After a lifetime of giving people the benefit of the doubt and trusting them, Michael had to force himself to go against his nature when it came to Ethan. He didn’t know how to act around fraudsters. Perhaps he was being too careful — after all, the sheriff knew what he was doing — but he didn’t want to glance away from Ethan for even a second.

“I’m Sheriff Ron Jericho,” Sheriff Ron said, “and I was told that you were a gentleman who would cooperate with us. Do I have that correct?”

Ethan smiled in that way that made Michael not want to trust him and said, “Yes, sir.”

“Do you have a billfold on you, Mr. Fitzgerald?” Sheriff Ron asked.

“In my right jacket pocket,” Ethan said.

Sheriff Ron nodded at him. “I’m going to need to loosen these ropes to get it, then aren’t I?”

Michael didn’t like that one bit. He walked forward to assist the sheriff. “I’ll keep a close watch on him while you get the billfold,” Michael said. “If he tries anything, I won’t let him get far.”

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“I’ll be making note of your cooperation, Mr. Fitzgerald,” Sheriff Ron said. “If you help make this easy for us, you’ll get a lighter sentence. We don’t want to have to go chasing after you.”

“I have every intention of making this as easy as possible for you, Sheriff,” Ethan said, “but I must say that these accusations are not true. I’m innocent. This has all been a big misunderstanding.”

“Let’s take a look at that billfold,” the sheriff said. “If it’s genuine currency in there, you’re free to go.”

“Certainly,” Ethan said.

Ethan was too eager. Michael knew something was awry. Either Ethan was confident enough in his work to think the sheriff would fall for his fake bills, or he had a trick up his sleeve.

The sheriff loosened the ropes and the sheriff reached into Ethan’s jacket.

“I’m sorry,” Ethan said. “It’s on my right. Your left.”

“My mistake,” the sheriff said.

The sheriff reached into Ethan’s pocket and pulled out the billfold. He looked through it, carefully analyzing the bills in the sun before showing them to Michael.

“I don’t know,” the sheriff said. “I think he might be telling the truth. These look fake

to you?”

Michael took one of the bills and eyed it carefully. If it was fake, the craftsmanship was impressive. It was completely indistinguishable from genuine currency.

“I apologize,” Sheriff Ron said. “It must be—”

“Wait a minute, Sheriff,” Michael said. He reached into the other side of Ethan’s jacket.

“No, that’s—” Ethan began, but Michael pulled a billfold out before he finished his thought.

Michael handed it over to the sheriff, who rifled through it and pulled out a bill.

“How do those look?” Michael asked.

Sheriff Ron shook his head. “They look like the evidence we needed. Mr. Fitzgerald, I’m placing you under arrest. You’re coming back to town with me and Mr. Harrison.”

“I can explain that,” Ethan said. “It’s not how it looks.”

Sheriff Ron removed Ethan’s arm from behind the rope and placed a handcuff over it, attaching the other end to himself.

“I’m going to be honest,” the sheriff said, “it looks mighty bad. I suggest you take Mr. Harrison’s advice and you don’t say another word until we get to the station.”

Michael helped him remove the rope and, as they walked away, felt a sense of relief. This wasn’t somebody who would come between Estelle and him any time soon.

“Come along, Mr. Harrison,” Sheriff Ron said before turning to Michael. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“Any time,” Michael said back.

The lawyer and the criminal went in the stagecoach while the sheriff got on his horse and they rode together back to town as Michael, Estelle, and her father watched with smiles on their faces.

“Mr. Holden,” Richard said, “I can’t apologize enough for the trouble that I’ve brought to you here on your lovely farm.”

“Sir,” Michael said, “to me it looks like you made a mistake a bunch of years ago and today, you took care of it. If you hadn’t arrived, why there’d be a good chance that I’d have fallen for Ethan’s tricks, just as you fell for his father’s.”

“Yes, but I feel horrible,” Richard said. He turned to Estelle. “I was selfish, Estelle, and I wasn’t thinking about you.”

“Of course you were, father,” Estelle said. “You wanted me to have a good life. I see that now. Your only mistake was believing that money would get me there.”

“Mr. Williams,” Michael said, “I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet you before I married your daughter, but I’d be honored if you’d stay with us for dinner tonight. We don’t have much space, but your daughter’s a spectacular cook.”

