



*The Bride
His Children
Brought Home*


RUBEDIA
PUBLISHING

Mabel Hayes

The Bride His Children Brought Home



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

A Western Historical Romance Novel

by

Mabel Hayes



RUBEDIA
PUBLISHING

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Letter from Mabel Hayes

“Out where the land is wild, the heart is even wilder.”

My love for Western Romance began on my grandparents’ ranch in Sheridan, Wyoming. I still remember the smell of hay in the barn, the clatter of hooves at dawn, and the way we’d gather eggs before the sun climbed high. Those summers taught me about hard work, tenderness, and the quiet kind of love you find under a wide Western Sky.

In college, I studied American History at Colorado State University, wanting to understand the real stories behind those dusty trails and endless horizons; yet, my writing started long before that. I’ve been scribbling notes about the cattle drives I imagined and the love stories I dreamed of under a prairie sunset ever since I was a little girl. What began as daydreams in my journal grew into short stories, and finally into the novels I now share with you.

Though I don’t live on a ranch today, every character I write carries a piece of that world — simple, rugged, and full of heart. When I’m not writing, you’ll likely find me reading on the porch, baking something sweet, or chasing a sunset that reminds me of home. My dream is that my books give readers what my grandparents once gave me: a chance of belonging, courage, and love that endures.

Today, I live in Durango, tucked in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado, with my husband Edward. Though we don’t own a ranch, we’re lucky to have a big house with plenty of space for our rescued family of cats — each one a reminder that love has many ways of making itself known. Life didn’t give us children, but it gave us this home, this family, and these stories, and I’m grateful every day to share them with you.

With hugs and pawprints,

Mabel Hayes

Let's stay connected!

Come sit with me a while, and let's connect!

The readers who walk this trail with me have shaped far more than the book in your hands—they've helped choose its name, its colors, even the pulse of the story itself.

Their kindness has carried me through long writing days and quiet mountain evenings, and I'm grateful for every step we've shared!

If you're not already part of my little story family, I'd be honored to welcome you in. As a thank-you, I'll send you my novella **"The Bride of the Broken Ranch"**:

FREE EXCLUSIVE GIFT
(available only to my subscribers)



Get it Here:

<https://mabelhayes.com/novella>

Blurb

“Your children sent for a bride.”

Jacob rubbed his jaw. “They should’ve asked the groom first.”

Olivia thought she knew what she was agreeing to when she answered a mail-order bride advertisement. But when she arrives in Wyoming, she realizes the man waiting at the ranch never sent for a wife at all... his children did.

“You didn’t write those letters,” she says.

“No,” his voice is steady. “But you’re here now.”

Widowed rancher Jacob Hale never planned to remarry. His life is his children, the ranch, and the promise he made to the woman he lost. But when a stranded bride arrives at his door with nowhere else to go, sending her away proves harder than he expected. Love isn’t part of the bargain. But Olivia’s gentle courage and warmth slip past every wall he’s built, and soon, the one thing he swore off becomes the only thing he can’t ignore...

When a dangerous man from Olivia’s past comes closer to the Hale ranch, the marriage that began as a mistake becomes the only thing standing between Olivia and the past she fled. Jacob and Olivia must decide... was this marriage only a practical arrangement, or is the family they’ve built something worth fighting for?

Prologue

Laramie, Wyoming Territory

1872

“I’ll be right there,” Olivia shouted to her ma. “I’m almost done.”

She wiped her hands on her apron and stepped back from the washbasin. The small rooms she and her mother rented above the cooper’s shop were cramped, but they were clean, and that was the important thing.

Morning light came through the single window and caught the dust floating in the air. She’d woken before dawn, cooked breakfast, eaten, and washed the dishes. Then, after lunch, she’d helped her mother scrub the floors and shake out the bedding.

It was the kind of work she didn’t mind. It kept her busy. And it kept her from thinking too much.

She was eighteen, old enough to be married by most people’s standards. Old enough, her mother had said, to make her own choices. But she’d found that wasn’t true.

If her father had still been around, she never would have agreed to marry Victor Kellan. But she’d thought it would provide security for her and her ma. She’d been wrong. It was just another mistake in a long line of mistakes. Only bigger.

She liked to think that her father would have seen right through Victor’s lies. But the truth was, she didn’t know her father at all. He’d left when she was a baby. Her mother had tried to keep them afloat over the years after her father’s disappearance, but money was tight, and Victor had seemed like a good solution at the time. He’d needed a wife. She’d needed security. It worked.

Victor had steady work, said all the right things, and wooed her energetically. He was older, yes. But that's what she needed. She had hoped that maybe someday, they might even grow to love each other.

Olivia had tried her best to believe it. Even if it didn't come to pass, she would still care for him in every way a wife should for the rest of their lives. It would be a marriage of give-and-take, and she was prepared to give to hold up her end of the bargain.

But over the next few months, every letter he sent, every visit he made, left her more and more uneasy. His temper was quick. His compliments felt forced and contrived. And his promises sounded like warnings or commands. She felt more like a pet or a possession than his wife-to-be.

Olivia had broken off the engagement two weeks ago, sending a short note through the post. She was too afraid to do it face-to-face. With his temper being what it was, she thought a letter might be safest. She hadn't heard from him since.

She just wished she felt relieved. Instead, she felt like she was waiting for something to happen. Something big. Something bad.

It was her mother who had her anxious and jumping at shadows. He could do what he wanted to Olivia, and she'd survive. But her mother was getting older. And Olivia couldn't abide any more sorrow being laid on her frail shoulders.

Her mother was folding linens at the table when Olivia walked in, and she paused, mesmerized. After years of practice, her mother worked quickly and quietly, folding them with just a few snaps of her hands.

Ma had always been the calm one, even when life pressed hard against them. Olivia admired that. She wished she had inherited more of it.

"Hand me that towel, Liv," Ma said.

Olivia passed it to her. “Do you think we’ll be able to come up with the rent?”

“We’ll manage,” Eleanor said, stacking the now-folded towel atop the others. She stood and gathered them all in her arms. “We always do.”

Olivia nodded, unconvinced. However, it was true enough that they always seemed to manage.

“I’ll go put these away. Then, we can make some supper,” Ma said.

“Okay. We still have two rashers of bacon left,” Olivia called to her.

Those would go well with the beans, even if she had eaten enough beans and cornbread to last her a lifetime. Still, they ate, and she was grateful that God had blessed them with what they had.

She reached for the broom, ready to sweep before she started the meal. She’d just turned around when raised voices sounded from the front of the house.

A man’s voice. Gruff and demanding.

Her stomach clenched, and she ran into the small living room.

Ma stood there, frozen, face-to-face with Victor.

“There she is,” Victor growled, taking a step forward with his eyes locked on Olivia.

Ma didn’t move. Instead, she placed a hand on his chest, stopping him from getting any closer. “I don’t think anyone has invited you in.”

Victor’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t need an invitation,” he said, gripping her wrist and using it to shove her aside.

Ma didn't let him get away with it. She turned around, took two steps, and planted herself in front of him.

"Stay over there," Ma called to Olivia. "He's got nothing to say to you."

Victor growled, looking down at Ma. And if looks could kill, she'd be planning a funeral for her mother. He raised his hand, preparing to strike her, and Olivia shouted, "Victor!"

Victor lowered his arms. "Why do you keep interfering in matters that do not concern you, Eleanor?"

Ma's reply was firm. "I haven't interfered in anything. Olivia made her own decision."

"She made it because you pushed her," Victor snapped. "You've been poisoning her against me."

"That's not true," Ma said. "I've never said a word against you. If she's decided not to go through with the marriage, that's to do with you, not me."

Olivia stepped closer, unable to stay back any longer. She reached the doorway just as Victor took another step toward her mother. His face was tight with anger, his restraint slipping. Eleanor didn't back away, but Olivia saw the tension in her shoulders.

"Leave," Eleanor said. "You're not welcome here."

Victor grabbed her arm. Hard. Eleanor winced, though she didn't cry out.

Olivia didn't think. She shoved herself between them, her hands out, her body blocking her mother from his reach.

“Let her go!” Olivia shouted, her voice shaking.

Victor’s eyes snapped to her. For a moment, he looked almost surprised. Then his expression hardened.

“You ungrateful little—”

His hand came fast. The slap cracked across her face, sharp and blinding. Pain burst along her cheek, and she fell to her knees, the floor rushing up to meet her. Her ears rang. Her vision blurred. She tasted blood.

Glancing up, she was satisfied. He’d let go of her mother’s arm.

Eleanor dropped beside her, one hand on Olivia’s shoulder, the other shielding her from Victor as if she could hold back the whole world.

Victor stood over them, breathing hard. Then he straightened his coat, smoothing the front with slow, deliberate movements.

“The wedding is on,” he said, sneering at Olivia on the floor. He turned to go, then hesitated and turned back around. “You belong to me, Olivia. And the sooner you and your interfering mother accept that, the sooner we can all get back to our normal lives. Now, I have to go. But I’ll come back when you’ve come to your senses.”

He left, closing the door behind him with a soft click that felt worse than a slam.

For a long moment, neither Olivia nor her mother moved. Olivia’s cheek throbbed. Her hands shook. She felt humiliated, frightened, and sick to her stomach. But she was also relieved that he hadn’t hurt her mother further. That was something, at least.

Eleanor stood first. She didn’t speak. She didn’t comfort. She didn’t cry. She went straight to the kitchen and wet a cloth. Olivia stood and

walked to the settee.

“I’m sorry, Ma,” she said on a sob. “I’m so sorry.”

“Pish!” Ma said, leaning down and placing the cool cloth on Olivia’s cheek. “Olivia, this world is full of men like Victor. They’re snakes, hiding behind expensive suits and fancy houses, flashing bright, white smiles and holding doors open for nice, young ladies. And you don’t know what they are until they strike. Now you know. Victor Kellan is a snake.”

Olivia nodded. He was. A snake. A poisonous one.

“Come with me,” Ma said, turning and heading toward the bedrooms.

Olivia stood and followed her, watching as her ma pulled out the small trunk they kept under her bed. She began packing clothes with quick, efficient movements.

“Ma?” Olivia whispered, still standing in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Gather your things,” Eleanor said. “We’re leaving.”

Olivia pushed herself up, her legs unsteady. “But... where are we going?”

“Somewhere he can’t reach you.”

“But—”

“No arguments,” Eleanor snapped, her voice waspish for the first time Olivia could remember. “Pack.”

Olivia did as she was told. She gathered her dresses, her underthings, her Sunday shoes, and the worn shawl her father had given her when she was twelve.

She tucked away the small wooden comb he'd carved for her when she was still just a baby. Her hands moved without thought, driven by fear and urgency.

Eleanor counted the little money they had, tucking it into her apron pocket. She wrapped bread and cheese in cloth and slipped them into her bag. She checked the windows, then the back door, then the windows again.

When everything was ready, she blew out the lamps and motioned for Olivia to follow.

They stepped into the night. The street was quiet, the air cool. Olivia pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. Her cheek still burned, but the sting of it was nothing compared to the dread settling in her chest.

They walked quickly, keeping to the shadows. Olivia didn't know where they were going. She didn't ask again until they were several blocks away, the rented rooms far behind them.

"Ma," she said softly, "where are we going?"

Eleanor didn't slow. "Sherman. I have a cousin there."

"But Ma, that's twenty miles from here," Olivia said. "And it's almost dark. It'll take us two days to get there."

"We're not walking," Eleanor said. "We're borrowing a rig from Mr. Wainwright. My cousin will return it for us later."

They walked a few more minutes in silence. Then, as they neared the livery, Olivia said quietly, "What if he comes after me?"

Ma looked at her, her face brimming with confidence and wisdom. “As long as we stay ahead of him, he can’t hurt you.”

Olivia swallowed hard. The idea of running for the rest of her life was not appealing. But the thought of Victor finding her again frightened her more.

“He’ll eventually give up, Olivia,” Ma said. “He’s just angry right now.”

“Angry? What’s he got to be angry about?” Olivia scoffed. She was the one with a black eye and a swollen cheek.

“You’ve embarrassed him, threatened to mar his reputation,” Ma explained. “He just has to bluster and blow for a bit before he calms down and moves on.”

Olivia glanced over at her mother, who walked with her chin high and her jaw set. Ma knew best. She’d always been strong, but tonight she seemed made of iron.

Olivia took a deep breath and matched her mother’s pace. She just hoped Victor would get over this sooner rather than later.

Chapter One

Laramie, Wyoming Territory

1877

“I’m tellin’ you, Jake,” Thomas said, grinning. “This one was different. Pretty as a picture. And smart, too. Said she’s new in town, staying with her aunt. I might have to make a few more trips to the mercantile.”

The bay gelding stepped back as Jacob undid the cinch, wiping dirt from his hands. Morning chores had stretched into midday, and now the sun was already high. His friend, Thomas, leaned against the corral fence, chewing on a piece of straw and jawin’ like he had all the time in the world.

Jacob shook his head. “You say that about every woman you meet.”

“That’s because every woman I meet is a gift from the Lord,” Thomas replied, tipping his hat back. “Some men appreciate the blessings sent their way.”

Sighing, Jacob didn’t bother answering. Thomas never changed, and Jacob didn’t expect him to. Thomas enjoyed his bachelor’s life, drifting from one flirtation to the next without a care in the world.

Sometimes, Jacob thought that he and the other three men who worked for him at the ranch only survived their weekends to hear all about Thomas’ adventures on Monday morning.

Thomas nudged him with an elbow. “You know, if you ever left this ranch long enough to see a woman, you might find yourself blessed, too.”

Jacob gave him a flat look. “I’ve got enough on my plate. The ranch. The children. The cattle. The horses. That’s plenty enough for me.”

Thomas opened his mouth to argue, but the sound of running feet cut him off.

“Pa! Pa!”

He turned just in time to see Mabel and John barreling toward him, a young woman strolling behind them and smiling. The woman stumbled once, then caught her footing, her cheeks flushing from the sudden attention.

Thomas let out a low chuckle. “Well, you don’t need to go out looking. Your young’uns bring them to you.”

With a warning glare at Thomas, he turned to face the woman. She was pretty enough, but young, maybe not even twenty, with a neat dress and a nervous smile. He recognized her from the schoolhouse—Miss Wilkes, the new teacher.

“Pa,” Mabel said breathlessly, “Miss Wilkes is staying for supper. We told her you were making venison stew.”

Staying for supper? Jacob blinked at her. She’d turned twelve the week before and had apparently decided she was old enough to make these kinds of household decisions.

John nodded eagerly. “Don’t worry,” his eight-year-old said sagely. “She’s real nice, Pa. And she reads stories better than anybody.”

He felt heat crawl up the back of his neck. He now understood exactly what his children were doing, and it made him want to sink into the dirt and cover himself up.

Blushing, Miss Wilkes smoothed her skirt. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Hale. They insisted I come over. I tried to tell them you weren’t expecting me.”

Jacob frowned, then looked at his children. “Y’all go inside and do your chores. I’ll be in shortly.”

Neither child moved. This irritated him further.

“Now,” he growled in his scariest ‘father voice.’

That did it. Groaning, they both turned and made their way toward the house. Only then did Jacob return his attention to the teacher.

He cleared his throat. “No need to apologize, Miss Wilkes. My children mean well, but they get ideas in their heads. I’m afraid I’ve got no time for visiting today, ma’am. Ranch keeps me busy.”

Her smile faltered, and Jacob felt like a brute. But before he could say anything else, Thomas stepped forward with his usual charm and easy confidence.

“Miss Wilkes,” he said, tipping his hat, “I’m Thomas Reed, a friend of the family. If you’re headed back toward town, I’d be honored to walk with you. Can’t have a pretty lady like you walking all by herself.”

She blinked, surprised, then nodded with a shy grin. “Yes, thank you. That would be very kind.”

Thomas offered his arm, and she took it. As they walked away, Thomas glanced back at Jacob with a wink and a grin that said he’d be hearing about this later.

Shaking his head, Jacob waited until they were out of view before leading the bay gelding to the barn. He’d never admit it, but Tiny was his favorite horse on the ranch. And they’d had a very busy day.

“How ‘bout a treat?” he asked Tiny when they were inside.

Jacob tied him loosely to one of the stalls, then went to the treat box by the door and grabbed a carrot. Then, he set to work with the brush. When he was done, he set Tiny loose in the pasture and made his way back to the house.

He paused on the front porch to wash up in the basin he kept beside the door. Then, he went inside to find his children sitting at the table doing lessons. Or, at least, pretending to do their lessons.

“All right. Which one of you wants to tell me about Miss Wilkes?” he asked.

Mabel crossed her arms, something she did quite often lately. “We just wanted you to meet her.”

“Yeah, she’s real nice, Pa,” John added. “She never yells or nothing.”

Jacob sighed. “You two can’t keep doing this. I’m not looking to get together with anyone in town.”

“Why not?” Mabel demanded. “We’re the only kids at school who don’t have mothers.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Jacob replied. “I’m sure they don’t *all* have mothers and fathers.”

John nodded. “It’s true. All of them.”

Jacob cleared his throat, not liking the direction this conversation was going. He crouched down so he was eye level with them. “Your mother’s only been gone five years. That’s not long enough for me to be rushing out and trying to find a replacement.”

His son looked confused. “We just want a ma.”

Jacob's jaw shifted from side to side as he thought about how to reply. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm not ready to forget your ma."

Mabel's eyes filled with frustration. "We're not asking you to forget her. We just... we want a family again. I'm the only girl in my school missing buttons on my dress and eating beef jerky for lunch."

John's voice was small. "You're always working, Pa. We hardly see you."

"We want to be a family," Mabel stated.

"We are a family," Jacob argued.

"We want a ma," John added.

Jacob closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn't realized how deep the loneliness ran for them. He'd been so focused on keeping the ranch afloat, keeping food on the table, keeping everything from falling apart, that he hadn't seen what it was costing them.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't know you felt that way."

Mabel's chin trembled. "Well, we do."

"I'll do better," Jacob said. "I promise. I'll spend more time at the house. We'll eat supper together every night I can manage it. I'll take your dresses to town for Miss Amy to alter. I won't throw jerky into your lunch pails anymore. And Sundays—we'll make those ours."

John's face brightened a little. "Really?"

"Really. Except for feeding and watering the livestock."

The children exchanged a look, then nodded. Mabel took John's hand and tugged him toward the kitchen. "We'll get washed up," she said.

Jacob watched them go. His chest tightened. He wanted to give them everything—a mother, a home full of warmth, a life without worry. But he couldn't bring back what they'd lost. And he couldn't force himself to move on when his heart still felt tied to the woman he'd buried.

His wife, Julie, had been too young when the consumption took her from them, only twenty-five. She was beautiful with long blond hair that reminded him of honey. They'd been sweethearts since the age of sixteen, and he'd never considered marrying or being with anyone else.

They had two young children at the time, ages 7 and 3. Jacob had no choice but to keep the family going. He couldn't run away or roll into a ball and join her because there was no one else left to look after the children.

Now, he was grateful that he'd held it together. He still missed Julie every day, but the pain was bearable. Each was the spitting image of their mother, which he found both a blessing and a curse—a blessing because they reminded him of Julie. A curse because they reminded him of Julie.

He stood there long after the children disappeared before he followed them to the kitchen. He'd promised them venison stew for supper, and that's what they were going to have. He wasn't a very good cook overall, but he knew he could make one thing that tasted good.

"Pa, can you *try* to braid my hair again tonight?" Mabel asked sadly.

Jacob felt a twinge in his chest. "Yes, sweetheart. I'll try."

Later that night, after the kids were in bed and he'd tried—and failed—to braid Mabel's hair the way she wanted it, he went outside to sit on the porch with a cup of tea. He'd have preferred coffee, but it kept him awake if he drank it at night.

He sat down in his favorite rocker, glancing over at the empty one beside him. That was Julie's chair. A few times while he was working, he'd glanced up to see Mabel sitting in it, and it made his heart lurch. But for the most part, he knew Julie was gone, and he'd accepted it.

He groaned as he leaned back in his chair and took a sip of tea. The ranch—what he could see of it in the dark—stretched out before him, wide and surrounded by forest in the distance. He loved his ranch.

He made a mental checklist of everything he needed to get done tomorrow. Livestock to feed. Fences to mend. Cattle to check. Bills to pay in town. Always something.

But none of it mattered as much as the look on his children's faces earlier when they told him they needed a ma.