“She is?” Richard said.

“Believe it or not,” Estelle said, “I’ve learned quite a bit out here.”

“In that case,” Richard said, “I’d be more than happy to take you up on that offer.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

For all the land that Holden Ranch held, there wasn’t much space for if a guest was to spend the night. Richard would have to make do with a few blankets and quilts and a pillow on the floor of the living room, which he preferred to having to make a trip to town after dark in order to find himself a motel.

As a result, it seemed the only place Estelle could find peace and privacy from her father was in the comfort of the stables, which is where she went with Michael after Ethan left.

Immediately upon finding themselves within the cover of the two walls, Estelle found herself in Michael’s arms, lips locked to his, in a loving embrace. Her heart could rest and love fully, knowing that Ethan couldn’t come in and spoil things for her and her husband. This was, after all, the first true kiss the couple had shared together. It was the first time they kissed since Michael had learned all the secrets Estelle had been keeping and accepted her despite them.

And it was a beautiful relief.

Estelle could finally love without boundaries and give in to her heart without fear of it breaking. It wasn’t just with Michael, but herself. She realized she could have everything that she wanted without compromise and didn’t just need to accept the

fate that she was handed. She wished she could go back to the little girl, looking through the crack in the wall of her father's office and talk to her, letting her know that everything would turn out okay.

"We did it," Michael said to her, once the kiss finally ended.

Estelle nodded. It was only three words, but the one she cared most about was the first. She couldn't have gotten rid of Ethan on her own, nor could Michael have. It was her and Michael and her father that did it, working together as part of a family that did it.

"How does it feel?" Michael asked.

She considered the question. Was there even a way to express it? It was a day she'd been waiting for that she didn't believe would ever come. How could she ever thank him for not only being her escape, but being what she never knew she wanted?

"I feel like today is the first day of my life," Estelle said. "And I can't wait to spend the whole thing with you."

"You know," Michael said, "now that I think about it, I think that's how I've felt every day since I met you."

The four of them, including Jacob, sat around the small table in the kitchen, which was filled to the brim with food. There were potatoes and dried meats, made from elk and bison, a bowl filled with leafy greens and cut up fruit, and a plate of biscuits. Estelle had come a long way from meals of just beans. Their elbows were bumping into each other, but they didn't mind.

“This is wonderful, Estelle,” Richard said.

“I worry it isn’t enough,” she said.

Richard laughed. “My dear, this will be more than enough to send all of us to sleep tonight with full bellies and big smiles on our faces. I don’t believe the chefs in our kitchen ever made us a meal quite like this one.”

Estelle blushed. She’d gotten used to Michael praising her cooking, and Jacob, too, would offer a compliment with every meal, but hearing her father’s approval meant the world to her.

“It’s remarkable how quickly she’s learned so much since arriving here,” Michael said.

“Yes,” Richard said. “I believe she gets that from her mother. Same as her stubbornness.”

It was a bit of a gentle tease toward Estelle, something her father always pointed out to her, especially when she was in trouble. Her father always told her her stubborn nature would get her in trouble. In a sense, he was right, but in another, it was also what ended up saving her.

“That’s the same stubbornness that made me come out here to avoid marrying Ethan,” Estelle said before taking a bite of her biscuit.

She saw her father’s face turn from laughing to serious in an instant. “That’s true,” Richard said. “It tends to be even more frustrating when you’re right.”

A small smirk forced its way onto Estelle’s face, no matter how much she tried to hide it. She couldn’t remember another time in her life when her father had said

something like that, admitting that he was wrong and she was right. Even if those weren't his exact words, that's how Estelle chose to hear them.

"I happen to admire that about her," Michael said. "Estelle is a woman who knows what she wants."

"That she is," Richard said. "Let me tell you something. When she was a little girl, she used to have quite the imagination. She'd put on shows for the family with her best friend. They'd pretend to be animals or do reenactments of stories they read."

Jacob's eyes perked up at the mention of Estelle's friend. "That friend from her childhood," he began, "wouldn't by any chance have been Megan, would it?"

"Why, yes it would as a matter of fact," Richard said. "Why do you ask?"

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“How is she doing?” Jacob asked, quietly.

Estelle was wondering the same thing. The back and forth letters highlighting the drama of the moments already seemed like they were years ago, a different time in Estelle’s life.

But a memory came back to her. Something she had nearly forgotten in all the madness.

“Quite well,” Richard said. “Lovely young woman.”

“You know, father,” Estelle said, “Jacob promised me that he would propose to her.”

Jacob’s face turned bright red.

“Propose? Has he even met the lady?” Richard asked.

“I thought we were done with secrets,” Michael said. “Is this true, Jacob?”

“It’s, well, it’s complicated,” Jacob said. It was quite amusing to Megan to see this big, burly man taken down by embarrassment. He, of course, had nothing to be embarrassed by, though for men of his nature, it could often be difficult to admit any feelings whatsoever.

“He told me,” Estelle said, “that if I told Michael about Ethan, then he would propose to Megan. Are you going to follow through with that promise? Or are you not a man of honor?”

Jacob was having trouble getting the words out. “You see,” he said, “what you said is not... well, you didn’t tell Michael anything. He found out when Ethan arrived.”

“She was in the process of telling me when he did,” Michael said. “It sounds like you need to be writing her a letter tonight.”

“I’d be happy to deliver it for you,” Richard said. “I’ll ensure that it’s not lost or delayed in the mail. It’s the least I could do after all the trouble I’ve caused you two.”

“That would be wonderful,” Estelle said. “So you’ll write that letter tonight, Jacob?”

Three pairs of eyes looked right at Jacob, as red as a fresh tomato by this point.

“You did promise,” Estelle said. “And I would love to have Megan here on the ranch with us.”

Jacob nodded and, in a mousy voice, said, “Yes. I’ll write it.”

“I’ll help if you’d like,” Michael said.

“That would be very kind of you, thank you,” Jacob replied, hiding his face in his food.

While Michael and Jacob worked on the letter, Estelle showed her father around the ranch, starting with her favorite place, the horse stables.

“This is Orion,” she said, kissing the top of his nose. “Orion, this is my father.”

She reached down and pulled a carrot out of the bucket, which she handed to her

father.

“He can be tough to win over,” she said, “but he loves carrots. Go ahead, feed it to him.”

Her father approached the horse cautiously, holding the carrot away from his body. Orion reached out and nibbled at the end of the carrot. As he did, Estelle saw the smile forming on her father’s face, which soon turned into a genuine laugh of pure joy.

“He likes that,” he said, “doesn’t he.”

Orion finished the carrot, but kept going, gumming his mouth around Richard’s hand. Estelle hadn’t ever seen her father so happy. In her memories, he was always locked in his office, focused on business, with a serious look on his face.

“I can take you riding tomorrow if you’d like,” Estelle said.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” Richard said, but there was something in his words that made his refusal seem less than genuine.

“It’s no trouble,” Estelle said. “While you’re out here, you may as well go for a ride. Have you ever ridden a horse?”

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“I’ve taken plenty of carriage rides,” Richard said.

“Father, that’s hardly the same thing. I’ll take you out tomorrow. It will change your life.”

“Well,” Richard said, still smiling at Orion, “if you insist.”

“And if you like feeding the horses, you must see the hogs,” Estelle said.

“Hogs?” Richard asked. “You mean you have pigs here?”

“Oh, yes. They’re like giant puppies,” Estelle said, barely able to hold in her excitement.

“I thought they were filthy things.”

“Oh, they love to roll in the mud,” Estelle told him, “but they’re so sweet it doesn’t even matter. They won’t get any of the mud on you. I promise.”

“Let’s take a look then,” Richard said.

Estelle led him out of the stable. She had never seen her father like this. There was a child inside him that had remained tucked away for as long as she’d been alive. The farm had a way of bringing that out of people. She recalled what it was like for her when she saw it all for the first time. It was as if a picture book had come alive right in front of her. She was seeing things she’d only heard about or seen in paintings, and they were all more remarkable than she could have even imagined.

It was dark, but she could see the same emotions in her father. He tried holding back his eagerness by walking alongside Estelle and not encouraging her to hurry, but she could sense his anticipation. It was infectious.

“I’m really glad you came all the way here to Utah,” Estelle said. “You didn’t have to, but if you didn’t, I’d probably be back in a train car with Ethan right about now. Thank you.”