He'd failed them without meaning to. And now he had to find a way to fix it.

Jacob leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Maybe he couldn't give them everything they needed. But he could give them more than what he had been.

And he would. He didn't know how. But he would.

Chapter Two

Evanston, Wyoming

Laura stood in the hallway and popped her head in the door, her arms loaded with linens. “You finished in here, Liv?”

“Just about,” Olivia replied.

Olivia scrubbed the last of the breakfast dishes and set them on the drying rack beside the sink. The boarding house kitchen was warm from the stove, and the smell of biscuits still lingered in the air.

She wiped her hands on her apron and stepped back, letting out a slow breath. Morning chores were done, but there were still rooms to clean, sheets to wash, and supper to help prepare. She was bone tired.

“I’m done now,” Olivia told her. “I’ll start on the upstairs rooms once these dry.”

Laura set the linens down and leaned against the counter. “You look tired today.”

“I’m fine.”

“You always say that,” Laura said.

“Because I always am,” Olivia replied.

That wasn’t true, of course. She just wasn’t one to share a lot about herself. Laura was her best friend—her only friend. They’d worked together in Laramie a long time ago, before Olivia was forced to pull up stakes and leave.

Olivia reached for a cloth and began wiping the table, though it didn't need it. Laura watched her for a moment, then stepped closer.

"Look, Liv, I know it's only been a few weeks," Laura said gently. "You don't have to pretend for me."

Olivia's hands stilled. She kept her eyes on the table. "I know. I just... It was too sudden," she said quietly. "I wasn't ready for Ma to leave me."

Laura didn't interrupt.

"Inside, she was strong," Olivia went on. "Stronger than anyone I've ever known. She kept us moving, kept us alive, even when everything fell apart. I guess I just thought she'd keep going forever."

She swallowed hard. The words felt heavy, but she forced them out.

"I should've done more for her. Found better work. Found a safer place. Something."

"You did everything you could," Laura said.

Olivia shook her head. "It wasn't enough."

Laura pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

"Are you crazy?" Olivia demanded. "If Mrs. Green sees us sitting here gabbing, she'll let us go." And she would, too.

Laura sighed and waved a hand toward the door. "She won't let us go. We're the two best workers she has. Besides, we started early today. We deserve a break."

Olivia wasn't so sure about that. She couldn't afford to lose this job—her third one in as many weeks. But eventually, she huffed and sat down across from Laura, her shoulders slumping.

“You know how it was,” Olivia said. She had confided that much to Laura already. “Every time we found a decent town, Victor had already sent word. Folks would look at us like we were trouble. Landlords wouldn't rent to us. Employers said they didn't need help anymore. Some wouldn't even let us in the door.”

Laura nodded.

“We'd get settled somewhere, and then a week later, someone would tell us we had to leave. Or I'd suddenly lose my job. Or someone would warn us that Victor was asking questions again.” Olivia rubbed her hands together. “Ma kept saying he'd give up eventually. But he never did.”

“And that's not your fault,” Laura said.

“It is. I'm the one who broke the engagement with Victor. This is all because of me. All that running wore Ma down. She was tired all the time. She'd never admit it, but she couldn't sleep. She worried about everything—money, food, where we'd go next. It got to her. I saw it happening, and I couldn't stop it.”

Her voice cracked, and she pressed her lips together until she could steady it.

“She deserved better than that life, Laura. Better than dying in some rented room with nothing to her name.”

Laura reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “She had you. That counts for something.”

Olivia didn't trust herself to speak, so she nodded.

After a moment, Laura let go and leaned back. “You’ve been carrying all this alone for too long. You need a husband.”

“I’m twenty-six,” Olivia said. “Too old for anyone to want to marry. Too old to start over. And I don’t have anything to offer except hard work.”

“That’s more than most,” Laura said. “Besides, you don’t look twenty-six.

“That’s odd,” Olivia replied. “Because I feel like I’m forty-six. No decent man would want me, Laura.”

Laura gestured toward Olivia. “You’re pulling my leg. You’re strong, Olivia. Not just in spirit—though that’s true—but you’ve got a resilience most people never learn. You’re quick on your feet, and you don’t back down from hard work. You’re practical. And you dress for what needs doing, not for show.”

Olivia chuckled. “You think a man is going to want me because I dress modestly?”

Laura frowned. “I wasn’t finished. I think a man will want you because you’re beautiful. You have a fine shape, Olivia. Your hair’s thick and silky, even when you keep it braided or pinned back. And your eyes—that bright hazel color, gorgeous. Do you know how many women would kill to have your eyelashes? Me included.”

Olivia listened with her hands folded on the table. Laura’s words settled over her, simple and true. For a moment, Olivia let herself believe she might be enough.

“It’s not enough for a husband. Not enough for a home.” Olivia looked down at her hands. “A twenty-six-year-old woman on her own doesn’t have many prospects.”

Laura hesitated, then reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a folded newspaper. “I might have to disagree with you there. Let me show you something.”

Olivia frowned. “What is it?”

“Advertisements,” Laura said, opening the paper. “Mail-order brides.”

Olivia let out a humorless laugh. “I’ve tried those before. No one chose me.”

“Maybe you didn’t find the right one.”

“I sent letters to three men. None of them wrote back.”

Laura shrugged. “Well, they obviously couldn’t read very well, then. Let’s try again.”

She slid the paper across the table. Olivia sighed, then took it. The print was small, the columns crowded with notices from men across the territories—farmers, ranchers, widowers, miners. Some wanted companionship. Some wanted children. Some just wanted a woman who could cook, sew, and keep a house.

Olivia read through them slowly. Most were from younger men, or men who wanted someone “cheerful,” “pretty,” or “of good family.” She skipped those. She knew better than to hope.

Then one ad caught her eye:

**WIDOWER, 30, WITH TWO CHILDREN, SEEKS WIFE TO
HELP KEEP HOME. MUST BE KIND AND GOD-FEARING.**

She read it twice.

“He’s young,” she murmured, shoving the ad to Laura. “But I like his ad.”

Laura leaned in. “And he’s got children. Means he’s already had a wife. Might not be so picky this time around.”

Olivia traced the edge of the paper with her thumb. “A man with children... he’d be looking for someone stable. Someone who can work. I can do that.”

“I agree. This one’s for you,” Laura said. “You’ve been taking care of folks your whole life.”

Olivia didn’t answer.

Laura tapped the ad. “Here’s my way of thinkin’ on it. If you’re already married, what reason will Victor have to keep pursuing you? And even if he did, you’d have a husband there to protect you.”

Olivia stiffened. She hadn’t let herself think that far. She’d always thought of marriage as having a house, shelter, food, and a guaranteed place to call home. But this was different. She’d have a man to protect her from people like Victor—the snakes.

Still, fear coiled in her stomach. “What if he doesn’t want me? What if no one wants me?”

“That’s not possible,” Laura said. “But if he’s not the one for you, we’ll try another one. And we’ll keep trying until someone sees what I see.”

Olivia looked up, a smile tugging at her lips. “And what’s that?”

“A smart, beautiful, loyal woman who works hard and has a lot to give to the right man.”

Olivia felt her throat tighten again. She looked back at the ad. The words were plain, but something about them tugged at her. A widower with two children. A man who'd already lost someone. A man who might understand grief. A man who might not expect perfection.

She folded the paper slowly. "I don't know, Laura."

"I do," Laura said. "You're not going to spend the rest of your life hiding. And you're not going to be alone."

Olivia stared at the folded paper in her hands. She thought of her mother, of the years they'd spent running, of the fear that had followed them from town to town.

She thought of the empty future stretching ahead of her if she stayed as she was—working in a boarding house, sleeping in a small room, never belonging anywhere.

And she thought of the ad. A man with two children. A chance at something different.

"Will you help me write the letter?" she asked quietly.

Laura smiled. "Of course I will."

Olivia nodded, her heart beating fast. She wasn't sure if she was making a mistake or taking her first real step toward a life that belonged to her.

It might not be the right move. But she was done running.

This was it.

Chapter Three

Laramie, Wyoming

“Only two more,” Thomas said as Jacob crouched beside the young bull calf.

The familiar sizzle filled the air, and the stink of burnt hair hit him hard. The calf bawled once more before Jacob let go, and it bolted back toward the herd.

Jacob stood and removed his hat, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. The August sun was fierce, and he could feel it in... uncomfortable places. He thought about taking the kids down to the creek later for a quick dip.

He took a deep breath, which ensured the smell of singed hair would be stuck in his nose the rest of the night. Maybe the creek water would wash that away, too. He still had a few things he needed to get done before he could call it quits for the day.

He was tired—bone-tired—and the day wasn’t even half over.

“Go on, now!” He heard Thomas yelling at the curious cattle milling along the fence.

He glanced over and saw Thomas standing a few feet away, leaning on the fence like he might fall over if he didn’t. His face was pale and washed out, his eyes squinting against the sun. He’d been out late the night before—again—carousing and making mischief. Now he was paying the price.

“You all right?” Jacob asked, though he already knew the answer.

Thomas groaned. "I reckon. But my head's poundin' like a drum, so stop shoutin'."

"I'm not shouting."

"Feels like you are."

Jacob shook his head. "Maybe you'll learn one of these days."

"Learn what?" Thomas muttered. "That life's short and a man ought to enjoy himself?"

"That you're too old to be carrying on like a schoolboy."

Thomas grinned weakly. "Old? I'm only two years older than you."

"Yeah, and twice as foolish."

Thomas chuckled. Then, he rubbed his temples and reached for the next calf. Jacob grabbed the branding iron from the fire, the metal glowing red.

He pressed the iron to the calf's flank, holding steady while it kicked and cried. When the time came, he lifted the iron and stepped back, letting the calf scramble away.

"That's it," Thomas stated. "Thirty-two. All the Spring calves. That's seven more than last year."

"Felt like more than that," Jacob admitted. "But it's a good number."

"It's a real good number," Thomas agreed. "If we can double it next year, we'll be sitting pretty."

Jacob wasn't sure that he wanted to double the size of his herd. More cattle meant more time feeding, watering, and maintaining. And that meant more time away from the children. To grow the ranch, he'd have to sacrifice something, either the ranch or the kids.

And that really wasn't a choice at all. His kids meant everything to him.

"By the way," Thomas said absently, ripping the hanky from his neck and dipping it into the water trough before patting his forehead with it. "I guess I ought to thank you."

"For what?" Jacob asked as he oiled the irons before putting them away in the barn.

"Miss Wilkes," Thomas grinned. "We seemed to hit it off."

"Oh, Lord," Jacob groaned, giving his head a little shake.

"She's making me supper Tuesday night," Thomas said with a smug grin.

"For some reason, that comes as no surprise," Jacob said flatly. "But I'm glad to hear it. Maybe she'll be a good influence on you."

"Or maybe I'll be a bad influence on her?" Thomas said. Then, at the look on Jacob's face, he laughed.

They worked in silence for a while, the kind of silence that came from long years of friendship. Jacob didn't need to say anything for Thomas to know what he was thinking. And Thomas didn't need to speak for Jacob to know he was regretting every drink he'd had the night before.

Jacob was drenching the branding irons when something caught his eye—a wagon bouncing down the long dirt path toward the house.

He straightened. “You expecting someone?”

Thomas followed his gaze, then smirked. “No. Looks like your children have arranged another girl for you to meet.”

Jacob shot him a scowl. “Don’t start.”

Thomas chuckled. “I’m just sayin’—they seem to have a knack for it.”

Jacob ignored him, though his stomach tightened. He wasn’t expecting anyone. Folks didn’t usually just show up unannounced out here unless they were lost or in trouble. And the way the wagon rolled straight toward the house made him uneasy.

It wasn’t long before Mabel and John came tearing across the yard, running straight for the wagon like it was Christmas morning. His gut clenched.

Jacob swore under his breath. “What have they done now?”

“Looks like you’re about to find out. They seem to know who it is,” Thomas said, running his fingers through his hair. “Or they think they do.”

Jacob didn’t wait to hear more. He dropped the iron in his hand and started toward the house at a fast pace. Something wasn’t right. He could feel it in his bones.

By the time he reached the yard, the wagon was pulling up in front of the house. Mark Underwood, the livery owner from town, sat on the bench seat, reins in hand. Beside him sat a woman Jacob had never seen before.

He studied her a moment as the wagon rolled closer. She had chestnut-brown hair braided into one long, no-frill plait that hung gently

over her shoulder. Her eyes were bright hazel and caught the sunlight, making them almost sparkle.

She sat straight, her hands folded in her lap, though he could see the tension in her shoulders. She seemed nervous or worried, though she could not say why. He was staring. He knew that. But for some ridiculous reason, he wanted to see her smile.

“Howdy, Jake,” Mark said, giving him a wide smile of his own—unfortunately, his was missing all his upper teeth, as well as a few on the bottom.

Jacob blinked, confusion knotting in his chest. “Howdy, Mark.”

Mabel and John were already in the wagon, talking fast and excited. The woman looked down at them with a polite smile, though she seemed unsure.

Jacob waited until the wagon came to a full stop, then stepped forward. He kept his eyes on Mark. “What brings you out this way?”

Mark nodded hello to the kids, then turned his attention to Jacob. “Found this lovely lady standin’ in front of the hotel. Said she needed a ride out here, so... here we are.”

“Here?” Jacob repeated. “Why?”

Mark shrugged and opened his mouth to speak. But before he could answer, Mabel stepped forward, her whole body braced for a fight.

“Pa, this is Olivia,” she said, gesturing toward the lady sitting in the wagon. “She’s agreed to be our new ma.”

Jacob felt the world tilt.

“What?” he growled.

John nodded eagerly. “We put an ad in the paper and everything. She wrote us back and said she’d do it.”

Jacob stared at them, then at the woman, at Olivia. Her expression shifted as the truth hit her square in the face. Her smile faltered. Her eyes widened. And her face went pale.

“You—” she whispered, looking at Mabel and John. “You’re the ones who wrote to me?”

Mabel nodded. “We told you all about Pa and the ranch and how we needed a mother.”

Olivia’s hands tightened in her lap. She looked mortified. “You said you were lonely and needed a partner.”

Mabel looked down at her feet, chewing her lip. Well, he was glad to see that she appeared to be ashamed about something, at least.

“I’m real sorry about that, Miss Olivia,” Mabel said. “It was the only way to get you to come out here. But we didn’t lie. He is lonely. And he does need a partner. And me and John need a ma.”

Jacob felt heat crawl up his neck. Embarrassment. Anger. Confusion. All of it tangled together.

He turned to Mark. “I’m sorry. There’s been a mistake. I’ll take her back to the station.”

Mark shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ve got other things I need to take care of anyway.”

Jacob looked back at Olivia. “Ma’am, I’m sorry for the trouble. I’ll get you back to town so you can catch the next train home.”

Her eyes lifted to his. He expected her to agree—to demand it, even. Instead, she surprised him. She drew in a slow breath and shook her head.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” she said quietly.

Jacob blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m staying,” she said. “Right here.”

The words slapped him right in the face. He stood there, stunned, as he watched her climb down from the wagon. Then, she reached into the back and took out her bag before walking around and thanking Mark for the ride.

Soon, shock turned to irritation. Jacob didn’t know this woman from Adam. He didn’t know why she’d come, what she’d been told, or what she expected. But like it or not, she would be on the next train out of town.

He glared at his children for a moment, his irritation quickly moving into angry territory. He’d told them in clear, plain English to knock off the matchmaking.

Apparently, the message did not get through.

Chapter Four

Olivia wished the ground would open and swallow her whole when Jacob looked at her and said, “I’m sorry. There’s no place for you here. You’ll have to leave.”

She stood beside the wagon with one hand clenched tight in her skirts, the other one holding her bag. Heat crawled up her neck. Shame pressed down on her so hard she could barely breathe. She had imagined many things on the long ride from Laramie, but not this.

She hadn’t pictured two eager children and a confused rancher waiting on her, nor the sick feeling that she’d been fooled. And learning she’d been writing to a pair of youngsters instead of the man she thought she was coming to marry didn’t make her situation any less bleak.

Her cheeks burned. She kept her eyes on the dirt, afraid to look at Jacob again. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and clearly irritated. She couldn’t blame him. She felt foolish enough for both of them. She should have known.

Mark Underwood stared at Jacob, not quite sure what to do. Jacob finally cleared his throat and said, “Thanks, Mark. I’ll take it from here.”

Mark nodded, looking relieved. “Alrighty, then. If you, or the little missy there, needs anything, you know where I am.”

“I do,” Jacob said, trying to muster a smile.

Mark shouted at his team of horses, then flicked the reins, and the wagon rolled away, leaving Olivia standing alone with Jacob.

She watched the wagon roll away, then her eyes snagged on a handsome man with blond hair, striking blue eyes, and broad, muscular

shoulders. He was grinning and walking straight toward them. When he reached the porch, he leaned against the rail and stared at her.

“Well now... afternoon, miss,” the man said with a crooked grin, tipping his hat at the same time. “I’m Thomas. And who might you be?”

Snake, she immediately thought, her sharp eyes studying the man closely. She knew what he was the moment he slithered over.

“Good afternoon,” she replied politely, if not coldly. “My name’s Olivia Carter. I’m here to...” she cut her eyes to Jacob nervously, “...meet Mr. Hale.”

The man looked amused at her expense. She was tired, her feet hurt, and she hadn’t eaten in two days. She was in no mood to cross swords with any more men.

“Sorry to say, miss,” he said, removing his hat and adjusting the band inside. “But you’re wasting your time with this one.” He gestured at Jacob. “He’s a lost cause, I’m afraid.”

“No, he’s not!” Mabel stepped forward, crossing her arms and scowling at Thomas.

“Yeah,” John said, stepping closer and crossing his arms like his sister.

Jacob sighed and turned to Thomas. “Why don’t you find Graham or Mason and y’all finish the clean-up. Or help Joe get that well started in the north pasture. I’ll be back in a few.”

Thomas smirked but didn’t comment. Olivia watched as he gave her one last playful grin—one that she figured turned most women into mush—then turned to leave. He headed back toward the barn, leaving her alone in the yard with Jacob and the children.

Jacob gave his children a stern look, then turned to Olivia, his hands fisted at his hips. “Ma’am,” he said, “I’m sorry for all the trouble. I really am. And believe me, these two are in for it,” he said, wagging a finger between his children. “But I’m not looking for a wife. Don’t want one. Don’t need one. So, I’ll take you back to town, and you can catch the next train home.”

“But Pa—”

“No, Mabel,” he said firmly. “You’ve gone too far this time.”

Mabel swallowed hard, then hung her head.

“But Pa, we—”

“John, close your mouth now. You’re just digging a bigger hole,” he told his son.

Olivia frowned. She’d expected to be rejected straight off. But she hadn’t expected all that was Jacob Hale. The man was sinfully handsome. He was tall and broad-shouldered, she assumed because of all the ranch work. His dark brown hair needed a cut, but she still liked the way it curled around his ears. She could tell he was more interested in practicality than vanity. And she liked that.

So, somewhere deep inside, she’d known this moment was coming. But traveling all this way, seeing Jacob Hale, and hearing his harsh words still felt like a blow. She forced herself to lift her chin.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hale. I know you want me to go home. But that won’t be possible,” she said.

Jacob blinked. “What do you mean?”

She drew a steadying breath. “I don’t have a home to go back to.”

His expression shifted—surprise, then confusion, then something like discomfort. She didn't let him speak.

"My ma's dead," she said. "There was nothing left for me in Evanston. I quit my job at the boarding house. Gave up our room. And I spent what little money I had left on a train ticket and food." And the dress she was wearing, but she didn't tell him that.

Her voice wavered, and her body trembled, but she pushed through it.

"I came because you—or your children, which I didn't know then—promised me a place. They wrote that you needed a wife. They said your wife passed away five years ago and that your children and your house needed looking after. I put everything on the line for those promises, Mr. Hale. So, I expect you to make good on them and let me stay."

Jacob stared at her as if she'd spoken in another language. Mabel and John stood close by, watching their father with wide eyes.

"You can't just—" Jacob started, then stopped. He rubbed the back of his neck. "You have to understand. I did not place that ad or write any letters."

"I do understand. I'm not asking you to marry me today," she said quietly. "I'm asking for a place to stay. I don't have anywhere else to go."

He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He looked pained. "Look, you can stay for the night. But that's it. I have no intention of getting remarried."

She supposed one night was better than none. And that bought her a little time. Maybe she could talk him into a different arrangement—a governess or a maid or something.

His mouth opened to speak, but Mabel cut in, throwing herself against him in a big hug. “Thank you, Pa!”

John stepped forward, a smile on his face. “She said she wants to be our ma, Pa. We told her she could come.”

Jacob’s jaw tightened. “We just talked about this. You two had no business placing an ad in the paper.”

“But we need a mother,” Mabel said, her voice cracking. “And she answered us. She likes us. Let’s try it.”

Olivia watched Jacob struggle. She could see the pull in him—the part that wanted to do right by his children and the part that wanted nothing to do with a stranger on his porch. She almost felt sorry for him. He looked like a man caught between two fires.

Yes, she felt bad for him. But her situation wasn’t much better than his. She was alone, without a home, a ruthless, sinister man hot on her trail. And she was flat broke. She didn’t have a choice in the matter. Welcome or not, she had to stay.

For better or for worse, he was stuck with her, and she was stuck with him.

“Come inside. I’ll show you your room. Later, I’ll go buy you a ticket,” he said, turning back to her. “Wherever you want to go.”

“I told you,” Olivia replied, her voice steady now. “I have nowhere else to go.”

Mabel grabbed Olivia’s hand. “That’s okay. I’ll show you around.”

John nodded hard. “Me, too.”

Jacob drew in a breath like he was preparing to explode. But he didn't. He looked at his daughter and said, "Fine. You kids show her around while I go back to work."

Before he could leave, a voice called out from the road.

"Jacob Fisher! What's this about?"

Olivia turned. A short, round woman in a faded blue dress was marching toward them, dust puffing around her boots. She struck Olivia as someone who didn't wait for permission to go anywhere.

And she didn't wait this time, either. She stepped right onto the porch without hesitation, examining Olivia from head to toe.

"Well now," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "Who's this young lady?"

Olivia blinked, startled by the woman's boldness.

Jacob let out a slow breath. "Agnes."

Once again, Agnes looked Olivia up and down, not unkindly but with obvious curiosity. "Hello. I'm Agnes Whitcomb. Jacob's neighbor. I was friends with his wife, Julie. And you are...?"

"Olivia Carter," she said, unsure what else to offer.

Agnes raised a brow. "And what brings you here, dear?"

Olivia opened her mouth, but Jacob spoke first.

"That's what we're trying to sort out."

Agnes shot him a look that said she'd get the truth one way or another. "What does that mean?"

When Jacob didn't answer, she turned back to Olivia, waiting.

Olivia felt her throat tighten again. She didn't want to explain anything to this woman. She was tired of explaining herself to people. She'd been chased through the entire state of Wyoming by a crazy man whose only aim was to see her suffer. But Agnes's stare was determined, and something about it made Olivia straighten her shoulders.

"I came because I was told I was needed," she said. "I was told there was a place for me here."

Agnes glanced at Mabel and John, who nodded vigorously.

"Who told you Jacob needed help?" Agnes asked, her eyes narrowing on Olivia.

Olivia frowned. How was she supposed to answer that? "I... I—"

"She answered our ad in the paper," John answered helpfully. Or not so helpfully.

"Ad?" Agnes murmured, turning to look at Jacob. Suddenly, her eyes grew squinty, and she nodded slowly. "Oh, I see," she said with more certainty. "And now Jacob here is giving you trouble about it."

Jacob's head snapped up. "I didn't say that. I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to," Agnes replied.

Olivia almost laughed. Would have if she wasn't so terrified. Agnes was a very scary woman. Even so, the tension in her chest eased just a little.

Agnes turned back to her. “Well, Olivia, you look like you’ve had a long journey. Where did you travel from?”

“Evanston,” Olivia replied.

Agnes looked aghast. “That’s a long way from here. And no one’s even gotten you a cup of tea?”

“I—”

“Y’all stop dilly-dallying and go put the kettle on,” Agnes told Mabel and John. Then she moved her attention back to Olivia. “Now, come inside and sit down before you fall over. We can talk about what kind of help Jacob needs.”

Jacob opened his mouth to protest, but Agnes held up a hand.

“Jacob Fisher, don’t you start. I owe it to Julie to make sure her husband and children are sorted out. Olivia here’s goin’ to help me do that. And right now, she needs a roof and a cup of tea.”

Olivia’s eyes stung, and she blinked hard, refusing to cry in front of these strangers. For eight years, she’d slipped from town to town, never staying anywhere long enough to make friends, and never sure if Victor’s men were watching. During that time, no one ever stood up for her or took her side in an argument.

She wasn’t used to people being nice to her. But here was Agnes, small but mighty, standing firm and demanding that Jacob make things right. It was almost more than she could take. Jacob glanced from Agnes to Olivia to his children. He looked trapped. Cornered. And she almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

Olivia watched Jacob's jaw tighten as he frowned, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation.

"I thank you for your concern, Agnes. But we're doing just fine," he insisted. "We don't need—"

"You need a female presence around here," she said, interrupting. "For Mabel's sake. How's she supposed to grow up right surrounded by all you men? If it's not you or John, it's one of those ranch hands of yours, cursing and spitting and telling her what to do all the time. She needs guidance. And I can't teach her, Jacob. I'm too old. Julie would want her to be raised right."

Olivia's eyes slid to Jacob, waiting to see if he would explode all over the porch. Or all over Agnes. He didn't. But she thought he was struggling to contain it.

"Agnes, I told you," Jacob gritted out. "We're all sorted here."

But Agnes didn't buy it for a second. She gave him a look that would cut through steel. "You can't pull the wool over this old gal's eyes, Jacob. You haven't been sorted for the past five years."

Her words hung in the air, direct and cutting, and Olivia saw Jacob's shoulders stiffen at the truth laid bare.

Finally, he let out a long, resigned breath. "All right. Fine."

Agnes tipped her chin up and nodded. "That's the right decision, Jacob."

Jacob sighed and shook his head. "I'm a fool," he muttered as he went inside, leaving the door open behind him.

Agnes took that as an invitation and followed him in. “Come on, Olivia. We have a lot to discuss.”

Mabel and John were trading grins and happy elbow nudges. But Olivia didn’t smile. She was too tired, too embarrassed, and too unsure of what came next. But she followed them toward the door and took her first step inside Jacob’s house.

She glanced up the staircase off the foyer, wondering what she had gotten herself into. She didn’t know if Jacob would change his mind once Agnes left or the children went to bed. She didn’t know if she’d be thrown out again before the week was over.

But at least she had a place to rest for now. She’d take it.

Chapter Five

“Sugar?” Mabel asked as she poured Olivia a cup of tea.

“Yes, please.” Olivia smiled up at her from her seat at the table, obviously pleased, and the sight made Jacob’s heart twist.

“So, you placed an ad for a mail-order bride, and Olivia replied,” Agnes said as Mabel moved to pour her tea next.

Jacob didn’t even have time to open his mouth before his children jumped in.

“She’s gonna be our new ma!” John blurted, bright-eyed and proud of himself.

Mabel smiled and nodded beside him. “She was the best one. We want her to be our mother.”

Jacob felt the blood drain from his face. Of all the things they could have said in front of Agnes Whitcomb, *that* was the worst. He shot them a warning look, the kind that usually shut them up quick. But the damage was already done.

Agnes took a sip of her tea, then turned her head to Jacob. “So, what’s the problem, then? It can’t be her looks. She’s beautiful. And it can’t be her personality. She hasn’t been here long enough for you even to have an opinion on her.” She squinted at him, her eyes sharp as a hawk on a rabbit. “What’s the problem, Jacob? Lost your nerve?”

Jacob cleared his throat. “Now hold on. That’s not—”

But Olivia leaned forward, flustered and red-faced, and Agnes’s attention snapped to her like a latch catching.

“Look, this is just an unfortunate misunderstanding,” Olivia said. “I’m sure we can work this out.”

Jacob tried again. “That’s right. It’s a mistake—a big one. I didn’t ask her to come here. I’ve apologized, and now the best thing for Miss Olivia is to head back home.”

He meant to sound firm, but the words came tumbling out, sounding more like a strong suggestion.

Olivia stiffened. Her hands balled into fists on the table.

“And I told him,” she said to Agnes, her voice shaking with anger, “I was invited to come here. And I can’t go back home. There is no home I can go back to! They’re all dead or gone.”

Her words hit him like a slap in the face. She’d said that before, but he didn’t really believe her. Everyone had a home somewhere. Didn’t they?

Agnes’ eyes widened, then softened. “No home?” Agnes repeated.

Olivia shook her head, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“Where’s your ma?” Agnes asked.

“Dead,” Olivia choked out. “Two months ago.”

“And your pa?” Agnes tried.

Olivia shrugged. “Left when I was a baby. I got a job in Evanston at Miss Findlay’s Boarding House. It was hard work, but I had food and a bed.”

Agnes frowned. “Then why’d you come here if Jacob didn’t invite you?”

“He did!” Olivia shouted. “At least, I thought he did.”

Jacob flinched. He hadn’t. His children had. But he wasn’t about to explain that to Agnes, not with her standing there ready to spread whatever news she gleaned across half the county by sundown. He kept his jaw tight and said nothing.

Frowning, he wondered how he could explain his rejection to the two frustrated women in front of him. He’d listened when Olivia spoke of her parents—dead or long gone—and still felt a tightness in his chest at the thought of her being alone.

She was really just a girl, left to fend for herself, and it pulled at something inside him that he found hard to ignore. He wanted to help her, but the idea of taking her to wife—even if only for his children—felt like a betrayal of his Julie. He must’ve taken too long to reply because Agnes turned her full wrath on him. “Jacob Fisher,” she said slowly, “if you invited this young woman, and she gave up everything to come here, then you have no choice. You have to let her stay.”

Jacob felt heat rise in his neck. “I didn’t—”

“And another thing,” Agnes cut in, lifting a finger like she was scolding a schoolboy. “You can’t keep a young, single woman in your house without a promise of marriage. Folks won’t stand for it. *I* won’t stand for it. There has to be a wedding. And I mean soon.”

He stared at her, stunned. “Agnes, I don’t like what you’re insinuating.”

“I’m not insinuating anything. I’m telling you how it looks,” she said. Agnes wasn’t one to back down. She never was. “A widower with a young woman under his roof, sleeping down the hall? People will talk. They’ll assume the worst. And I won’t have that kind of behavior next door. What would Julie think?”

Jacob's mouth went slack, and Olivia paled, looking like she wanted to disappear. Jacob didn't know what to say to that, except that Agnes was right. Julie would have hated it. And he hated seeing Olivia embarrassed and humiliated. He hated that Agnes was making it worse.

This was all his fault. If he'd been a better father, the children would never have placed the ad.

He tried to salvage the situation. "Maybe I could hire her," he said. "As a childminder. She could watch the kids while I'm working."

Agnes snorted. "Hire her? And she lives here? Under the same roof? Jacob, are you hearing yourself? That's no better. Folks will think you're keeping her for... well, you know what they'll think."

Jacob clenched his jaw, cutting his eyes to Mabel and John. He did know. And he hated that Agnes had said it out loud, even if she hadn't used the actual words. Olivia's eyes dropped to her almost empty cup. Her shoulders hunched. She looked like she wanted to sink through the floor.

Agnes pressed on. "No, I'm sorry. This town has standards. We don't allow that kind of carrying-on. If you won't do what's right, I'll bring the pastor here myself."

Jacob felt the last bit of fight drain out of him. He looked at Olivia again. She was mortified, he could tell. Her cheeks were blotchy, her eyes shining with humiliation. She didn't deserve this. She hadn't asked for any of it.

Agnes sighed and looked at Jacob. "We could send Olivia away. But the truth is, you do need help, Jacob. Olivia could keep the house, cook, clean, and mind the children while you work. And I'm not even going to ask what the kids would do if anything happened to you."

Jacob frowned. He could hardly argue with anything she'd said. He did need help with the children. At this point, they were raising themselves.

His daughter couldn't even sew a button on her dress. There was no one here to teach her how. And Agnes touched on a sore point when she asked what would happen to the children if he were to die, too. Right now, they'd be sent to an orphanage.

And that thought was too much to bear.

Agnes turned and smiled warmly at Olivia. "And you need a place to live. So, in exchange for cooking, cleaning, and minding the young'uns, Jacob could put a roof over your head, food in your belly, and provide a little bit of security. Yeah?"

Olivia nodded.

"So, I don't see the problem," Agnes told them.

His kids stood close to Olivia, both of them looking scared now, like they were only now realizing the trouble they'd caused.

He didn't want to ruin Olivia's reputation. Or his own reputation, either. Not because he cared what people thought of him, but because he knew it would fall on his children, too. He'd seen it happen before. People talked. People judged. And once a rumor started, it stuck like burrs in wool.

He felt cornered and pressed from all sides. Agnes was glaring at him, with Olivia shrinking into herself. His children were watching him like their whole world depended on what he said next.

And before he could stop himself, the words burst out.

"All right. She's my new fiancée."

Silence hit the room like a hammer.

“But only on paper. That’s as far as I’ll go. And I want a contract drawn up,” he rambled on, “stating that this is for convenience only.”

Agnes nodded, pleased with herself. Olivia’s head snapped up. The children gasped. And Jacob felt his heart drop straight to his boots.

“She’s going to be living here with the children and me,” he went on, because he’d already stepped off the cliff and there was no climbing back up. “She’ll stay in the guest room while we arrange something with the pastor.”

Agnes’ smile disappeared, and she looked like she might object. So, he continued quickly. “As I said, this is only a marriage of convenience. It’s not real. And it never will be.”

He made the mistake of looking at Olivia. She didn’t speak. Didn’t need to. Her haunted eyes said everything.

“We’re engaged,” he told Agnes.

The moment the words had left his mouth, panic set in. What had he done? He wasn’t looking for a wife. He didn’t want one. He’d made that clear.

He’d spent five years trying to hold his life together, and all that time he thought he was doing a good job of it. Apparently, he’d been wrong. And now he’d just announced an engagement to a woman he’d met less than an hour ago.

Agnes blinked, then nodded slowly, as if she approved. “Well. That’s acceptable, then. If she’s your intended, that settles it. But I want a date by the end of the week.”

Jacob swallowed hard. Nothing felt settled. And he wondered if he could get away with setting a date five years in the future. He doubted it.

Olivia stared at him, still stunned. Her lips parted like she wanted to speak, but no sound came out. She looked confused, hopeful, maybe even a little overwhelmed. He didn't blame her. He'd dragged her into this mess, even if he hadn't done anything.

Agnes clapped her hands once and stood from the table. "Whelp, all good now. I'll let the pastor know. He'll want to speak with you both soon."

Jacob felt sweat bead at the back of his neck. "Agnes—"

But she was already turning away, pleased she'd fixed the problem. She marched out of the room, and he heard the door close behind her a few seconds later.

What was he supposed to do now? He looked at Olivia again. She was still staring at him, her face pale, her eyes wide. The children stood close to her, unsure whether to be excited or scared.

Jacob rubbed a hand over his face. He felt like he'd been kicked in the gut.

He hadn't meant to say it. He hadn't meant to agree to anything. But he'd seen the way Olivia's shoulders had curled in on themselves under his and Agnes's harsh words. He'd seen the shame in her eyes.

And he'd known, in that instant, that he couldn't let her be humiliated like that. Not by Agnes. Not by him. Not by anyone.

"I have to get back to work," he said, not knowing what else to say. "Mabel, you and John show Olivia to her room and get her settled."

Mabel nodded, trying to decide whether to smile or not. "Yes, Pa."

He looked at John, who scooted closer to Olivia. "You be good."

“I will, Pa,” John said, relieved he hadn’t gotten yelled at.

Then, he looked at Olivia, who still hadn’t spoken. “I’ll be back at supper. We’ll talk more tonight.”

Olivia nodded. “Okay.”

He left through the back door, heading toward the barn where Thomas was asleep, reclining on several bales of hay with his boots crossed in front of him.

“Wake up,” Jacob said, kicking one of Thomas’ boots. “We still have work to do.”

Thomas sat straight up, stretching his arms high above his head and yawning. When he finished, he looked at Jacob, his eyes dancing. “So, when’s the wedding?”

Jacob scowled. “We need to worm that herd in the north pasture,” he replied.

Then, he walked off.

Chapter Six

“Come on,” Mabel urged.

Olivia barely had time to gather her thoughts before Mabel grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the stairs. The girl moved with purpose, as if she’d been waiting her whole life for this moment.

“I’ll show you your room first,” Mabel said, already halfway up the steps.

Olivia followed, her legs still cramping from the long ride and the shock of everything that had happened. John trailed behind them, quiet but just as enthusiastic.

“The second door on the right,” Mabel announced, stopping in front of it. “You’ll be between John and me.”

Olivia nodded, though her throat felt tight. She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Then, she froze.

The room was bigger than she’d anticipated. At the boarding house, she and her mother had shared a single cramped space with barely enough room for two narrow beds and a washstand.

Here, the room stretched wide, with a small fireplace and a tall window letting in the afternoon light. A sturdy bed sat against the far wall, covered with a simple quilt in faded reds and blues. She couldn’t wait to snuggle into it.

A small dresser stood beside it with a clean, empty surface, as if it were waiting for Olivia’s things. A washstand with a white basin and

pitcher stood in the corner. And there was even a little braided rug on the floor, worn but soft-looking.

Even she had to admit it wasn't fancy. Nothing about it screamed grand. But to Olivia, it felt like pure luxury.

She stepped farther in, touching the quilt with her fingertips. The fabric was soft and welcoming. She wondered who had slept here before her. A guest? A hired hand? Jacob's late wife? The thought made her chest tighten, and she pulled her hand back.

Mabel watched her with a proud smile, as if she'd made the room herself. "Do you like it?"

"It's... lovely," Olivia said, and she meant it.

She set her small bag on the bed. She'd unpack later, when she was alone and could take her time. For now, she followed Mabel back into the hallway, John falling in behind them again like a shadow.

"That's my room," Mabel said, pointing toward the door on one side of Olivia's room. Then, pointed at the other. "That's John's."

They wandered further down the hallway, and Mabel paused in front of a small, elegant inlet, her excitement a little more curtailed. "This was our mother's sitting room," she said.

"Yeah, we're not allowed to go in there," John added. "Pa gets mad if we touch anything."

Olivia looked into the small sitting room, careful not to touch anything. The furniture was plain and sturdy—a wooden rocking chair near the window, a simple settee with faded upholstery, and a square table holding a worn Bible and a glass lamp. On the settee was a knitting bag and a half-completed shawl.

The floor was bare except for a narrow, woven rug, and the walls held a few framed photographs, browned with age. Shelves in the corner displayed a handful of well-read books and a chipped blue vase, likely used for wildflowers in the summer.

It was neat, practical, and quiet, with just enough comfort for someone to read, sew, or rest for a while. But even Olivia thought it was a little morbid. Julie's knitting was still sitting where she last left it. Everything was covered in layers of dust, and she could tell it made the children sad to even look at it.

Mabel led her through the rest of the upstairs, which included Jacob's room and a small washroom that doubled as a storage and linen room. Then they returned to the main floor, where a quick tour revealed a study, a parlor, a dining room, a pantry, a root cellar, and, of course, a kitchen.

And that's where Olivia was standing—in Jacob's kitchen—trying to take in the space. It was larger than the boarding house kitchen, though far plainer. A big wooden table sat in the center, lightly scarred from years of meals and chores.

The stove was iron and well-used, like everything else. A row of hooks across the wall held pots and pans. And across the other wall, rows of white cabinets, and a shelf near the window with jars of dried beans, flour, and sugar.

She walked over to the narrow door near the back corner and opened it, peeking inside the pantry. Shelves lined the walls, holding jars of preserves, various dried herbs, flour, beans, cornmeal, and many other staples. Olivia stepped inside and scanned through the rest of the contents.

Mabel had said that she was in charge of the garden outside. Olivia had to give her credit. For a twelve-year-old, she was doing a very good job of caring for her family.

A trapdoor in the floor caught Olivia's eye, and she walked over to take a closer look at the root cellar. Inside, there were sacks of potatoes, carrots, turnips, beets, onions, and other vegetables. The house was well stocked. Mabel should be commended.

When she turned back, John was standing behind her, watching her with wide eyes.

"Hi there," she said, giving him a friendly smile.

"Hello," he replied, still staring at her.