Richard nodded. “I feel strange accepting your thanks for a situation that I got you in to begin with. I shouldn’t have ever tried to make you marry that man. I should have listened to you, but more than that, I should have treated you like a person instead of, like... I don’t know...”

“Like a cattle being taken to market?” Estelle asked.

She saw her father’s face light up again. “Yes,” he said. “I imagine you have cattle here, too.”

“A whole bunch,” she said.

“Well, then, maybe you should show me those, too.”

“After the hogs?” she asked.

“Of course.”

As happy as Estelle was, she couldn’t help but feel disappointed that her father would have to return to Philadelphia. She truly loved him, just as she always had, and hated that he put her in a situation where she had to distance herself from him. She reached out and hugged him, knowing that soon enough, he’d be returning to the east coast and she wouldn’t be able to.

Maybe, just as she had thought with Megan, she could convince him to come out and live on the farm with her. But perhaps she was being greedy.

Her father hugged her back and, in his embrace, she imagined he was thinking the same things she was. That was the bond between a father and his daughter. Sometimes they didn't need words: a single hug could say it all for them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Michael shook his father-in-law's hand at the train station.

"My boy," Richard said, "you take good care of her."

"Yes, sir," Michael said. "But, with all due respect, I think she does a pretty good job of taking care of herself."

Richard smiled knowingly at Michael as if to say that he knew his daughter was in good hands. Michael, for his part, knew that there wouldn't be a second of their life that he would take for granted.

Then Richard moved to Jacob. "Do you have that letter for me?" he asked.

Jacob reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope, which Richard took and said, "I'll be sure that she gets it. And I'll be sure that she answers you right away."

Michael saw his brother blush. It wasn't all embarrassment, there was a bit of overwhelming happiness inside Jacob that he was struggling to keep inside. Michael took some of it for him.

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Richard placed the letter carefully in his jacket pocket and moved on to his daughter.

“Estelle, Estelle,” he said. “Now you get to make trouble for another man, don’t you?”

Michael saw the love in her eyes when she looked at her father. She nodded and said, “I don’t believe he thinks I’m too much trouble. Do you, Michael?”

“Not in the least,” he said, and meant it. She could be stubborn, perhaps, and free spirited, but it all only made him love her more.

“I’ll miss you, Father,” she said, then gave him a hug.

“Please write to me,” Richard said. “And no more fights.”

“No more fights,” she said.

He took his bags and stepped onto the train, giving the conductor his ticket.

“Safe travels,” Michael said, waving.

Then Richard went on board and, in a few moments, the train left the station, heading off to the east, becoming smaller and quieter along the horizon until it completely disappeared.

It was three weeks later that the town held Ethan's trial.

The jury returned from their chambers, after an hour or so of deliberation, and sat down in their seats. All in an orderly manner, stoic and unreadable. The foreman held the verdict in his hands and Michael watched captivated by the proceedings. Estelle grabbed his hand with a firm grip, shaking as she awaited the results.

The spectator area was filled to the brim, with perhaps a dozen or so people standing in the back. Grafton wasn't used to this kind of excitement and everybody there watched with eager anticipation. Would Ethan be found guilty by the jury of his peers? Or would they show mercy upon him?

They'd all been there for several days, taking in the incontrovertible evidence, but there was always the chance that things looked differently from the juror's box. It wasn't about whether or not Ethan had committed fraud or theft, it's about whether the jurors had it in their hearts to forgive him.

Michael, for all his patiences and desire to see the good in people, couldn't forgive Ethan for his sins. It was a case of the crime being greater than the sum of its parts.

Michael, perhaps, could forgive the fraud and deceit. But what he couldn't forgive was that Ethan nearly took Estelle away. And while that's not technically a crime, it certainly wasn't something that Michael could just overlook.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"We have," said the foreman, holding the envelope in his hands.

The judge put on his glasses and reached out his hands. "Let me see it."

The foreman handed off the envelope and the judge opened it, looking it over.

“I trust this is unanimous,” the judge said.

“Yes, your honor,” said the foreman, who sat back down in his seat.

“The jury has found the defendant, Mr. Ethan Fitzgerald, guilty of three counts of fraud and four counts of theft,” the judge said.