"Maybe you could show me the smokehouse?" she asked him.

"The meat shed?" He brightened. "It's out back. I'll show you."

She followed him through the back door into the yard. The air smelled sweet, and the sun-warmed grass soothed her frazzled nerves. She could keep a house, but she loved working outdoors more.

Whether it was gardening, planting flowers, caring for animals, or even doing laundry, she tried to spend at least an hour or two outside every day.

A small shed stood behind the house near the fence line. John pointed to it proudly.

"That's where we keep our meat," he said proudly. "We got bacon, ham, venison, and some beef, too."

Olivia nodded, taking it in. Then, she turned and scanned the ranch. She'd grown up in kitchens doing chores, but never a place like this. A family home. And now that she was here, she wanted to stay.

"I'll make supper," she said, mostly to herself.

After a quick peek in the “meat shed,” she thought about what recipes she could make with the available ingredients. It had to be a delicious—stick-to-your-ribs—dinner that would satisfy a hungry rancher and his family. Because if she could win Jacob’s stomach, she was one step closer to his heart.

She’d show Jacob Hale how useful she could be, and soon, he’d wonder what he ever did without her. Once her mind was settled, she grabbed a slab of bacon and hurried back to the house.

Inside the kitchen, she rolled up her sleeves. She retrieved the beans she saw in the pantry and a small sack of cornmeal. She set a pot on the stove and started the beans first, cutting the bacon into smaller pieces and dropping them in to flavor the broth.

She mixed the cornmeal with water and salt, shaping small cakes to fry in the large iron skillet. Once those were going, she returned to the pantry and found a jar of canned peaches that she set aside for dessert.

It wasn’t fancy, but it was hearty. She didn’t have enough time to cook a roast or her famous chicken and dumplings. She’d focus on fancy tomorrow. Tonight, she just wanted a supper that a ranch family might appreciate after a long, hard day’s work.

As she stirred the beans, she thought about Mabel. The girl moved with the confidence of someone much older. Too old, really. It was clear that she’d taken on most of the housekeeping and childminding since her mother died. And the thought made her chest ache.

No twelve-year-old should have to shoulder that much.

John, on the other hand, seemed like any eight-year-old boy—curious, restless, eager to help but quick to disappear. He’d vanished again, probably off to find his father or aggravate his sister.

Olivia wiped her forehead with her sleeve. She'd left the back door open while she cooked, hoping for a breeze. But she hadn't felt one yet. She set the spoon on the counter and walked over to open the window by the table.

As soon as it was open, she heard voices outside. Jacob's voice carried easily through the open window.

"She's staying for now," Jacob said, sounding tired and worn down. "I just need time to think. I've got to figure out how to get myself out of the mess those two put me in."

Olivia's hands stilled on the table. The words landed heavily, and her throat tightened. She knew he hadn't wanted her here. She'd known it from the moment she stepped off that wagon. But hearing him say it—hearing the defeat in his voice—cut deeper than she expected.

But what could she do? She needed a roof. She needed food. She needed time. And if she couldn't stay here, she needed a way out of Wyoming entirely.

If Jacob didn't want a wife, then fine. She couldn't force him. But he'd have to help her get somewhere safe. Somewhere, Victor couldn't find her. Somewhere, she could start over. For the last time.

She stirred the beans again, trying to steady her breathing. But before she could, a loud knock sounded at the front door. Olivia froze, the wooden spoon still in her hand. For a moment, she thought it might be Jacob, but he was just standing at the back door talking to Thomas. She wiped her hands on her apron and crossed the room.

A boy of about ten stood on the porch, hat in hand, breathing hard as if he'd just run a mile.

"Hello," she said hesitantly.

“Howdy. Are you Miss Olivia?” he asked.

“Yes?”

He held out an envelope. “Pastor sent me. Said it’s for Mr. Jacob and you both.”

Her stomach tightened. “Thank you,” she replied, taking it as she searched her apron pocket for a coin. The boy smiled. “That’s all right,” he said and sprinted back down the path.

She closed the door and stared at the envelope. Her name and Jacob’s were written in the pastor’s careful hand. That alone made her uneasy. She broke the seal with her thumb and unfolded the letter.

The pastor’s words were polite, but firm. Agnes had gone to see him, saying she was “deeply concerned for the welfare of the household.” She had asked him to write on her behalf, laying out what they called “proper expectations” if Olivia were to remain under Jacob’s roof.

Olivia read each line slowly.

The first rule was regular church attendance. The next, a clear timeline for marriage, “so as not to invite gossip.” Then, there was no sharing a room until vows were spoken. And chores must be divided “in a manner befitting a respectable home.” Then, there was a final note. Agnes wished to ensure the children’s reputation remained “untarnished by impropriety.”

Olivia’s cheeks burned. She pressed her fingertips to her mouth, trying to calm her breathing. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or laugh. Agnes was certainly bold, but this—this was something else.

The floor creaked behind her.

She spun around to see Jacob standing in the doorway, wiping his hands on a rag. “Who was it?”

“A boy from town,” she said, handing him the letter. “From the pastor.”

He read it quickly, his teeth clenching. “Agnes,” he muttered. “Of course.”

“I didn’t mean to cause all this,” Olivia whispered.

“You didn’t.” He folded the letter and set it on the table. “She means well. In her own... loud, irritating way.”

Olivia huffed a small, humorless laugh. “I’ve never... she wants a timeline for our wedding.”

Jacob stepped closer. “Don’t worry about that. We’ll decide when we get married. Not her.”

Before she could answer, another knock sounded—this one softer.

Movement caught her eye. She turned and saw Mabel and John peeking around the doorframe, watching her like she was some kind of miracle they’d summoned.

She forced a smile. “Hello, darlings. Come on in.”

“We smelled something good,” John told her.

“I was just about to finish up. Would y’all like to help?”

John nodded happily, and Mabel smiled, walking over to the counter to peek into the pots and pans.

“You made corn cakes?” Mabel asked.

Olivia nodded. “I did. I had to make something quick that didn’t take a long time to cook.”

“I love corn cakes,” Mabel said.

“Me, too,” John put in.

“What’s your favorite?”

Mabel put a hand to her chin, tapping a finger against her cheek. “Peach pie. And fried potatoes.”

John grinned. “Biscuits. And bacon.”

Olivia nodded. “Great! I have bacon in the beans, and I was just about to make a peach pie.”

Their faces lit up, and for a moment, the heaviness in her chest eased.

“But no biscuits,” she told John and watched as he deflated. “Because we have corn cakes. But I’ll make you some biscuits for breakfast. Sound good?”

John smiled. “With gravy?”

Olivia chuckled. “Yes. I’ll make gravy, too.”

“Can I help you make the pie?” Mabel asked hopefully.

“Sure, you can,” Olivia replied, gathering the flour and the jar of peaches from the counter. “Can you go find some butter?”

“Okay. We keep it in the root cellar on account of it being the middle of summer and all.” Mabel explained.

That made sense. She smiled, watching as Mabel and John took off to the root cellar. Then, her thoughts returned to Jacob and how he was trying to find a way out of their engagement.

She wasn’t sure what Jacob would decide. But tonight, she could give these children a warm meal and a bit of comfort.

Tomorrow, she’d come up with a plan. Whether that was a plan to stay or to go, she’d just have to see.

Chapter Seven

Jacob took another bite of beans and corn cake and let out a quiet breath through his nose. It wasn't polite to groan at the table; he'd had to work hard to control himself.

The food was good—better than anything he or Mabel could have managed. Not that he was complaining. He and Mabel tried their best, but neither of them had the touch for cooking. Most nights, supper was something they ate because they had to, not because they wanted to.

Tonight was different.

He looked down the table at Mabel and John. Both children had cleaned their plates so thoroughly that he could see the bottoms gleaming. They sat straight in their chairs, their attention glued to Olivia.

“And that's the story of Persephone and the changing seasons,” Olivia said with a smile.

John wrinkled his nose. “Why did they think gods controlled the weather?”

“Well, I think probably because they didn't have science to give them answers. So, they told stories, instead.” Olivia looked thoughtful, as if still considering John's question.

“Did they really think thunder was Zeus throwing lightning?” Mabel asked, her nose scrunching.

He loved it when she did that. Julie used to do that whenever Jacob told her something she didn't like or believe.

Olivia nodded at Mabel and said, “Yes, they did, and those stories helped them make sense of storms, crops, and the way the world changed.”

The children listened, their eyes wide, and Olivia finished the tale with a gentle smile, looking at both of them.

“And that’s why so many of our words, customs, and even how we understand nature come from those old Greek stories. They shaped how people think, even now, in ways we don’t always notice.”

“And your ma used to tell you these stories?” Mabel asked.

Olivia sighed and smiled softly. “Yes, she did. My ma had a lot of stories.”

Jacob watched Olivia. It was obvious how much she missed her mother. He had a quiet respect for how she seemed to have already bonded with his children.

He’d never thought much about stories. He was more of a “how was your day” kind of man. He’d tell them about things that happened on the ranch—a new colt or a new calf, a broken fence. But seeing the children so lit up and curious, he wondered if there might be more to them than he realized.

Supper felt different with Olivia there. Not bad. Just different. His kids felt it, too. They sat straight in their chairs now, waiting for dessert like it was Christmas morning.

He couldn’t remember the last time they’d looked this happy during a meal, not since Julie.

He pushed that thought aside before it could settle.

Olivia sat to his right and asked them about school. Did they like it? What was their favorite subject? What was their teacher's name?

The last question made Jacob cough, all eyes turning to him. "Pardon," he said, reaching for his napkin.

"Our teacher's name is Miss Wilkes," John said, happy to be included in the conversation. "She wanted to be our ma, too."

Olivia blinked, cutting her eyes to Jacob. "Is that right?"

John nodded. "Yes. But Pa didn't like her."

"But Thomas does," Mabel said, biting her lips to keep from saying more.

"Thomas likes her cooking," John corrected. "He said he's going there all the time 'cause he likes the taste of her food."

"Yes, I'll bet," Olivia said with a chuckle.

"Okay. That's enough talk about Miss Wilkes." Jacob could feel his ears burning. It was bad enough that his children were trying to play matchmakers. But announcing it to all and sundry was too much.

Jacob stared at John, considering whether to punish him and his sister for their outrageous behavior. But then he realized something. Normally, John fidgeted throughout the whole meal, tapping his spoon, swinging his legs, and playing with his food. Mabel often tried to help, reminding him to sit still or keep his elbows off the table.

But not tonight. Both children were quiet, talking and listening politely to Olivia. If this is what having a woman around did, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

“But it’s good that Thomas and Miss Wilkes are friends. The important thing is that you have a good teacher at school. And when you get home, you’ve got a good pa to take care of you.” Olivia said.

Jacob felt something twist in his chest. He didn’t want to feel it, but he did. He wasn’t a good pa. His children had no one to tell them stories. They had chores, schoolwork, and a father who showed up tired and cranky more often than not. A good pa would be there more, would find a way to teach them the things in life they needed to know how to do—like sew a button, make brown gravy, or shoot a rabbit. A good father would be more involved in his children’s lives.

He tried—Lord knew he tried—but he wasn’t their mother. He couldn’t fill that space. Not the space with tasty food, good stories, and warm desserts. That was Julie’s space.

And here Olivia sat, talking about her own mother with such love and warmth that the room felt warmer. Softer. He’d forgotten supper could feel like this.

He swallowed hard and looked down at his plate. He’d told Thomas earlier that he needed to figure out how to get rid of Olivia. That this whole mess, this so-called engagement, was something he needed to undo. Listening to her now, he felt like a real horse’s behind.

He kept his thoughts in check until Olivia announced it was time for dessert. She served each of them a thick slice of peach pie with a glass of warm milk. The smell alone had his mouth watering, despite the two bowls of bacon and beans and the four corn cakes he’d just eaten.

When he took the first bite, his eyes closed before he could stop them. It was the best pie he’d ever tasted. The crust was flaky, the peaches sweet but not too sweet, the whole thing warm and comforting in a way he hadn’t expected. It was like... a big hug.

He cleared his throat. “That’s fine, pie,” he said, the words coming out rougher than he meant.

Olivia’s smile widened. “Thank you, Jacob. Mabel and John helped.”

John puffed up with pride, announcing, “I cracked an egg.”

Mabel laughed. “I cut in the butter and made the crust.”

Olivia smiled at them both with pride in her eyes. It made his heart swell. “Yes. They’re very good helpers,” she said.

Jacob watched her watching them. She wasn’t pretending. She wasn’t putting on a show. She already cared about them. It’s plain as day. And the children were soaking it up like dry ground taking rain.

He didn’t know what to do with the feeling that rose in him. It was too much, too fast. He wasn’t ready for any of it.

He pushed back from the table. “All right. Time to get ready for bed.”

Three sets of eyes locked onto him, blinking. The children were surprised and, obviously, a little disappointed. But they obeyed. They told Olivia goodnight, each of them lingering a little longer than usual before heading upstairs.

Jacob left the room before Olivia could say anything.

“I’ll be back,” he said, taking his tea and walking toward the front door.

He needed air. He needed space, some place Olivia wasn’t. The sky was turning dark, and the evening was cool without the oppressive August

sun beating down on him. He sat in his usual chair and stared out at the yard, thinking.

He remembered the day they first came here, after Julie's parents were killed in a carriage accident. The house was cold and empty. He'd felt lost, unsure if this place could ever feel like home. But Julie persuaded him. And she was right. It felt like home because she was there.

She'd wanted a start fresh—to build a ranch, raise kids, make something that lasted. And soon her dream became his because she'd always made things seem possible.

Those first few months had been hard. The work was endless, and nothing came easy. But Julie never let him quit. She saw the future in every fence post and every meal they shared at the old kitchen table. Jacob had trusted her hope, even when he couldn't feel it himself.

And then, they'd had Mabel. And their life was near perfect, even with the ranch demanding most of his time. He hadn't thought life could get much better. But then John came along, and he knew their family was complete.

Now, sitting here alone, he saw what they'd built. Julie was gone before those dreams took hold. But the ranch kept going, though half-heartedly. He was still moving through the days, but something essential was missing, something only she had brought.

He stayed there for nearly an hour, trying to figure out how to move forward with his children and their infernal matchmaking. Olivia and her stories. Her cooking. The way the children looked at her, like she was the answer to their prayers. And the way he'd felt sitting beside her at the table.

None of it fit with the plan he'd had in his head. He'd wanted to set her up at the hotel back in town. Then, send her back to wherever she'd come from. He'd wanted things to be simple.

But nothing about this was simple.

When he finally went back inside, the house was quiet. Olivia stood near the stairs with her hands folded in front of her.

“I reckon I’ll head up to bed,” she said softly.

“I’ll show you to your room,” he replied automatically.

She shook her head. “No need. Mabel already showed me the upstairs.”

Something hot and ugly flared in him. It came out of nowhere, like a spark hitting dry grass.

“The living area upstairs is off limits,” he snapped. “You’re never to go in there.”

Olivia blinked, startled. “I... I didn’t. I only saw the hallway. Why is it off limits?”

That did it. His temper slipped its reins.

“I’m already doing you a favor letting you stay here,” he said, his voice low and threatening. “That doesn’t mean you get to pry into our lives. You’re here to look after the children and keep the house. That’s all. Focus on that instead of my business.”

Her face went pale. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. She looked like she’d been slapped.

Something inside him cracked. He didn’t wait for her to answer. He turned and walked away, each step feeling heavier than the last.

He'd made a very big mistake agreeing to this whole debacle. Tomorrow, he'd tell her he changed his mind. Then, he'd send her on her way.

Chapter Eight

“Can I have more hotcakes?” John asked.

Olivia looked at him and squinted. “You’ve already had five. Anymore and I’m afraid you’re going to have a bellyache.”

“I won’t,” John promised, pushing his plate toward the platter with only two hotcakes left on it.

“All right,” Olivia sighed. “But on your head be it.”

“Huh?” John looked at her, his face confused.

“What does that mean?” Mabel asked.

“It means I’ve warned him what could happen if he eats too many hotcakes,” she explained as she forked another hotcake onto his plate. “So, if he decides to eat another one, then it’s his own fault if he ends up with a stomachache.”

“Oh,” Mabel said with a nod. “That’s true. On your own head be it,” she repeated to John.

Olivia smiled. She’d been in Jacob’s house only a few days, but it felt longer—long enough for her to realize that the air around the table was tight and uncomfortable. Something was eating at Jacob.

She moved through the rooms quietly all morning, careful not to disturb him or give him any reason to finally say the words she knew he’d been holding back.

Two days earlier, he’d finally summoned the courage. He opened his mouth to tell her to leave. She’d seen it in his eyes, in the way his jaw

tightened. She could tell by the way he couldn't hold her eyes for more than a second at a time.

She'd braced herself for it.

But then Mabel and John burst into the room, talking over each other, and walking straight to her. They each grabbed her arms, insisting she come with them so they could show her the blackberry patch in the woods.

They wanted a cobbler. They wanted *her* to make it.

"It's Pa's favorite," Mabel gushed. "We haven't had it in a long time. I don't know how to make it."

Olivia had looked at Jacob and smiled. "I'd be happy to make you a blackberry cobbler," she said.

He hadn't said a word and just stared at the floor.

So, she'd turned to the children. "Lead the way," she'd said. And they'd taken off running, leaving her no choice but to follow.

She'd made the cobbler that night, using the berries she'd picked with the children. They each had a piece of it with dinner, and even she had to admit it was tasty. But she knew it was good when she came back down later for a glass of water and found Jacob in the kitchen, standing over the empty pan with a spoon in his hand.

He'd looked like a man caught stealing from his own pantry. She hadn't said anything. He hadn't either. He'd just set the spoon down and walked past her without a word.

Now, two days later, they sat at the breakfast table in silence.

The children finished their meal quietly, glancing between their father and Olivia as if waiting for someone to break the tension. Jacob didn't look at her. He kept his eyes on his plate, shoulders stiff, and his jaw set. Olivia didn't need to guess why. She knew.

He was angry—at himself, at her, and the situation. Angry that she was still here. Angry that he'd let the children talk him out of sending her away. Angry that he'd eaten half a cobbler in the middle of the night like a man who hadn't tasted anything good in years.

She kept her eyes on her own plate, eating slowly. Her stomach was tight, but she forced down each bite. She needed to keep her strength. She needed to keep her wits. She couldn't push him too far because she had nowhere else to go.

Eventually, John cleared his throat. "Pa?"

Jacob didn't look up. "What."

"We got rehearsal today. For the school play," he reminded.

Jacob frowned. "It's Saturday."

John stared down at his empty plate. "I know."

Jacob didn't say anything, just poked at the hotcake on his plate.

John waited, then tried again. "We gotta go early. Miss Wilkes said so."

Jacob let out a long breath through his nose. "Fine. Olivia will take you."

He pushed back from the table so suddenly that his chair scraped across the floor. Without another word, he grabbed his hat and stormed out

the back door.

The children stared after him, wide-eyed and confused.

Olivia forced a small smile. “All right. If you’re done with your breakfast, go get ready. We’ll leave soon.”

They did as they were told, though both looked troubled. She couldn’t blame them. She felt troubled herself. Almost enough to have a word with Jacob. If he was angry with her, fine. But she couldn’t abide him taking it out on the children. No matter what they’d done, they didn’t deserve his gruff, grouchy moods.

When they were ready, she walked them down the road toward the schoolhouse. The morning was cool—or at least not scorching hot—and the sky promised a beautiful day.

“So, what’s this play about?” Olivia asked as they walked past Agnes’ house towards the school.

“It’s about Laramie,” Mabel replied. “And how we all came to be here.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Olivia said. “What role are you playing?”

“I’m playing ma,” Mabel told her, shaking her head. “And I’m also in charge of the scenery.”

“The scenery?” Olivia blinked, wondering what all that entailed. “How can you be in charge of scenery and remember all your lines?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” she said, then sighed. “Ma doesn’t have many lines. But I’m the best in our class at drawing and painting. I even draw maps for the sheriff sometimes. For this play, I had to make a backdrop of

the whole town and a scene with the creek and that giant weeping willow, and—”

“I’m going to play the role of Jacob Hale,” John cut in, unable to wait for Mabel to finish. “And Junior Burroughs is playing his pa, Silas Hale.”

“You’re playing your pa?” Olivia asked, surprised.

“Yep. I’m gonna tell them all how Pa started up the ranch. And how he married our ma,” he said, making a face. “But I ain’t gonna kiss Mabel.”