Michael and Estelle both let out a collective breath. Though the prosecutor had made short work of Ethan and Sheriff Ron’s testimony should have put a nail in whatever case Ethan might have had, there was always doubt. Now that the jury reached their guilty verdict, the two lovers could rest easy at night.

“Now, in the way of punishment,” the judge said, “I find imprisonment inappropriate, largely because I don’t want such a foul-moraled boorish man to remain in our wonderful town any longer than necessary.” The judge thought for a second, then continued. “In lieu of jail time, I hereby send him back to Philadelphia where a Pennsylvania judge can do with him as he’d like.”

The gavel came down and two guards escorted Ethan out of the courtroom, to be put on the next train to Philadelphia.

“All’s well that ends well,” Estelle said. Michael took her arm in his and they walked out to their horses, which they mounted and rode back towards the ranch.

“What do you think they’ll do with him in Pennsylvania?” Michael asked.

“Likely send him to Eastern State Penitentiary,” she said. “But I don’t much care so long as he doesn’t ever come back here.”

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It didn't take too long for them to get out of the town square, where the empty desert surrounded them and the sun cast long shadows over the land. Michael watched Estelle lose herself in the scenery, allowing it to surround her like a pool of water. Eventually, she turned to look at him.

"Michael," she asked. "Is this ever going to stop feeling like a dream?"

He looked at her and wondered the same thing himself. She was right: it didn't feel real.

"I imagine not," he said.

"Good," she replied.

"I can't think of anything else I could ever want," Michael said.

Estelle smiled. "See, that's where you and I differ."

"You're not happy?" Michael asked.

"I'm beyond happy, but I can always dream bigger," she said.

Michael was confused. They had each other and the animals and a life that allowed them to appreciate nature all day every day. "What more could you possibly want?"

She smiled and left the question in the air for a bit before she said, "You have such beautiful eyes, Michael, have I ever told you that?"

“No,” he said, “I don’t believe you have.” He also wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything.

“I see your two beautiful eyes and you know what I want?” she asked. “I want two more. Or maybe four more. Perhaps even six.”

“You want more eyes?” Michael asked.

“Little eyes just like yours. On adorable little faces, running around the farm with their tiny legs,” she said.

He was beginning to get the picture. It wasn’t something he’d fully considered in the past.

“Don’t you want that, too?” Estelle asked.

“No,” Michael said.

“You don’t?”

“I’d want them to have your eyes,” he said.

When they arrived back at the house, a letter was waiting in their mailbox. Estelle pulled it out and an instant smile spread across her face, giving it a soft glow.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“It’s for Jacob,” she said.

“Oh...”

Michael knew what that meant. Jacob had been checking the mail every day for the past three weeks, ever since Richard left, trying to minimize its importance, but Michael could tell that it mattered more than anything for his brother. It was likely only by chance timing that they managed to grab the letter before Jacob got to it.

“Let’s go take it to him,” Estelle said.

They walked up the path to the cabin and Estelle knocked on the door.

“Yes?” Jacob asked.

“We have a letter for you,” Estelle said, “but we could come back later if you’re busy.”

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The door opened before she could even finish her sentence and Jacob pulled the envelope out of her hands.

He was careful opening the seal, trying to avoid tearing the paper as he broke the wax seal. When he pulled it out, it was two pages, which Jacob began to skim.

“Come on,” Michael said. “Read it aloud. We want to hear it, too.”

Jacob cleared his throat. ““Dearest Jacob, I have received your letter from Mr. Williams. I must say, it took me by surprise. For starters, I was under the impression that he would be bringing my darling Estelle back home with him. Imagine my disappointment when he only handed me a letter!””

Jacob’s face dropped as he read that, but he kept going.

““I read the letter you wrote, then immediately read it again, for I couldn’t believe what it had said. I thought it must be some kind of poor attempt at humor, but Mr. Williams insisted that it was not. He said you were genuine.

““I still find it difficult to believe him. If this is some kind of cruel joke, I must demand you never send me another letter, for my heart cannot take such wanton manipulation. So I will answer you genuinely, and assume you wrote with the most honest of intentions and not to hurt me.

““The answer to whether or not I will marry you is...””

Jacob quickly moved to the second sheet of paper, read it, and then looked up at

Michael and Estelle.

“...yes,” he said.