Olivia chuckled. “Well, I can’t wait to see it. All of it. Including the scenery and the artwork.”

John grinned shyly.

“But why don’t you have many lines?” she asked Mabel.

Mabel shrugged. “We don’t really know too much about her.”

Olivia frowned, taking in the children's sad faces. “How old were you when you lost your ma?”

“I was seven,” Mabel said.

“I think I was three,” John told her.

Olivia could see how John might not remember her. But Mabel should be able to recall more.

Before she could ask, Mabel continued thoughtfully, “I remember how she brushed my hair. And she took us on a picnic one time by the creek—we had strawberries. And I remember her reading stories to me

sometimes when she tucked me in. But I don't know much about her, like why she came here."

Olivia nodded. "Can't you ask your pa?"

Both children exchanged glances. Then, John shook his head. "No. We aren't allowed to talk about her."

Olivia blinked, then frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Pa doesn't like talking about her. He gets upset. So, we don't mention her," Mabel explained. "Ever."

She could hardly believe her ears. That wasn't right. He shouldn't shut them out like that. "Why don't you ask Agnes? Or some of the older women who might remember her?"

Mabel nodded. "I could do that. Then, I'd have some idea what I'm supposed to say. And wear."

"Did you not keep any of your ma's clothes?" Olivia asked, afraid of the answer.

"There's a shawl," John said excitedly. "In her parlor. And an umbrella, too!"

Mabel blinked and drew in a sharp breath. "You're right! There is!" Then, she spun to Olivia and asked, "Could we use those? Do you think Pa would mind?"

Yes. She definitely did think he would mind. But she wasn't going to let a little thing like that stop her. She didn't approve of the shrine in the first place. It wasn't healthy for the children. She would discuss it with him as soon as they were both available.

Instead of answering Mabel, she asked, “Does your pa know about the play? Who you’re both portraying, I mean,” she asked as an afterthought.

“We told him it was about the history of Laramie,” Mabel said. “But we haven’t really had a chance to tell him about our parts.”

Oh, Lord. “I see,” Olivia said, nodding and forcing a smile.

She supposed they should tell Jacob they were going to act out some intimate scenes from his life. It wouldn’t do for him to be surprised in the middle of the play. Then again, with the mood he’d been in, he might stop them from participating at all.

She thought about it as they walked, listening to the children talk about the other players—how Lenora kept trying to kiss John, how Johnny Evans insisted on drawing the windmill from Mr. Jones’ ranch, and it looked crooked, and how Lester Cobb was ruining everything by insisting his grandpa started up a flea circus when he got to Laramie.

Olivia was chuckling as she listened to them discuss how Mr. Cobb might have been able to train his fleas. Their excitement and banter eased some of the heaviness in Olivia’s chest.

The walk went by quickly. When they reached the schoolyard, a woman stepped out of the doorway. She was young, maybe even a few years younger than Olivia, with dark hair pinned neatly and a pretty face. She smiled at the children, then at Olivia.

“Hello,” she said. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Naomi Wilkes.”

Olivia liked her immediately. She remembered the children telling her how Miss Wilkes wanted to be their ma. And she wondered if Naomi still felt that way.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Olivia said. “The children speak highly of you.”

Naomi’s cheeks colored. “They’re good children. Very bright.”

Olivia agreed, nodding. John and Mabel ran off to join the other students, leaving the two women standing together.

“The children are very excited by the play,” Olivia told her. “They’ve been practicing at home.”

Naomi smiled and relaxed a little. “We’re putting together a small performance to celebrate the town. Each child is sharing a bit of their family’s story—how they came here, what their parents did, that sort of thing.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Olivia crooned. “If you need help, I’d be glad to offer it. My mother used to tell me stories every night, and I used to write short novels about them when I was in school.”

Naomi’s eyes brightened. “Truly? That would be a great help. Some of the children struggle to put their thoughts into words.”

They talked for a few minutes more, an easy conversation that made Olivia feel almost normal again. She liked Naomi. She liked the way she spoke about the children, the way she cared for them. It made Olivia feel hopeful, even if only for a moment. She decided she wanted them to be friends.

Naomi hesitated before asking, “Where are you staying?”

“With the children,” Olivia said. “And with Mr. Hale.”

Then the moment ended.

Naomi blinked, her face pale. “Oh. I... see.” She cleared her throat. “Mr. Hale is a good man.”

Olivia didn’t have time to reply. Agnes Whitcomb had spotted them. She marched across the schoolyard like she owned every inch of it. Her skirts snapped with each step, and her expression said she’d come with a purpose.

Her eyes locked on Olivia at once.

“Well, now,” Agnes shouted, loud enough for half the yard to hear, “Miss Olivia. How are things going with you and Jacob?”

Naomi stiffened beside her, hands twisting in front of her apron.

Olivia kept her voice calm. “Just fine, thank you.”

Agnes sniffed, unimpressed. “Mm-hmm. I spoke with Pastor Fleming yesterday. He says you and Jacob haven’t even been to see him yet.”

Naomi’s eyes widened. “Pastor Fleming?” she whispered, as if the name alone might summon him.

“Well, we’ve been busy,” Olivia said, searching for the right words. “There’s been a lot to do at the ranch.”

“That may be so,” Agnes replied, her tone sharp as a tack. “But Jacob promised me a wedding date by the end of the week. And today is Saturday.”

Naomi gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Jacob said that?”

Agnes waved a dismissive hand. “Of course he did. I wrung it out of him myself. Men never volunteer important information. You have to

squeeze it out like water from a stubborn pump.”

Olivia felt heat rush to her face. “Agnes, I don’t think we should talk about this in the middle of the street.”

“Oh, I know exactly what’s going on in that brain of yours,” Agnes snapped. “Those children of his have been trying to fix him up with their teacher for months.” She jerked her chin toward Naomi. “No offense, dear.”

Naomi blinked. “None... taken?”

“But it was never going to work,” Agnes went on. “You’re too soft for Jacob Hale. You’re a sweet girl, but too soft. And he needs someone who can stand toe-to-toe with him without fainting.”

Naomi made a small squeak, unsure whether she’d been insulted or complimented.

Agnes turned back to Olivia. “Now you—Jacob listens to you. You tell him to do something, and he actually does it. That’s a rare gift in a man like him.”

Olivia swallowed. “I don’t tell him what to do.”

“Well, you should,” Agnes said briskly. “He’d be better for it.”

Naomi tugged gently at Olivia’s sleeve. “Maybe we should—”

But Agnes wasn’t finished.

“I’ve already spoken to the pastor,” she continued. “He agrees that certain expectations must be met. Church attendance. A proper courtship timeline. No sharing a room until vows are spoken. And chores are divided fairly. A respectable home must look respectable.”

“I know. I read his letter.” Olivia felt her stomach twist. “But Agnes, that’s not—”

“Necessary?” Agnes supplied. “Oh, it absolutely is. This town watches everything. You so much as breathe wrong, and someone will have an opinion about it.”

Naomi nodded weakly. “She’s... not wrong.”

Agnes planted her hands on her hips. “I’m only trying to help. Jacob deserves to be happy. He deserves a good wife. And you,” Agnes said, pointing at Olivia, “are the only woman I’ve seen who doesn’t shrink when he scowls.”

Olivia didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“I should be going,” Olivia said quietly. “I’ll be back for the children in a couple of hours.”

Naomi touched her arm. “Olivia... you don’t have to run off. Agnes means well.”

Agnes snorted. “Of course I do. If I didn’t, I’d keep my mouth shut like everyone else.”

Olivia managed a polite nod, though her heart thudded painfully. She turned to leave, feeling Naomi’s worried gaze on her and Agnes’s expectant one.

Behind her, Agnes called, “And tell Jacob I expect that wedding date by supper!”

Naomi groaned. “Agnes...”

“What?” Agnes said. “If I don’t keep these things moving, nothing ever gets done.”

Olivia kept walking, her breath tight in her chest, and Agnes’ words pressing down on her like a millstone.

She’d known this would happen. She’d known the town would talk. But knowing didn’t make it any easier. And now, Naomi would never be her friend.

She kept walking, not looking back.

Chapter Nine

“I’ll swing by and check on Joe on my way home,” Thomas said as he headed for his horse. “See you tomorrow.”

Jacob raised his hand and waved, too tired to speak. Even that hurt. And it didn’t stop there. His shoulders ached, his throat was dry, and his backbone was pushing at his belly button. It had been a hard day.

In fact, it was one long grind from the moment he stepped out the door this morning. One of his hands, Joe, had quit without warning—rode off before breakfast, leaving nothing but a half-hearted apology scratched on a scrap of paper.

Jacob hadn’t taken it well. But Thomas and the other men had taken it even worse. Graham and Mason argued over who had to pick up the extra work, each one claiming he already had more than his share. Even Thomas was grumbling come lunchtime.

Jacob felt like he’d spent the whole day trying to keep tempers from boiling over—his included. He’d stepped in himself to cover the gaps, and by late afternoon, he’d been doing the work of three men, all while trying to dose the herd with the latest treatment to prevent tick fever.

He’d known this was coming. He’d felt the ranch slipping toward trouble for months. Today only proved he’d been right.

Joe was unhappy and had been for a long time. He made sure everyone knew it, too. Joe was the first ranch hand Jacob hired. So, when Thomas came on a year later as Jacob’s new foreman, Joe went on a tear—a tear that had lasted for three years before finally coming to a head.

By the time Jacob pushed open the front door, he was worn down to the bone. His shirt was molded to him with sweat and mud. His breeches

chaffed. He was hungry. And he wanted to take off his boots.

But more than anything, he wanted to sit down at the table, see his children, eat whatever Olivia had made for them, and enjoy a quiet evening with his family.

He stopped short in the dining room. The table was empty.

No food. No plates. No family.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the bare table, trying to make sense of it. He remembered the kids' play. Was that tonight? Why didn't anyone remind him? That was the only thing he could think of.

Olivia had served supper at the same time every night since she arrived. She'd taken to his kitchen like she'd worked in it for years, and he'd gotten used to walking in and smelling something delicious on the stove. Tonight, there was nothing.

Then he heard it—laughter. Light and cheerful, drifting down from upstairs.

His jaw tightened. Surely, they weren't... in... that... room.

He walked to the staircase, more sure than ever... they were.

He climbed the stairs two at a time, each step feeding the anger that had been simmering inside him all day. He didn't even know why he was angry now. Didn't care. He just knew that he was.

He reached the top of the stairs and saw them in the islet.

Julie's sitting room.

He stopped dead. His breath caught in his throat.

Olivia stood inside the room with Mabel and John. The children were sitting on the floor, going through an old trunk. Julie's trunk. Olivia held one of Julie's dresses in her hands, the blue one Julie used to wear on Sundays.

"I think this one's lovely," she told Mabel. "It might even fit."

Might even fit? His head nearly exploded. How could he have been so blind? He'd known Joe was going to quit, just like he'd known there was something not quite right about Olivia. She'd been too nice, too efficient, too beautiful, too... everything.

His eyes were focused on the room—his wife's room—that hadn't been touched since the day she died. He'd made sure to keep it exactly as it was. He couldn't bring himself to change anything. He couldn't even bring himself to look at it most days.

And now they were all in there. Going through her things, laughing, and disrespecting her memory.

Then, the tenuous control he'd had all day snapped.

"What are you doing?" His voice came out louder and harsher than he intended, but he didn't pull it back. "Get out. All of you. Out!"

The children froze. Olivia turned, startled, the dress still in her hands.

"Jacob—"

"Out!" he barked again.

Mabel scrambled to her feet, eyes wide. John followed, shrinking back into her as if he expected Jacob to march in and hit him. Jacob pointed down the hall.

“To your rooms. Now.”

They didn’t argue. They didn’t say a word. They didn’t even look at Olivia as they hurried past Jacob, their footsteps quick and harried.

When they were gone, Jacob stepped further inside, blocking Olivia’s way out. His chest rose and fell with quick, shallow breaths. He couldn’t look at the dress in her hands. He couldn’t look at the open trunk. He couldn’t look at the room.

“I told you this room was off-limits,” he said, his voice low but shaking with anger. “I told you.”

Olivia swallowed hard. “Mabel asked me to help her find something. She said—”

“I don’t care what she said.” His voice rose again. “You disobeyed me. You disrespected me. You went through my wife’s things. You disrespected her. You had no right.”

She took a step back, her face pale. “Jacob, I didn’t mean any harm. The children—”

“The children know better,” he snapped. “They’ve never disobeyed me. Not until... you.”

She opened her mouth again, but he cut her off.

“This isn’t going to work. I knew it from the start. I should’ve listened to my gut.”

Her eyes widened. “Jacob—”

“You need to leave,” he said, the words firm and final. “I’ll give you two days. That’s all.”

Olivia's eyes were wet with tears. "Jacob, I don't have anywhere—"

"I don't care," Jacob spat, shaking his head for emphasis. "All you really had to do was take care of my children. And you led them astray, made them disobey and disregard me."

She stared at him, stunned. Her hands trembled around the fabric she still held. She looked down at the dress, then back at him.

"I didn't mean to upset you," she whispered. "I was only trying to help the children."

He didn't answer. He couldn't. The anger was too thick, too tangled with grief he'd kept buried for years. He stepped aside, giving her room to leave.

"Go pack your things," he said, snatching Julie's dress from her hands. "And make sure nothing of my wife's makes it into your bag."

"Of course," she said, picking up a photograph from the settee and putting it back into the trunk. Her lips trembled as she said, "I'll just set this here."

Then, she placed one hand over her mouth and waved the other before running past him to her room. She didn't look back.

Jacob stayed where he was, standing in the middle of the room he'd kept closed for so long. The air felt different now. He couldn't see her image, sitting on the settee, drinking tea and reading a book. He couldn't smell her unique perfume. She was gone. Julie was gone.

His eyes scanned the room. The trunk was open, and the afghan she always kept on the settee was wrinkled and skewed. The fragile peace he'd guarded so fiercely was gone.

He stepped over and tossed the dress inside, then closed the trunk with a hard shove. Then he sat on the sofa, elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

He was swallowed up by regret. He tried to catalog all the regret, but there was too much. And it went too far back. He regretted ever moving here in the first place. If they'd gone on to Texas like he'd wanted, Julie might even still be alive.

He regretted taking over this blasted ranch. Because, in return, the ranch had taken over his life. It took and took until he had nothing left to give. He never wanted the ranch. The ranch was Julie's dream, her father's dream, but not his. It was never his.

And he regretted not having talked to Joe about why he had hired Thomas. He and Thomas had been friends for years. That much was true. But Thomas had been born on a ranch, worked it all his life, and offered to bring that knowledge to Jacob's ranch for hardly any pay. His folks were wealthy, which meant Thomas was wealthy, too.

He didn't even have to go back years to find more regrets—only minutes. He regretted how he'd just spoken to his children. He regretted scaring his own son—he hadn't missed the way John cringed when he was shouting at him. And he regretted not being there for them, for being a ghost for the past five years.

He thought of Olivia, not quite ready to admit any guilt for how he'd spoken to her. Letting her stay had been a mistake. And that's what he regretted.

He'd known it from the moment she stepped off that wagon. She was beautiful. Too beautiful. And she was sad. He'd seen it in her eyes, couldn't miss it. But he'd steeled himself and was prepared to send her away. But he'd let the children sway him.

Then, he'd let himself get used to her cooking, her stories, the soft lilt of her voice, and the way she made the house feel less empty. He didn't feel like a ghost anymore, haunting his own house and family. He'd found himself in the field, looking forward to whatever she'd made for supper.

And now this.

He rubbed his hands over his face, trying to slow his breathing. He wasn't sure if he was angrier at Olivia or at himself. He only knew one thing for certain.

She couldn't stay. Not after this. Not after he'd been so clear with her about Julie's room.

Two days. That was all he could give her. And she was lucky he gave her that.

He stood, took one last glance around, then walked down the hall to the stairs. His body ached, his head hurt, and his feet were blistered. But he'd make supper tonight.

And every night after. Because Olivia wouldn't be there.

Chapter Ten

Olivia ran into her room, slammed the door, and threw herself across her bed, sobbing. And that's where she stayed most of the night, crying until there were no tears left. Nothing.

Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. "What did I do?"

The room didn't answer. But she did hear the screen door slap shut, and she moved to the window. Jacob was already up and stalking toward the barn. She assumed that meant he didn't want to risk seeing her this morning. And maybe she couldn't blame him.

She'd been so convinced that the children needed to know their mother, to embrace the memory of Julie Hale, that she'd let Mabel talk her into going through the trunk. And then, they found among Julie's dresses and shawls a diary. Julie's diary.

The children had been so happy, she didn't have the heart to make them put it back. Mabel had been like a sponge, reading through the first few pages of Julie's diary. When she was done, she said she knew what her lines for the play should be.

Reading Julie's words, seeing her clothes and her belongings, they'd all been so happy they lost track of time.

But it wasn't the children's fault. It was Olivia's. She should have known better. Should have realized how Jacob would react. However, she would never have guessed that Jacob would react the way he did.

Jacob's words from the night before still rang in her ears—cruel, angry, and final, leaving no room for hope. Two days. That was all he'd given her. Two days to pack up, say goodbye, and disappear from the only place that even held the promise of home since her mother died.

She rubbed her palms over her face, trying to gather her wits. She couldn't fall apart again. Not today. And not in front of the children. They didn't deserve that. They had already been frightened enough by Jacob's anger. They didn't understand what had happened or why.

And she couldn't imagine how they would react when she told them she was leaving. She'd let them get too close, too fast. She'd let herself do the same. It broke her heart to think that there'd be no more sewing lessons with Mabel. No more bows and arrows with John. But she knew it wasn't so much about what they were doing. They just needed the attention. Any attention. They were starved for it.

She stood slowly, her body groggy and heavy from the long night. She dressed without rushing and combed her hair, every movement slow and deliberate, as if moving too fast might break her again. When she finished, she took one last deep breath and left the room.

Downstairs, she moved through the kitchen on instinct—lighting the stove, pulling out the pan, tossing in four rashers of bacon. She reached for the dough, her hands working while her mind drifted. She kept seeing Mabel's face when Jacob had shouted. John's small shoulders were drawn tight.

Olivia had wanted to shield them, but she'd been too stunned to move. Not today, though. She'd do whatever she had to. And she wouldn't let them face more hurt today. Not if she could help it.

When the gravy was done, the children came into the kitchen quietly and sat down at the table without a word. Mabel's eyes were red. John kept his gaze on the floor.

“Good morning,” Olivia said. “Everybody hungry?”

“Where's Pa?” Mabel asked, her eyes darting around the kitchen as if Jacob might jump out at any moment and start yelling at everyone.

“He went to work,” Olivia replied as she set plates in front of them and tried to smile normally. Even she could tell it felt thin.

“He’s not eating with us?” John asked hopefully.

Olivia shrugged. “He went to work about an hour ago. I’m not sure if he’s joining us or not.”

The children seemed to sigh with relief. They ate, but without their usual banter. They did talk about the school play, and Olivia was glad to see that they were still excited about it.

Olivia thought again about telling them she had to leave tomorrow. But she couldn’t bear to add more weight to their shoulders today. She would wait until after the play.

Jacob didn’t come in for breakfast. She wasn’t surprised. She cleaned the dishes, wiped the table, and left him a plate of bacon, biscuits, and gravy. Then, she wrote a short note for him, leaving it where he couldn’t miss it.

Don’t forget the kids’ performance is after school today. - Olivia

She didn’t add anything more. There was nothing else to say.

The walk to school was quiet, and Olivia watched them closely. They were good kids. And she wanted to remember them when she was gone.

The children stayed close to her, as if they sensed something was wrong. When they reached the schoolyard, Naomi Wilkes waved them over and greeted the children warmly. When they’d gone inside, Naomi asked softly, “Are you all right?” Naomi’s gentle question caught Olivia off guard. After hearing the children say Naomi wanted to be their ma, Olivia had assumed she’d want nothing to do with her. But here Naomi was, showing

real kindness and concern. They might even have become friends if Olivia weren't leaving tomorrow.

"Yes." Olivia nodded. "I'm just tired."

Naomi didn't press. Instead, she put Olivia to work helping with the rehearsal. Olivia was grateful for the distraction. She helped paint scenery—sometimes following Mabel's instructions—straightened costumes, and guided the younger children through their lines.