His smile spread across his face and Michael thought he might need to grab his brother to keep him from falling if he fainted. Jacob managed to stay on his two feet.

“Is that it?” Estelle asked.

“Just let him have his moment,” Michael said.

Jacob held the letters close to his heart, embracing them as he would Megan if she was here with them. Then he looked back down at the letter and continued.

“I am packing my bags and arranging my travels to Grafton Town. I promise to arrive as soon as I can, though it may take several weeks to get my affairs in order. After all, I won’t just be visiting: I’ll be staying.

“The good news is that by the time you receive this letter, I should already be on my way to you. I hope you’re ready for me.”

“She’s on her way,” Estelle said. “How wonderful!”

Jacob cleared his throat and read the end of the letter. “Lots of love, Megan Richardson, the future Mrs. Jacob Holden.”

Estelle looked at Michael. “Remember me telling you to dream bigger?” she asked.

He nodded. “I see what you mean,” he said. “You were absolutely right.”

Epilogue

Six months later

The sun rose on another day, sending a beam of light to the ceiling of Estelle's room. She laid in bed for a moment, appreciating the warmth of her blanket as the world outside was edging closer and closer to winter. Months ago, she asked her husband if it would ever stop feeling like a dream. He said it wouldn't and, at least so far, he was right. Sleep seemed like such a waste of time when there was so much to be awake for.

Since she had married Michael, every day was special, but they all seemed to be over so quickly. Before she knew it, they had passed their six-month anniversary and she had a feeling that the next six months would also go by in an instant. And yet so much had been stuffed into that time.

Megan had arrived and married Jacob and the two of them became accustomed to helping on the farm. They'd spend the days working and the evenings sitting around a fire, telling stories of the past and looking forward to the future.

Estelle rose out of bed, which was starting to become difficult for her. She put her hands on her stomach and, though she couldn't feel any kicks yet, she knew it was just a matter of time. Boy or girl, she couldn't wait to meet the newest member of their happy family.

She opened the drapes to her window and saw that the ground was covered in a light layer of snow: the first of the year. She shivered and put on a coat, then spent another minute or so taking in all the beauty of the ranch. It was the same place she'd lived for more than half the year and, yet, with the snowfall, it had been transformed into a completely new place, barely recognizable to her.

And she loved it.

Estelle opened the door to her room and the smells of the kitchen filled her head, bringing her an instant supply of happiness. With her pregnancy, Megan had taken over much of the kitchen work and, though Estelle had improved her cooking in the time since she'd arrived in Utah, she had to confess that Megan was much better at it.

Estelle walked down the stairs and, upon seeing Megan at the stove, said, "Good morning."

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“Morning, Estelle,” Megan said, cracking four eggs, one at a time, onto the pan, and letting them sit for a moment, while she returned to the potato slices, sitting in another pan of sizzling oil. Megan jostled the potatoes around a bit, then pulled one out, blew on it, and tasted it. “Just a little bit longer,” she said.

Estelle sat down at the table. “Megan,” she began, “do you ever wonder ‘What if?’”

“Like ‘What if you’d never answered the ad?’,” Megan said, “is that the kind of thing you’re saying.”

“Yeah,” Estelle said, still taking in the smells of Megan’s breakfast, getting stronger by the minute. “There are so many things that had to happen for us to end up right here right now. What if just one of them hadn’t happened?”

Megan flipped the potatoes around once more, then poured them onto a plate. “Sometimes, but then I stop myself.”

“How?” Estelle asked.

“Well,” Megan said, “I tell myself that I’m just worrying. That’s all it is. Except normally you worry about what might happen. But when you play ‘What if?’, you’re worrying about what’s already worked out perfectly. ‘What if I’d never met Jacob?’ I might ask myself. Except I did meet him. So what’s even the point of the question?”

Megan had a point. Estelle was worried about something that had already happened and turned into better than anything she could ever imagine.

“If you want something to worry about,” Megan said, “I’m sure you could find something. But why look to the past to be worried? Worry about the future.”

Except Estelle wasn’t worried about the future. Not at all. Of course, the future wasn’t written and anything could happen. It was true that life had a way of traveling in ups and downs, but none of that mattered to Estelle so long as she had Michael. And if she had Megan and Jacob on top of that, so much the better.