The schoolhouse buzzed with activity all day, and for a spell, Olivia let the rest of it fall away—her ma's passing, Victor's mean-spirited carryings-on, even the ugly words Jacob had hurled at her the night before.

She didn't trouble herself over tomorrow, or where she'd light next when her time here was up. The bustle and noise gave her a bit of breathing room, and she was grateful for it.

At lunchtime, Olivia sat with John and Mabel. As she unpacked the lunch of ham, cheese, bread, and pickles that she'd made for them, John asked Mabel, "Are you still wearing Ma's shawl and her work dress?"

Mabel hesitated. "I brought them. But... after last night, I don't know if I should wear them."

Olivia sighed and leaned closer. "Julie was your mother," she said gently. "She would want you to wear them. Just go up there and be proud."

Mabel looked uncertain, but she nodded.

The afternoon flew by. Olivia spent most of it on Lester Cobb's Master of Ceremonies costume. But when the play was about to begin, Olivia caught a glimpse of Mabel backstage, wearing the dress and shawl she'd found in her mother's trunk.

Olivia walked toward her, smiling. The fabric was a little worn, but it fit her well enough. Mabel smoothed the shawl nervously.

“You look beautiful,” Olivia said. “Just like the photo we found in your ma’s trunk.”

Mabel glowed. “You really think so?”

“I do,” Olivia promised. “I think you’re the spitting image.”

Mabel sighed, then whispered, “Do you think Pa will be mad?”

Olivia shook her head. “I think your pa will be proud once he sees you up there. You don’t need to worry.”

At least, Olivia hoped so. If she was wrong, what more could he do to her? Still, she hoped Jacob’s love for his children would be stronger than his anger.

“Okay, children!” Naomi shouted. “It’s time!”

Olivia waved as Mabel hurried backstage, then she took a seat among the parents. Far away from Jacob.

People began to arrive—neighbors, ranch families, and townsfolk. Olivia watched as the schoolhouse soon filled with excited parents and expectant friends. Then she saw Jacob walk in with Thomas.

Her breath caught. For a moment, their eyes met. His expression was unreadable. Then, he looked away and took a seat near the back.

Olivia forced herself to face forward.

The play began with the younger children reciting short lines about the town’s founding. It was sweet and elicited laughter and sighs from the

audience. And then, it was John's turn.

He stepped onto the stage wearing Jacob's worn jacket and hat. The hat was too big and slid down over his ears, but he pushed it back with determination.

"My name is Jacob Hale," he announced, voice steady. "I'm a rancher and a father."

A few parents chuckled softly at the sight of him in the oversized clothes, and a few more turned to look at Jacob.

John continued, "I'm a good pa. And I was a good husband. I loved my wife so much that I never forgot her. Not even a little bit. Her memory is more important to me than anything else in this world, and I spend my whole life grieving for her."

The room went quiet. Olivia felt her throat tighten. She glanced toward Jacob. He sat very still, his eyes fixed on his son.

John finished his lines and stepped back, and then it was Mabel's turn.

She walked onto the stage wearing her mother's dress and shawl. She stood tall, shoulders back, and looked out into the audience. Olivia dabbed at her eyes. Mabel smiled at her, looking older than her twelve years.

"Hello, I'm Julie Hale," she said. "I was born in Missouri, and my family moved to Laramie when I was young."

Her voice was clear and steady.

"My pa wanted to start a ranch here, but he died before he could. My husband and I honored him by carrying on."

Olivia felt a pang in her chest. No wonder Jacob moved through his days as if he were carrying a heavy load. He'd taken it on for Julie, same as she'd done for her folks before her. And now, no one was left to care anymore.

"I used to love to bake," Mabel continued. "I filled our house with the smell of bread and sweets. And I shared what I made with my neighbors and church friends."

These were things Mabel had learned from Agnes and others—bits of memory passed down, pieced together like a quilt.

"I was happy and laughed all the time. I loved my town and my husband. But the most important thing in the world to me was my two children."

Olivia glanced toward Jacob again, and he didn't look like a statue anymore.

He was leaning forward slightly, elbows on his knees, eyes locked on his daughter. His face was tight, but not with anger. His eyes shone, and when he blinked, she could see the tears slipping down his cheek.

He turned his eyes to Olivia. And he didn't look away this time.

He didn't hide the tears. He didn't hide anything.

And Olivia, sitting among the parents in the front, felt her breath catch. Her heart lurched, and suddenly she only wanted to comfort him. To be there for him.

He was hurting. And he was proud.

Chapter Eleven

The schoolhouse was still buzzing from the play, parents talking and laughing, children running around in their costumes. He should've been proud, and he was. But the pride was tangled up with a healthy dose of shame.

"Tell the kids they did a great job," Mrs. Lindley said, placing a hand on his shoulder as she and her husband, Rick, walked past.

Jacob continued to sit in the back row of the schoolhouse. The wooden bench was hard and uncomfortable, but he barely noticed. His guts were still tied in knots from what Mabel and John had said—words he hadn't wanted to hear, and couldn't seem to shake.

Was it true? Had he really spent the past five years ignoring everything and everyone except his grief? He knew the answer before he even asked himself the question. Yes. That was exactly what he'd done.

He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to settle himself before anyone noticed him sitting there like a man who'd lost his bearings.

Naomi Wilkes spotted him before he could slip out. She hurried toward him, skirts swishing, her expression earnest. His stomach dropped, and he braced himself.

Was she about to say something harsh but deserved? Would it be about him being such a poor parent? Or about Olivia, the beautiful, single, young girl who was living with him out of wedlock?

She seemed like a good woman, but she had opinions, just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, she didn't always keep them to herself. But it really wasn't any of her business how he parented or who he let stay in his home or help raise his children.

“Oh, Mr. Hale. Glad I caught you,” she said, slightly breathless.

He hadn’t seen her since the day she showed up at his house, applying for the position of his wife. He was glad she had moved back to formal greetings, rather than using his Christian name uninvited.

He forced a polite nod. “Ma’am.”

“The kids did so well. Don’t you think?” She smiled warmly, expectantly.

“Yes, ma’am. They did,” he replied, wondering where this was leading.

“We’re having a small celebration to thank the children and parents who helped with the play. Olivia and the kids are invited to stay for it,” she said. “They all did such a great job. Do you mind? I can bring them home later, if that’s all right.”

He blinked. This wasn’t what he expected. Not even close.

“Sure. That’s fine,” he said. “Thank you.”

She smiled, making him wonder if she didn’t harbor any ill feelings about what happened.

“Alrighty, then. Take care,” she said with an absent wave. Then, she turned and hurried back to the children.

Outside, he tipped his hat and said goodnight to a few of the people who still lingered, chatting in the yard. The sun had set long ago, but it was still hot, the air heavy and stifling. He climbed into the wagon and headed home, trying to clear the mess in his head.

And part of that mess was knowing that he had amends to make. He just needed to figure out how best to do that.

As the wagon neared the house, he saw Thomas' horse tied out front. Then, he spotted him coming out of the barn, wiping his hands on a towel. Jacob pulled the horses to a stop and waited for Thomas to reach him.

"What's wrong?" he asked when Thomas leaned against the wagon.

"Rough delivery with that red-tag heifer," Thomas said. "But she's fine now. Calf too."

"Good. Thank you for seeing to it."

"No problem." Thomas squinted at him. "You got a face like a slapped behind. What's wrong with you?"

"I went to the children's play," he said, letting out a long breath.

Thomas arched his brows. "Okay. That ain't what I asked, though."

"I need to get the horses settled," Jacob said, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. "Come with me, and I'll tell you about it."

Half an hour later, Jacob had told him the whole, ugly story, including the blowup the other night when he told Olivia to leave. He lingered on the part at the school, describing his epiphany in detail.

"I have to make it up to them," Jacob mused as he watched the new calf struggling to walk. His long, lanky legs wobbled, and it made him smile.

Thomas folded his arms. "And how do you plan to do that?"

The smile on his face faded as he turned to look at Thomas. “I have no idea.”

The calf let out a squall, and Thomas laughed. Then, he looked at Jacob and grew serious. “Look, your wife died. You’ve been sad. Distant.”

“I’ve been right here,” Jacob snapped.

“Maybe.” Thomas shook his head. “But even when you’re here, you’re not really here, Jacob. We all feel it. Even the kids.”

Jacob pressed his lips together and hung his head. “I know. I’m trying.”

“I know you are,” Thomas replied. “We can all feel that, too. Look, the kids are fine. They have food, shelter, and a good home. You haven’t beaten them, starved them, or done any permanent damage to them. It’ll be all right. Just come back to us.”

“But it’s true,” Jacob murmured. “John described me tonight like I was some sad, pathetic, walking ball of grief. That’s what they think of me.”

Thomas didn’t answer right away. Probably looking for the right words. Then, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I can see this is hitting you hard. But I reckon you still want the truth.”

Jacob nodded.

“Truth is,” Thomas said, “your world revolved around Julie—no shame in that. And yes, you’ve been grieving for the past five years. Maybe it’s because she passed so fast and so unexpectedly. I don’t know. But you ain’t the same man you used to be.”

Jacob winced, feeling like the air had been sucked out of the barn.

Thomas went on. “We’re all still here, and we love ya. We’re gonna help you get past this. But yes, Jacob, we all think it’s been long enough. Especially Mabel and John.”

“I thought you said they were okay?” Jacob frowned.

“They are. But think about it. Mabel makes supper, does the housework, watches after John, gets him off to school, and does everything else he needs. She’s twelve, buddy. She ought to be worried about homework and boys.”

Jacob shot him a look. “I don’t think so.”

Thomas laughed. “Fine. Not boys. Girls. Friends. About school and having fun. Dances and pretty new dresses. That kind of stuff. It ain’t fair what you’ve been asking of her.”

Jacob nodded slowly. “I know it’s not.”

But how could he help Mabel with those kinds of things? He was a man. That was Julie’s place. If she were still alive... if he’d fetched the doc faster or stopped her from going with those church ladies to take food to the sick or made her quit sitting outside in her rocker through all kinds of weather. She told him she had a cold. Agnes told him to stop fussing.

But he knew in his gut that it wasn’t a cold. He should have followed his gut.

Thomas clapped him on the back. “And I don’t mind taking them to church on Sundays or picking them up from the Thursday night socials. I love those kids. I’d do anything for them, and I’m happy to help out. But that’s something you ought to be doing. You’re their pa.”

“I know.” Jacob swallowed hard. Even though he’d let their mother die, they still loved him. And he still loved them. They needed him. Now

more than ever.

“Good,” Thomas said with a nod. “Then, fix it.”

It was quiet for a moment, and Jacob said, “How do I do that?”

Thomas shook his head, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling. “Heaven, give me strength,” he said on a sigh.

Frustrated, Jacob flattened his lips. “In case it has escaped your notice, old friend, I have a ranch to run. It takes up a lot of my time.”

With a deep breath and a clap on the shoulder, Thomas smiled. “The answer’s right in front of you, buddy. Figure it out.”

He knew Thomas was talking about Olivia. Maybe she was part of the solution. They talked a while longer, mostly about the ranch, the new calf, the weather, and the new girl in town Thomas was planning to meet later.

“I thought you were seeing Naomi,” Jacob said.

Thomas half-shrugged. “I guess I am. But it’s not like we’re engaged. I want a drink, and Naomi’s at some school party with all the kids. Alice is at the saloon.”

Jacob shook his head. “Someday you’re gonna regret all this hound-dogging.”

“And you’re gonna regret pushing everyone away,” Thomas said. “There’s no shame in accepting help, especially when it comes from a beautiful woman who seems to be very fond of you and your children. Take the help, Jacob. That’s where you start.”

Maybe Thomas was right. That might be a good place for him to start, and Lord knew he needed the help. She did seem to care a lot about his children, and they seemed to feel the same about her. Especially Mabel. He'd relied on her too much over the years, forgetting she was just a kid, too. He could do this for her and John.

"Just think about it," Thomas said with a wink, then moved to mount his horse. "I'll see you later." He waved as he rode off toward town.

Jacob sat on the porch for a long time after that, elbows on his knees, staring out at the pasture. He'd said the answer was right in front of him. He knew what Thomas meant. Maybe he could do a marriage of convenience, for the kids. It might take a while, but he could get used to the idea.

So long as no one rushed him.

When Naomi's wagon finally appeared on the road, he stood and walked down the drive to meet them. He helped Olivia down first, then the kids. Naomi watched them closely, then glanced toward the barn.

"I suppose Thomas is already gone?" she asked.

Feeling like he was being folded into some kind of conspiracy, he nodded. "Left a while ago. Thank you for bringing them home."

"You're very welcome." She smiled, then turned to look at Olivia and the kids. "Goodnight."

He watched the wagon roll away in the midst of several goodnights and a storm of waves. Then, he turned to Olivia and said, "We need to talk."

She nodded and ushered the children toward the door. "Go on in and get ready for bed," she told them. "I'll be up in a minute."

When the door shut behind them, Jacob sat down on the porch step, gesturing for her to sit beside him. He was relieved when she did. Now, he just had to figure out what to say to her.

He decided on simple, unvarnished groveling. “I’m sorry. For last night. For how I acted.”

Olivia sat up straight and looked down at her lap. Her fingers twisted nervously. “I’m sorry, too. I only wanted to help the children. They’re proud of what they did up there. And they’re proud of you. They just want to know their mother, even if you want to hide her like a secret.”

Jacob flinched. “I know that.”

“You’re not the only one who lost someone when Julie died,” she said, her voice softer now. “They did, too.”

He nodded, but they didn’t speak again for a long moment.

“I really am sorry that you’re angry,” she murmured. “I know what grief feels like. And I don’t want to cause you more pain.”

When he finally did speak, his voice was low and full of remorse. “I’m not angry,” he said. “Not anymore. I’m actually grateful. You did something I couldn’t. You woke me up.”

Olivia’s expression softened, and she gave him an encouraging smile. And once again, he was struck by her beauty. It hit him the same way every time—like a slap in the face. His chest tightened, his stomach dipped, and his breath caught like he’d taken a punch he hadn’t braced for. His hands went still, useless for a moment, and a warm flush crept up the back of his neck.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve forgiven me. You were furious,” she told him.

“I was,” he admitted. “But then you did something else I couldn’t. You helped them remember Julie. I should’ve done that years ago.”

“You can do it now,” she said, smiling with encouragement.

He nodded. “You’re right. I’ll do better. I promise. I’ll spend more time with them. I’ll talk about Julie more. And I’ll pack up her things from the sitting room upstairs. It’s time.”

Olivia’s eyes widened with surprise.

“That... that’ll be good for them,” she stammered.

“I want you to stay,” he added firmly as he stared at his boots. “The kids need you. I need you. And I think we should move forward with this... marriage of convenience. This week.”

She didn’t answer right away, but she didn’t immediately object, either.

He took it that she needed further convincing. “I’m not proposing a real marriage, mind you. I’m just saying that we need each other. It makes sense. I promise I won’t change my mind again.”

When she still didn’t say anything, he raised his head and looked at her. He stopped breathing, which seemed to happen a lot around Olivia. She was so beautiful. She could have any man she wanted. But she was here. He didn’t understand it. But he was grateful, anyway.

Her eyes were soft and shone with tears when she said, “All right, then. Did you have the contract drawn up?”

Contract? His forehead creased, trying to remember—

“Oh. That,” he sighed, shaking his head. “I think we’ll be alright. Don’t you?”

She smiled, then nodded slowly. “Yes. I think we’ll be alright now.”

They heard Mabel squeal, and John let out a whoop from inside the house. Jacob laughed, then stood, offering Olivia his hand. She took it, and he froze for a moment, staring at their hands.

The warmth and strength of her fingers were a quiet reassurance—at the same time, her hand was soft and inviting, fitting perfectly into his, and offering comfort that he hadn’t known he needed. It wasn’t Julie’s hand. But it seemed to belong there, anyway.

Jacob stepped inside first and found his son still wearing his old jacket and hat, strutting around the room like a miniature version of himself. He found Mabel far more reserved, standing by the table in the foyer, smiling at him and Olivia.

“Are you good?” he asked her.

Mabel nodded. “Yeah, Pa. I’m good.”

He stretched out his arm, and she ran into it, burying her face in his chest. “Shh,” he said, stroking her long blond hair. Her mother’s hair. Leaning down, he kissed the top of her head. “We’re going to be fine now.”

She raised her face, still smiling as a tear rolled down her cheek. “I know,” she said.

He turned to look at John, who was busy herding invisible cattle in the living room. Jacob laughed—really laughed—and scooped him up, surprised by how heavy he was. John squealed, wrapping his arms around his father’s neck.

It had been a long time since he held his son like this. His eyes drifted shut, and he savored every second, every touch, and every smell. Finally, he leaned over and set John's feet back on the ground.

"I know we ate at the party," Olivia said to the children. "But I don't think your pa has had anything. Come on. Let's go scrounge up some supper for him."

The room emptied, and he felt the loss. But he heard Olivia, Mabel, and John talking and laughing as they made their way to the kitchen. He liked the sound of it.

Jacob lingered for a moment, smiling as Mabel called John a squirt.

"I am not a squirt!" he balked. "Am I, Olivia?"

"No, John," Olivia assured him. "You are a very strong, very polite young man who is above any petty name-calling."

That seemed to pacify John because the next comment was about whether he'd prefer venison jerky or roast beef.

He'd made the right choice in asking Olivia to marry him—maybe it was a practical decision, but hearing his children so happy with her filled him with a deep sense of peace. Even if life wasn't perfect, these small moments made his soul glad.

Chapter Twelve

Olivia was already in the kitchen, frying bacon and stirring a pot of oats, when she heard Jacob moving around upstairs. The boards creaked as he crossed the hall, pausing a couple of times—no doubt, checking the children’s rooms.

A moment later, the soft thump of his steps came down the stairs, and then he was in the kitchen with her.

“I’ll get us some fresh water,” he said.

“Thank you,” Olivia replied. “I was going to do that after I finished the oats.”

Jacob smiled. “And now, you won’t have to.”

She watched him step outside, a small smile tugging at her lips. She liked this side of him, comfortable in his own skin, busy without looking worn down, and actually present instead of lost somewhere else in his thoughts.

When he came back inside, he filled the basin and two pitchers with fresh water, hung the bucket on the wall, and sat down at the table.

“Breakfast is ready,” she informed him. “You want me to wake the children?”

He shook his head. “Let them sleep in a bit. I have to go feed and water the stock after I eat,” he said. “But that’s all I’m going to do today. I’ll give the boys a few jobs to tackle, and then I’ll come back here. I want to spend time with the kids today.”

He said it plainly, without fuss, but Olivia felt the truth of it deep inside. She would rather he'd said he wanted to spend time with *her* and the kids. They were to be married, after all. They needed to bond as a family. She wanted to feel included in that. But she was willing to wait. He said he wanted to focus on his children now. And she believed he meant it. She prayed he meant it.

Time would tell if she'd placed her faith in the right man, she supposed. They would all know soon enough if he was free—truly free—from his past. Or if he was still anchored to his dead wife.

For now, she'd just be pleased for Mabel and John. And maybe, in some small way, for her.

She smiled. "They'll like that."

He nodded once, and that seemed to be the end of it. So, she handed him a cup of coffee. Then served him some oats, bacon, and toast. She kept the rest warm on the stove for the children.

It was late morning, and Olivia was sweeping the front room. Mabel came running in from the yard with a folded note in her hand.

"Miss Wilkes gave me this to bring to you," she said, breathless.

Olivia wiped her hands on her apron and took the paper. The handwriting was neat—just what she'd expect from Naomi. Inside was a short message inviting her to afternoon tea as thanks for helping with the school play. Naomi added that she'd love the company and hoped Olivia could spare some time.

Olivia smiled. It was the first time in years that someone had invited her anywhere to spend time together. But she couldn't leave the children alone. Then, she remembered. Jacob was coming back.

“Well? What is it?” Mabel asked, biting her lip and wringing her hands as she stared at Olivia. “What’s she want?”

“Calm yourself, child,” Olivia laughed. “No one’s in trouble, if that’s what you’re worried about.

She knew that’s exactly what Mabel was anxious about when her shoulders seemed to sag with relief. Then, her pretty face lit with a smile. “I try to keep an eye on John at school, but I can’t watch him all the time. And those boys are always into something.”

“Yes, they are. Even when they’re grown up,” Olivia laughed. “Naomi has asked me over for tea. Would you mind watching John until your pa gets back?”

“I don’t mind,” Mabel replied. “He’s outside building a fort right now. That should keep him busy for a while.”

Olivia beamed a smile. “Thank you, sweetheart. Your pa is supposed to be back early today. So, it shouldn’t be long.”

With that settled, Olivia hurried upstairs for a quick wash and a change of clothes. She put on a clean dress and worked her hair into a neat braid, pinning it into place before heading back down.

“You look pretty,” Mabel said, fussing over Olivia’s dress.

“Thank you,” Olivia sighed. She didn’t believe it, but it was still nice to hear. As she stepped outside, she told Mabel she’d be home before supper, then set off at a brisk pace.

The walk to Naomi’s house wasn’t long. She lived in a small house near the schoolyard, tidy and bright, with lace curtains in the windows. Naomi opened the door before Olivia even knocked.

“Oh, good! You came,” Naomi said, pulling her inside. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be too busy.”

“I’m glad for the invitation,” Olivia said honestly. “It’s nice to get out of the house for a bit.”

Inside, Olivia took in Naomi’s home. The living room was modest but inviting, with a large rug covering most of the wooden floor. Simple chairs and a small sofa looked worn but comfortable. The windows were covered with lace curtains, letting in a flood of light.

From where she stood, she could also see into the kitchen where shelves held neatly stacked crockery and some beautiful china teacups. A clock ticked quietly on the mantel, and a vase of wildflowers sat on a small wooden table standing between the kitchen and the living room.

The flowers added a splash of color to the space. The room felt cheerful and inviting, with no clutter except for a couple of handmade quilts folded on a bench near the fireplace.

“Come, sit down,” Naomi said, steering her deeper inside.

They settled at the kitchen table, where Naomi had set out biscuits and a small jar of blackberry preserves. The house smelled like lavender soap. But then again, so did Naomi.

“I wanted to thank you again for helping with the play,” Naomi said as she bustled around the kitchen, putting a kettle on the stove to heat. “The children adore you.”

“Well, they adore you, too,” Olivia said, then chuckled. “But I guess you know that already.”

“Yes.” Naomi blushed, then turned around to retrieve the teacups from the shelf. “It’s just so important to get parents engaged with school

activities. But so many are too busy to help.”

Olivia took the hint. Naomi didn’t want to talk about the blind setup the children had arranged—she was embarrassed enough as it was. That was fine. So long as it didn’t stand in the way of their friendship, Olivia was happy to leave it be.

“I enjoyed it,” Olivia said at last. “My mother used to tell me stories when I was little—mostly about our own family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are scattered all over. I never met most of them, but she talked about them so much I felt like I knew each one. Seeing the children act out the town’s history, dressing up like their family members... it brought all that back. It reminded me of my mother, and how those stories were the only way I ever really knew most of my family.”

Naomi smiled warmly. “You’re an amazing person. And you have a way with children. Especially Mabel.”

Olivia looked down at her cup. “She’s a good girl. They’re both good kids.”

After a moment, Naomi asked, “And how are things with Jacob?”

Olivia hesitated. She didn’t want to flaunt their engagement in front of Naomi, especially when Jacob had so firmly rejected the idea of her becoming his children’s ma. She knew Naomi would find out soon enough. But that didn’t mean Olivia had to be the one to tell her.

“Everything’s fine,” she said, not really a lie.

“I just imagine that he’s not the simplest man to live with,” Naomi said as she placed the cups on a tray with sugar and a small pitcher of milk. “Especially with him... you know.”

“I’m not sure I do,” Olivia said, furrowing her brow. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, my heavens. I’m so sorry.” Naomi set the tray on the table and shook her head, blushing. “I just meant... I know he’s... well, I *think* he’s still in love with his deceased wife.”

“Ohh,” Olivia drawled. “*That*. Well, folks are bound to talk, I suppose. But there’s no great mystery to it. He loved his wife, and losing her nearly split him in two. Anyone would carry that kind of hurt for a long while.” She gave a small shrug, as if the matter were simple and not worth gossiping about. “I think he’s doing the best he can, trying to raise two kids alone. But that’s all there is to it.”

There was a lot more to it than that. But Olivia felt a need to defend Jacob, for whatever reason. She wasn’t about to throw more kindling on that fire.

“Well, I’m glad to know it,” Naomi said, walking to the stove to retrieve the boiling kettle. She poured tea into both cups, then set the kettle back on the stove. “Sugar?” she asked as she sat down across from Olivia.

Olivia smiled. “Yes, please.”

Once they’d had their first sip of tea, Naomi looked at Olivia and said, “I want you to know that everyone respects him. We only want to see him happy.”

“I want that too,” Olivia said with a smile. “For him. And for the children.”

Naomi reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you’re here. Truly, I am. It’s nice having someone my own age nearby. Someone to talk to.”

Olivia felt her throat tighten. Other than Laura, she hadn't made a friend in years. Not since before Victor. Not since before her life had turned into a string of spies and whispered warnings followed by hurried departures in the cover of night.

"I'm glad I'm here, too," she finally said.

"Good!" Naomi brightened. "Then you're coming with me to the church social next week."

Olivia laughed. "If you insist."

"I do."

They talked for hours—about the church social, what they were baking for the event, the upcoming Harvest Festival, the children, the town, the weather, and the price of flour. They even talked about gardens and spring planting. They had another cup of tea, and Naomi told her what it was like growing up there all her life. Time got away from Olivia when she glanced at the window and noticed the sun going down.

"Oh, my goodness," she said, startled. "I didn't realize we'd been chatting for so long."

"I had fun," Naomi said. "I needed this."

Before Olivia could stand, there was a knock at the door. Naomi went to answer it.

Thomas stood on the porch, leaning against the doorframe like he had all the time in the world. His eyes swept over Naomi, and he grinned.

"That's a fine dress you got on, Miss Wilkes."

Naomi flushed so deeply that Olivia could see it from across the room.

“Hello, Thomas,” Naomi asked, flustered. “What brings you here?”

“Looking for Olivia,” he grinned. “Is she here?”

Naomi blinked and turned to Olivia, confused. “Thomas is here for you.”

Thomas stepped inside, shaking his head. “I’m here for Jacob. He asked me to fetch you home.”

Olivia’s eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms. “Fetch me?”

Thomas held up his hands. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m just doing what he told me.”

“I’ve stayed longer than I meant to,” Olivia said, “but that doesn’t mean he can send someone after me like I’m a stray cow.”

Thomas snorted. “You want to argue with him, be my guest. Just don’t shoot the messenger.”

Olivia’s first instinct was to get angry. But then, she had a terrifying thought—one that made her panic and feel selfish. “Are the children all right?”

“Yes.”

“Is Jacob all right?”

“Yes.”

“Is anyone hurt? Bleeding?”

Thomas grinned. “No.”

The panic and guilt she was feeling evaporated, and she was back to being angry again. “Then what is so urgent that it can’t wait until I get home?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Like I said, don’t shoot the messenger.”

Olivia felt her cheeks burn. She turned to Naomi. “Thank you for the tea, Naomi. I had a wonderful time.”

Naomi smiled and hugged her tightly. “Come again soon.”

Olivia swept past Thomas, still irritated. She reached the yard before realizing he hadn’t followed her out. She turned back.

Thomas was standing in the doorway, still looking at Naomi.

“How about we go on a picnic tomorrow?” she heard him ask, bold as anything.

Naomi’s face went scarlet. “I... suppose we can do that.”

Olivia’s brows arched. Hadn’t Jacob mentioned that Thomas was seeing some saloon girl who was responsible for him being late to work all the time?

“After church?” he asked Naomi.

She nodded.

Thomas tipped his hat. “I’ll pick you up, then. After church.”

He winked and finally stepped outside.

Olivia shook her head. “Snake,” she muttered.

“Snake?” Thomas said, scouring the ground. “You see a snake, Olivia?”

She flattened her lips and nodded. “Yeah. They’re everywhere.”

He marched her to the wagon and helped her in, then climbed up behind her. She kept to the very edge of the bench as they started down the road toward the ranch. The sky was already turning purple above them.

Olivia rode in silence, still carrying the warm feeling of the afternoon with her. She’d had a good day. A great day. And best of all, a normal day. The first one she’d had in a very long time. And the only dark spot—Jacob. She’d agreed to be his wife, not his servant. She didn’t appreciate being “fetched” like she was some kind of ranch hand.

She had a good mind to tell him exactly how she felt about it. In fact, she would.

Best to start as you mean to go on. That’s what her ma used to say.

Chapter Thirteen

“Pa! Should I light the candles on the table?” Mabel called from the front room.

“Wait till we hear the wagon,” he said.

He’d finally asked Thomas to stop by Miss Wilkes’ and ask her to come home. That was half an hour ago, at least. They should be pulling up any minute.

Jacob checked the roast one more time, though he knew it didn’t need checking. He’d already looked at it twice in the last ten minutes. The kitchen smelled good. His mouth would be watering if he weren’t so nervous.

Mabel really outdid herself. She’d seasoned the meat the way he liked it, with onions and a little sage, and John had peeled the potatoes without losing any fingertips. So, he reckoned their special supper was a success. At least, so far. If they didn’t get their special guest soon, it might not stay that way.

Still, he lifted the lid again, pretending to check the carrots. The roast popped softly in the pan, sending up a hiss of steam. He wiped his hands on his trousers, then on the towel, then on his trousers again. He now understood how Olivia felt when she called them to dinner and they hem-hawed around, taking their time to get to the table.

This was too much hard work to take for granted. He wouldn’t do it again, and he’d make sure the children didn’t, either.

The light outside was fading fast. He leaned against the counter, staring outside and thinking that this was Olivia’s view all day, every day. She could see him if he was working near the barn or the corral, which he

often did. Sometimes, he'd glance at this window, wondering if she was there. Was she watching him back?

"I'm going to get some candles," John said, hurrying to the cabinet where they kept them. "Can I light them myself, Pa?"

Jacob sighed. "If you slow down and don't burn yourself. Think you can do that?"

"Yes, Pa."

A lantern already burned on the counter, throwing warm light across the table. He watched as John placed two candles on the table, using a match to light them. The table was beautiful.

Mabel had centered the plates earlier, but Jacob nudged one a little to the left, then nudged it back, unsure which looked better.

"I think they're perfect right there, Pa," Mabel told him.

"You're right. They are perfect." She was such a good girl, his Mabel.

She nodded and went back to fussing with the napkins. She'd folded them into little triangles and kept smoothing the edges, like she was afraid Olivia might judge her for crooked corners. Every few seconds, she glanced toward the window, then back at the napkins, then at the window again.

John was standing on a chair, trying to tie a ribbon around the water pitcher. Jacob didn't know why the pitcher needed a ribbon, but he didn't say anything. The kids were excited. He didn't want to spoil it.

"Think she'll like it?" John whispered, leaning close as if the roast might overhear him.

“She’ll like it,” Mabel whispered back, though her voice wobbled. “She has to.”

Jacob pretended not to hear, but the words hit him square in the chest. He walked to the window and pushed the curtain aside. Nothing yet. Just the darkening yard, the faint buzz of insects starting up for the night, and the empty stretch of road.

He let the curtain fall back into place.

“Pa?” John asked. “Should I blow out the candles and relight them when she gets here?”

He swallowed, his throat tight. “Not yet,” he said. “She’ll be here soon.”

And he prayed—quietly, fiercely—that Olivia would walk through that door and see what they’d tried to do for her. That she’d understand what it meant. That she’d stay.

Truth was, he was excited too. And nervous. More nervous than he expected. He didn’t understand it, but he wanted everything to be perfect. He wanted her to smile. No, he wanted to make her smile. He knew it wouldn’t make up for all the tears she cried the other night. But it was some token of atonement. And this was important to him.

He wiped his hands on a towel and leaned against the counter, watching the children move around the room. They’d worked hard all afternoon—cleaning the house, making him lunch, setting the table, sweeping the floor, and polishing the good plates. He’d helped, though he wasn’t sure how much help he’d actually been. Mostly, he’d just gotten in their way.

He felt like a man preparing for a courtship supper. The thought hit him hard enough that he had to look away. He hadn’t felt anything close to this since Julie. And he didn’t know what to do with that.

This absolutely wasn't a courtship. He wasn't fool enough to do that. He only wanted to thank Olivia for everything she'd done. For the children. For him. For the way the house felt now was different. It was warmer, more peaceful, like a place where a family lived.

He cleared his throat and straightened the plates again, though they didn't need straightening.

"Pa," John said, tugging on his sleeve. "Do you think she'll like it?"

Jacob looked down at his son's hopeful face. "I think she'll like it fine."

"I hope so. I want Olivia to stay with us," John told him.

"Why's that?" Jacob asked, already suspecting the answer he'd get—*I just do*. John was only eight, not really old enough to understand his feelings, much less how to express them. But he still wanted to hear what John had to say.

John gave a little half-shrug. "I don't know. Lots of reasons."

"Like what?"

"Well, she tells me stories and puts blueberries in my pancakes." John paused, looking thoughtful. "She plays bandits with me sometimes, and she lays out my clothes on the bed for me. She helped me catch a rabbit after school the other day—but then she said we needed to let it go 'cause it was just a baby. Yesterday, she fixed the hole in my breeches and said she was taking me to get new shoes later."

Jacob blinked, still taking in everything John had said. The boy had poured his whole heart out in one breath, and Jacob wasn't exactly sure what to do with it.

John sighed, then added softly, “And she’s nice to Mabel and me. I... think she loves us.”

Jacob’s heart gave him a painful kick. He looked over and found Mabel watching them, her hands clasped in front of her skirt. She’d been listening to John closely, her eyes wide and a soft smile on her sweet face. He wondered if she had her own list tucked away in that beautiful little mind of hers.

“What about you?” he asked.

Mabel straightened, as if she’d been waiting for the question. “I want her to stay, too,” she said simply. Then, after a breath, she added, “Because she listens to me. Really listens. When I talk about school, a play, or... anything, she’s my friend.”

Jacob smiled, letting her go on.

“And she helps me with my hair when it gets tangled,” Mabel said, touching the end of her braid. “She brushes it softly and doesn’t just rip the brush through my hair. She just... works it out gently.”

John leaned against Jacob’s arm, listening.

Mabel took another breath. “She makes the house feel different. It’s hard to explain, but I can feel it. It’s warmer. Homier. I think maybe it’s like a ma might do. I know it’s not the same. But I think it might be just as good.” Her voice wavered, but she kept going. “And more than anything, I want her to stay because you smile more when she’s here. I know you don’t think you do, but you do.”

Jacob stopped breathing for a moment.

“You really do,” John said, nodding his agreement.

Mabel stepped closer. “And she always tells the truth. Even when it’s hard, I like that about her.”

She looked up at Jacob, her eyes shining with a quiet certainty far older than her years.

“That’s why I want her to stay, Pa.”

Olivia had obviously made a place for herself here, and it was clear John cared for her deeply—maybe more than Jacob had realized.

But if she left, John would feel it hard, and Jacob didn’t want that for his boy. Still, he respected the way Olivia had treated his son with patience and kindness, and he now saw how much that mattered to John. He figured he’d have to do what he could to keep her there. That included marriage. Then, she couldn’t leave.

Finally, he smiled at John and told him to go sit down. Then, they waited. The sky outside grew dark, and Mabel kept glancing out the window. John asked three times if he could run down the drive to look for her. And Jacob told him no three times.

Then, finally, the sound of a wagon drifted up the drive.

“That’s her,” Jacob said. “Go on—light the candles.”

The children scrambled. Mabel struck a match and lit the two stubby candles she’d set in the middle of the table. John hurried to the door, then remembered he wasn’t supposed to fling it open and ran back to stand beside his sister.

Jacob smiled at him, then wiped his damp palms on his trousers. He didn’t know why they were sweaty.

He heard Olivia's footsteps on the path, then the creak of the porch boards. The doorknob turned.

The door swung open, and Olivia stepped inside, her face like thunder.

"—Jacob Hale," she said loudly, her eyes locked on him. "I am not your servant to order around, and if you think you can just send someone to fetch me after me every time you—"

She stopped mid-sentence and slowly turned, as if she felt the children's eyes on her.

Her gaze landed on the table. The candles. The food. The children stood stiff as fence posts, their faces blank.

Then, Jacob saw the regret hit her like a blow.

"Oh... my goodness," she breathed. "Did you do all this for me?"

Mabel nodded, her eyes big. John swallowed hard and nodded too.

Olivia's whole face changed. The irritation vanished, replaced by something soft and bright. She pressed a hand to her mouth.

"I've never had anyone do anything like this for me before," she said, her voice thick. "I love it. Truly, I do."

She dabbed at her eyes with the back of her hand, then looked at Jacob.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I thought... well, it doesn't matter what I thought. I'm touched. Really."

Jacob cleared his throat. “We... uh... wanted to thank you. For everything you’ve done for us. The house is starting to feel like a real home again. And that’s because of you.”

He hadn’t meant to say that last part out loud, but it slipped out before he could stop it. Olivia’s eyes softened even more.

Mabel stepped forward and took Olivia’s hand. “Come and sit. We made your favorite biscuits.”

Olivia blinked. “My favorite?”

“Well, they will be after you eat them,” Mabel said.

John hurried over to pull out her chair, and Olivia laughed, surprised at their attention. She sat down and let John tend to her.

Jacob watched his children fuss over Olivia—straightening her napkin, pushing the chair in, handing her the butter dish like it was a treasure. He felt something twist in his chest. Pride. Gratitude. Maybe even hope.

He sighed, then took his seat at the head of the table. Olivia sat across from him, still looking around like she couldn’t believe this was happening.

“Let’s say the blessing,” Jacob said, bowing his head.

They all bowed with him. His voice was calm and strong as he thanked the Lord for the food, the hands that prepared it, and the people at the table. When he finished, they all murmured “amen.”

Then, they all tucked in. As he’d hoped, the roast was tender, the potatoes soft, the biscuits flaky. Everything was delicious. Olivia praised

everything, especially the biscuits, which made Mabel beam and John sit up straighter.

“Pa cooked the roast,” Mabel said, giving her father a grateful look. “I just seasoned it.”

“Well, you used the right seasoning and the perfect amount,” Olivia praised.

Jacob tried to focus on his plate, but several times, he caught Olivia’s eyes across the table. Every time their eyes met, she quickly looked away. She knew he was staring at her. She blushed, focusing on her own plate. Then, Jacob learned something new. He enjoyed making Olivia blush.

The children chattered nonstop—about the next play, about school, about the calf that had gotten loose that morning. Olivia listened to every word, laughing, asking questions, making them feel important. Jacob watched her, watched them, and felt something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Contentment.

The kind that didn’t come from a quiet house, a new calf, or a finished list of chores. It was the kind that came from people. From family.

He wasn’t sure when the feeling had slipped in, but it was there now, steady as a heartbeat. He hadn’t decided yet what to do with it.

Glancing over at Olivia again, he was surprised to see that she was already looking at him. This time, though, she smiled—small, warm, and grateful. Beautiful.

Jacob felt his breath hitch. That was what he’d wanted. That smile, right there.

Once again, he was glad that they were moving forward with the engagement. He felt like a man with a future. Something he could look forward to.

It was ridiculous, of course. But tonight, he'd let it play out. Tomorrow, he'd get a hold of himself.

Chapter Fourteen

“Olivia!”

Olivia looked up to see Mabel coming out of the schoolhouse, surrounded by at least a dozen other children, her hand in the air, waving excitedly. She made her way over, hugged Olivia, then stepped back and smiled. “John’s coming. Miss Wilkes is talking to him about his homework.”

“Good,” Olivia replied. “I was hoping Naomi could take a walk over to the general store with us. I have a few things I want to pick up.”

“Can John and I get a sarsaparilla at the hotel?” Mabel asked hopefully.

“I think we can manage that,” Olivia laughed. “But I want you to look at some fabric with me. You need a new dress.”

Mabel squealed and danced on the balls of her feet. “Yes!”

They waited outside the schoolhouse, Olivia’s hands tucked into her shawl as a cool breeze blew through the yard. She could smell the chalk dust from the open windows. She glanced up and saw Naomi close one window while John closed the other.

A moment later, Naomi stepped out behind John, pausing to lock the schoolhouse door. Mabel started jumping up and down. “John! Miss Wilkes!” Mabel called, waving her slate in the air. “Over here!”