Perhaps it was her confidence in the future that made her have to look to the past to find something to concern her.

Michael came in from outside with his brother, snow on their coats, which they dusted off as they stepped into the house.

“Smells wonderful,” Michael said.

“And feels a lot warmer than out there,” Jacob said. He sat at the table and watched his wife, still as in love as the day he’d met her. In fact, Estelle had a feeling that he loved her even more than he had that day. He knew her better and, through the letters, he’d fallen completely head over heels. And once she moved to the ranch, it seemed as though Jacob never wanted to be without her, even for a day.

As for Estelle, she looked at her husband, the man who taught her what it meant to truly love somebody. He was the only person she’d ever met who never for a second underestimated her and always encouraged her to push just a little bit harder. Everything she knew about how to run the farm she’d learned from him, but more than that, she became a different person because of him. She was now the person she always wished she could be.

And Michael was the husband she never believed she could have.

Megan put their plates in front of them, then handed out silverware.

“Bon appétit!” she said, sitting down next to her husband, across from Estelle.

The food was delicious as always and the four of them ensured there was nothing left over.

“What are we doing today?” Megan asked.

“With the snow, it’s probably best that we start bringing the cattle inside for the winter,” Michael said. “We don’t want them getting cold out there.”

Estelle knew right away what that would entail. She’d get to ride Orion, leading the cattle and keeping her eye out for snakes or anything else that could spook the cows. Michael and the dogs would circle them, keeping them in a tight herd so they’d be easier to control.

Megan and Jacob would also help. When Megan married Jacob, Michael picked up two new horses for them as wedding gifts. Jacob’s had a beautiful silver coat and, as a result, he named the horse Steel. Megan’s was white and would likely blend in with the snow. She named hers Angel.

While Estelle led, Megan and Angel would bring up the rear and Jacob and Steel would look for stragglers, bringing them back in with the herd.

Estelle thought back to her childhood, where she’d spend every day playing with her best friend. It felt like her adulthood was much the same. Yes, working on the ranch was work, and important work at that with little room for error, but it was so much fun that it still felt like play to Estelle.

“Better get started with that,” Michael said.

Estelle sat on Orion out in the cold, wearing her thick coat and feeling her cheeks getting rose. She let out a breath and saw it dissipate into the air.

The cows were all grouped up and Jacob stood at the gate.

“Are we ready?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Estelle said.

“I’m good,” Michael said.

“I’m all set!” Megan shouted from the back.

Carefully, Jacob opened the gate, allowing Estelle to rid through.

“Keep it slow, Estelle,” Michael said. “Just a gentle trot. We’ve got plenty of time.”

She nodded and let Orion determine a comfortable pace back to the barn. She looked back at the cows, grouped together, letting out the occasional “moo” and shaking their heads and bouncing back and forth as they marched forward.

Daisy and Buckley, the two shepherds, circled the gentle beasts, nipping at their hooves and barking to keep them bunched up. Michael circled in the opposite direction, serving much the same purpose. And Megan and Angel pushed through the gate after the last cow hobbled forward, trying to keep up with the group.

Megan told Estelle about the futility of “What if”, but perhaps there was a beauty in it, too.

What if Estelle had never left Philadelphia? She would have been inside at this moment, looking out the window, sitting by a fire. It would have been comfortable and warm, and perhaps she’d even have a book to serve as an escape and keep her company as she counted down the hours until nighttime.

The image made Estelle sad and the saddest part was that version of herself might have been content, perhaps even seeing herself as happy. Estelle wanted to reach into her imagination and pull that woman out. She wanted to show her what life could be and what she was capable of. She wanted to introduce Content Estelle to Michael and let her know that he could be her husband.

But then she thought back to what Megan said. Content Estelle didn't exist. There was only Estelle. And she wasn't locked up inside on this beautiful day. She was leading a herd of cattle to their winter home on the back of a beautiful horse. When she was done, she would tend to the other animals, ensuring they were well fed and warm.

And once the sun went down, she'd be comfortable and warm, sitting by a fire in the arms of her perfect husband eating a meal made by her best friend and, when it got late enough, she'd reluctantly go to sleep so she could wake up early the next day and do it all over again.

She didn't need an escape because she was exactly where she wanted to be: paradise.

THE END?