John barreled toward her, nearly tripping over his own boots. “What are we doing?”

“Sarsaparilla,” Mabel said excitedly.

“Shopping,” Olivia said at the same time, smiling.

Miss Wilkes joined them, greeting Olivia. “I was just getting ready to come and see you.”

“You were?” Olivia was filled with warmth.

“Yes. I wanted to talk to you about the Harvest Festival. And see what you’re planning to wear and what you want to take,” she added quietly.

“I was actually on my way to the mercantile now,” Olivia said, probably more excited than Mabel. “I want to get some fabric for Mabel and me. We’ll need new dresses.”

“What about me?” John asked, his hands on his hip as he pretended to be offended.

“What about you?” Olivia teased. “Do you need a new frock, too?”

John snorted. “No.”

Olivia chuckled. “We might be able to squeeze in enough fabric for a new pair of trousers and some nice shoes.”

John’s face broke into a smile. “And a sarsaparilla?”

“Don’t be greedy,” Olivia replied, then offered him a wink. She turned to Naomi. “Would you like to join us?”

“I’d love to,” she said. “I need a few things from the mercantile anyway.”

“Good,” Olivia replied, looping her arm through Naomi’s. “I could use the company.”

They set off down the road together, the children walking ahead, kicking stones and arguing about whether John would get sarsaparilla or ginger beer. Naomi shook her head at them, amused.

“You have your hands full,” Naomi said with a chuckle.

“Yes. But it’s not more than I can handle,” Olivia assured her.

“Good. Because I have news about the Harvest festival,” Naomi said, her voice turning serious. They’re adding a new judge to the panel this year. He’s from Siloam Springs, so he doesn’t know anyone here. That makes him far more likely to be objective. The town’s already buzzing about it. We need to start preparing.”

Olivia had already talked about it with Naomi and heard bits and pieces from the children. She knew the annual Harvest Festival was a big deal to the town. But she got the feeling she didn’t know just how big a deal it really was. “Just how important is this event?”

“Oh, it’s the biggest event of the year, next to Christmas,” Naomi said. “We normally hold it after the last of the crops come in. There are vendor booths, games, pony rides for the little children, and a pig chase for the older kids. They get to keep the pig if they catch it.”

“John would love that,” Olivia mused.

“It’s a lot of fun. And not just for the kids. There’s a whole slew of contests for women—a pie contest, a cake walk, a quilting competition, an embroidery and needlework contest, and a canning and preserves competition. Oh, and a bread-baking competition, too. I’m competing in that myself.”

“Mabel has a wonderful biscuit recipe,” Olivia said. “Maybe I can get her to enter, too.”

Naomi nodded. “The men have their own contests, like wood chopping, axe throwing, roping, horse racing, and I don’t know what all else.”

“My goodness! That’s... a lot,” Olivia sputtered. “Does Jacob usually participate?”

Naomi looked thoughtful for a moment. “I honestly can’t recall.” I don’t remember seeing him at the barn dance at the end of the festival, either. Not since Julie died. They have a quilt raffle at the end of the dance.”

“That all sounds so lovely,” Olivia said. Her cheeks warmed as she pictured herself gliding across the dance floor with Jacob, laughter swirling around them. Maybe—though she knew it wasn’t likely—he might pull her close at the end of the night and steal a gentle kiss beneath the lanterns. The thought made her heart flutter, and she felt a rush of excitement.

“It is exciting. And it’s not just the town. I think half the county shows up. Folks start planning weeks. And this year, the church ladies are determined to outdo themselves. Mrs. Whitcomb’s been practicing her apple pie recipe every Sunday. I think she’s been trying to bribe the judges.” Naomi whispered the last part.

Olivia laughed. “Does it work?”

“Nah. Everyone knows that Emily Sparks wins the pie-baking contest every year,” Naomi said. “I don’t even bother entering it anymore.”

That didn’t sound good. The same woman shouldn’t be winning the same contest year after year. Not unless her angel food cake was piped down directly from Heaven. “Maybe with the new judge, that might change. I think you should definitely enter this year.”

Naomi perked up. “You know, you’re right. I believe I just might.”

They reached the general store just as the stagecoach rattled past, splashing water on Mabel and John. The children wiped at their faces, smearing mud. Olivia chuckled, then dug out a couple of coins from her purse.

“Y’all go see if you can clean up at the hotel. Then, you can each get a sarsaparilla.” She waved them toward the hotel porch. “Go on. And clean up first!” she called after them.

Olivia watched through the window as the hotel clerk waved them toward the back to wash up. Then, he handed the children two bottles and told them to sit on the bench outside. Olivia watched them settle, feet swinging, already arguing over whose was the best.

Naomi leaned closer. “You spoil them.”

“I do not,” Olivia said, though she knew she did a little.

A wide grin appeared on Naomi’s face. “That’s a good thing, Olivia.”

Was it? Olivia smiled. She really didn’t care. They deserved it.

Olivia and Naomi headed into the general store. The bell above the door jingled as they stepped inside. Naomi waved at the clerk and steered Olivia toward the back. Shelves were stacked with flour, beans, crackers, and a plethora of dry goods, along with jars of penny candy. As always when she visited the mercantile, Olivia was impressed with the variety of offerings.

Naomi wandered toward the sewing notions while Olivia picked up a few things Jacob needed—coffee, soap, and a new tin of axle grease.

As she was comparing prices on lamp oil, a man she recognized as the postal clerk walked by.

“Miss Olivia,” he said, tipping his hat. “Got a letter for you.”

She blinked, then her heart jumped. “For me? Or for Jacob?”

“For you,” he confirmed. “Came in on the morning stage.”

She told Naomi she was running to the post office and would be right back, then left her basket on the counter. She followed him to the post office and leaned on the counter as he rummaged through a small stack of mail. “There it is,” he said, handing her an envelope. Her breath caught when she saw the handwriting.

Laura.

She hadn’t heard from her since leaving the boarding house. Relief washed over her—warm, sudden, almost dizzying. She tore the letter open right there, smiling before she even read the first line.

But her smile faded fast.

Her stomach dropped.

Liv, Victor came around asking questions...

Her eyes skimmed the words, her pulse thudding in her ears.

He came to the boarding house. Wanted to know where you’d gone. I didn’t tell him anything, but others might have. I’m worried. Be careful. Write me when you can.

Olivia’s hands trembled. She folded the letter quickly, pressing it against her chest as if she could smother the fear rising inside her.

Victor had been at the boarding house.

He was looking for her.

Her throat tightened. She hadn't felt this kind of fear since the night she and her mother fled Rock Springs, leaving half their belongings behind. She thought they'd outrun him. She thought she and her ma were safe. But the hotel manager had shown up at her door, warning her that Victor was there, looking for her.

And he was still searching.

And if he found her...

She swallowed hard. No. She wouldn't let that happen. And she was tired of running.

There was only one way to be safe. Really safe. One way to make sure Victor had no hold over her.

She needed Jacob to marry her.

Soon.

Her legs felt unsteady as she thanked the clerk and walked back to the general store. Naomi was waiting near the counter, holding a basketful of fabric and a few spools of thread.

"Did you get your letter?" she asked.

"Yes," Olivia said, forcing her voice to stay even. "We should hurry. I need to get home."

Naomi frowned. "What's wrong? Was it bad news?"

Olivia shook her head too quickly. "No. Everything's fine."

“What about your dresses?” Naomi asked. “I found some lovely fabric for you to look at.”

She looked down to see Naomi shoving two bolts of fabric toward her. “Oh, that’s lovely,” Olivia said, barely seeing it. “That’s perfect.”

The clerk told Olivia the price for her purchases, and Olivia shoved the money toward him. She tapped her finger on the counter as she waited for her change.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Naomi asked again.

Olivia stopped tapping and smiled at Naomi. “Yes. I’m fine. I just need to round up the kids and get home. Jacob will be back soon, wanting his supper. That’s all.”

Naomi didn’t believe her—Olivia could see it in her eyes—but she didn’t press. She simply nodded and helped gather the rest of their things.

They collected the children from the hotel porch. John was sticky with sarsaparilla, and Mabel had somehow gotten the cork stuck in her bottle. Olivia barely noticed. Her mind was racing.

Victor was closing in.

He’d soon find her. Again.

She kept her face calm for Naomi and the children’s sakes, but inside she felt like she was coming apart—the way she’d felt for years, always looking over her shoulder, always waiting for the next door to slam shut.

When they reached Naomi’s house, Naomi turned and touched her arm.

“Olivia,” she said softly. “If you ever need to talk, you can come to me.”

“I know.” Olivia forced a small smile. “Thank you. Truly.”

She hugged Naomi, then ushered the children down the road toward the ranch. The sun was starting to dip, turning the fields gold. She wished she’d brought the wagon now. The children skipped ahead, kicking rocks and picking at each other. Olivia barely noticed them, her mind racing.

She had a decision to make.

Should she tell Jacob the truth? The *whole* truth?

If she told him about Victor—about the engagement she’d broken, about the way he’d chased her from town to town all these years—would Jacob still marry her? Would he still want her in his home? Around his children?

Or would he send her away?

She crossed her arms, her hands tightening on her elbows.

She couldn’t risk losing the safety she’d found here. She couldn’t risk losing the children she’d fallen in love with. She couldn’t risk losing Jacob—who she’d started falling in love with, too. Not now, not when she’d finally begun to feel like she belonged somewhere.

But if she didn’t tell him...

Maybe he would agree to marry her quickly if she just asked? Would he do it without knowing the reason for the urgency? She could always blame Agnes.

No. It was time to own up to the truth and hope for the best. Hope he understood.

The ranch came into view, and like every other time she saw it, Olivia sighed. There was smoke curling from the chimney in the kitchen, the barn doors were open, the rockers on the front porch inviting her to sit while the horses milled about in the corral. Home.

Olivia's heart pounded.

She had to choose her words carefully. One wrong step, and everything she'd built with Jacob could fall apart.

She took a deep breath and told the kids to go inside and get washed up.

Whatever happened next, she wouldn't run anymore. She couldn't leave Jacob and the children. Besides, her ma was gone now, and there was no one else left to protect but herself.

It was time to end this.

Chapter Fifteen

“That hurts, *eh*, buddy?”

Jacob worked the salve into the bull’s hide with the side of his thumb, pressing it in deep so it wouldn’t shake loose the moment the animal twitched. The cut ran along the hind quarter, a long, deep slice likely caused by getting snagged on barbed wire. He’d cleaned it twice already, but the edges still looked angry and raw.

The bull tossed its head and stamped its feet, shaking the rope that held it still. Jacob kept his voice low and calm, the way his father used to when a horse got skittish. “Easy now. I know it's sore.”

The animal didn’t like being touched anywhere, but certainly not on a painful cut. Jacob held his breath for a moment, and the bull calmed down. After a minute or two, it even tolerated him enough to let him keep working.

Jacob kept one hand braced against the bull’s flank, brushing over its soft hide. But the tremble of muscle under his palm made its pain clear. Jacob smeared the last of the carbolic salve across the wound as quickly as he could, trying to be as gentle as he could. The smell of the salve was bitter and medicinal. Strong enough to cut through the dirt, the manure, and the strong, heavy scent of cattle.

He straightened, wiped his hand on a rag, then checked the edges of the cut one last time. It would heal, so long as infection didn’t set in. He’d keep an eye on it for a few days, maybe wrap it if the bull would stand for it long enough. There’d be a scar, for sure. But as far as he knew, that wouldn’t affect the bull’s sale at auction.

The old stud might not be the prettiest one at the party, but he would be one of the healthiest.

Jacob patted the bull when he was done, his jaw set. He couldn't afford to lose another head—every animal counted now, more than ever. With an extra mouth to feed, letting even one go would mean tightening the belt in ways he wasn't willing to face. The thought of letting any of his ranch hands go bothered him. They were more than just workers; they were friends. Part of his family.

Thomas' talk about expanding the ranch echoed in his mind. Maybe growing was the right move, now that he was finally turning his attention where it belonged. His family deserved more than just getting by. It was a shame that it had taken so long to realize it. But he was here now, and that had to count for something.

He was reaching for the lid of the tin when movement caught his eye. Someone was coming across the field at a fast clip. Too fast for a casual visit. Too fast for comfort.

Olivia.

Jacob's stomach tightened. She'd never come out this far before and wouldn't unless she had a reason. And the look on her face—pale, mouth pinched—told him the reason wasn't good.

He snapped the lid onto the tin, shoved it into his saddlebag, and swung the bag over his shoulder. The bull snorted behind him, and Jacob turned to watch it. The last thing he needed was for him or Olivia to get stamped on by a startled bull.

"Wait there!" he called to Olivia as he loaded the saddlebag on his horse and mounted. Then he trotted over to where she stood.

"Jacob," she said, her voice trembling.

"Climb up," he said, reaching out his hand. "I don't trust these bulls."

Olivia took his hand and stepped into the stirrup. Jacob did the rest, pulling her up behind him.

“Are the children alright?” he asked as soon as she was settled.

“Yes. They’re fine,” she assured him. “I just need to talk to you.”

He searched her face for some clue. She didn’t look sick. She wasn’t carrying bags, so she wasn’t leaving. But something had shaken her enough to drive her out into the pasture alone. That wasn’t like her.

They started back toward the barn at a brisk walk, the horse’s hooves thudding against the packed earth. Olivia’s hands tightened around his coat, not in fear of falling, but in worry.

“It’s about that letter,” she said quietly. “The one from Pastor Fleming. And Agnes.”

Jacob’s jaw tightened. “I figured as much.”

“She means well,” Olivia murmured, though her voice said she wasn’t sure she believed it. “But she’s... pushing. Hard. And the pastor—he’s only trying to help her keep order, I suppose. But it feels like they’ve already decided what our life should look like.”

Jacob didn’t speak right away. He felt her breath against his back, quick and uneven.

“I don’t mind expectations,” she went on. “I don’t mind rules. I just —” She hesitated. “I don’t want to be a burden. Or a problem you have to fix.”

“You’re not,” he said, sharper than he meant to.

She rested her forehead lightly against his shoulder. “I just needed you to know how it feels.”

The barn came into view. Jacob urged the horse faster, needing solid ground under his boots before he answered her properly. He stopped in front, helped her down, and climbed off behind her, his mind already turning over what she’d said—and what she hadn’t.

“I just...” she trailed off, following him inside, “...came from town. And it’s not good.”

Confused, he stopped and gave her his full attention. “What’s not good?”

“People are talking, Jacob. Agnes is talking.” She stopped, and he saw her swallow hard.

He almost laughed. Probably would have if she didn’t look so upset. “Olivia, I don’t care what folks in town are saying.”

“You should,” she snapped, grabbing his arm before he could brush past her. Her fingers dug in harder than he expected. “Jacob, listen to me.”

He looked down at her hand, then at her face. She wasn’t just upset. She was scared.

“All right,” he said, quieter. “Tell me what happened.”

She swallowed, gathering herself. “They’re talking about us. About me living in your house. About us not being married.”

He let out a breath through his nose. “People always talk, Olivia. They’ve got nothing better to do.”

“This isn’t just talk.” Her voice rose, then cracked. “Agnes is upset. She says it’s improper. She’s gone to the pastor.”

That made him pause. Not because he feared the pastor, but because Agnes had a way of stirring up trouble when she felt righteous about something. And she always felt righteous.

Still, he didn’t like being pushed, either. “Agnes can mind her own business.”

“She won’t,” Olivia said. “She’s telling people you’re keeping me here at your beck and call with no date set for marriage. That it’s not right or decent. And now the pastor is planning to come speak with you.”

Jacob clenched his jaw. He could picture it already—Pastor Fleming standing on his porch, hat in hand, voice gentle but firm, telling him what a God-fearing man ought to do as if Jacob didn’t already know how to run his own house.

Olivia stepped closer. “Jacob, it’s hurting your reputation. Yours. Mine. And it will hurt the children if it keeps on. We’ve decided to marry, anyway. Let’s just do it.”

He didn’t care about his reputation. And frankly, only a little about Olivia’s. She would be his wife at some point. So, what did it really matter? But the children... that was a different story.

“We have to get married,” she said. “Now.”

That word—*now*—hit him wrong. He stiffened. “I said I would marry you. And I will. But I’ll do it when I’m ready. Not when Agnes tells me to jump.”

“This isn’t about Agnes—”

“It is,” he cut in. “She’s the one stirring the pot. And I won’t let her run my life.”

Olivia’s eyes flashed, but she didn’t argue. Not the way he expected. Instead, she looked... wounded. She let go of his arm and wrapped her hands together in front of her, twisting her fingers.

“This isn’t your decision to make alone,” she said, voice small and breathy. “It affects me, too.”

He felt his temper rise, slow and hot. “I’ve given you my word. Isn’t that enough?”

He expected her to snap back. To tell him his word didn’t mean much if he continued to drag his feet. To accuse him of not really wanting to get married. To throw something acidic or cutting, the way some women did when they felt cornered.

But she didn’t.

Her eyes filled with tears.

Real ones. Not the kind meant to sway a man. He could tell the difference after raising Mabel. These came too fast, too suddenly, and she turned her face away as if ashamed of them.

Jacob’s anger drained out of him in an instant. He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Olivia, tell me what’s really eating at you?”

She shook her head, but the tears kept coming. “I guess I’m just... afraid.”

“Afraid? Of what?”

“Of everything.” She swiped at her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “I don’t have anyone. You know that. I have no family to go back to. No home. If you send me away, I have nowhere to go. No one to protect me. No one to speak for me.”

Her voice broke on the last word.

Jacob felt something twist in his chest. He wasn’t good with crying. Never had been. But seeing her like this—small, scared, trying so hard to hold herself together—it did something to him he didn’t expect.

He reached out, hesitated, then rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m not sending you away.”

“You might,” she whispered.

“No.” He shook his head. “I won’t. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. I’m sorry.”

She looked up at him, eyes red-rimmed. “I just... I need to know I’m safe.”

“You are,” he said. And he meant it. “I give you my word, and I’ll keep it. We’ll set a date. Soon. When we are both ready. I’ll think about what you said.”

She nodded, though she didn’t look happy about it. She wiped her face again, took a shaky breath, and stepped back.

“I should get back to the children,” she said.

He watched her turn and walk toward the house, skirts brushing the tall grass. She kept her head down, shoulders tight, as if she were holding something heavy inside her.

Jacob stood there long after she disappeared through the back door.

Something was going on. Something wasn't right. He felt it in his gut. She'd told him she was afraid, but there was more to it. There was something she hadn't said. Something she was carrying alone.

He fished into his saddlebag, pulling out the salve he'd just used on his bull and replacing it on the shelf with the other medicine. Then, he looked toward the house again.

He'd promised her he'd think on it. But the truth was, he wasn't sure what to think. He couldn't say why he was putting it off. He really had no reason, probably because he felt like everyone was pushing him into it. But if it meant that much to her, maybe he should just go ahead and do it.

He'd chew on it a bit more and talk to her when they'd both had a chance to think it over.

Chapter Sixteen

The morning was colder than she expected. A thin draft slipped under the kitchen door, brushing her ankles and sending a chill up her spine. Even with the stove on, she thought about lighting a fire in the living room before the kids came downstairs.

Outside, she could hear the animals stirring—the soft lowing of cattle, the impatient stomping of the horses wanting feed, and a rooster crowing late as usual. The smell of biscuits drifted from the oven, making her mouth water. The lovely scent filled the room in a way that should have comforted her. But it didn't.

The conversation from two days earlier still preyed on her mind. She'd meant to be honest with Jacob, to explain herself without falling apart. Instead, she'd panicked, cried, and left him standing there with more questions than answers. She hated the memory of it, hated how small it made her feel.

She'd meant to tell him about Victor, but her nerve failed her at the last second. She ended up spewing some gibberish about her reputation. The way he'd looked at her, as if she'd lost her mind but was too polite to say.

She pushed the thought aside and focused on the bacon, determined not to let her nerves ruin another morning.

She had just set the biscuits on the table when she heard someone on the stairs. Jacob.

"Good morning," Olivia said gently as he walked briskly into the kitchen.

"It's cold in here," he noted. "I'll go light a fire before I go."

Olivia frowned. “Are you not going to eat breakfast before you get started?”

“I need to get the rest of the hay in before it rains again,” Jacob replied, grabbing a cup from the cupboard and moving toward the kettle on the stove.

She wasn’t sure how much rain they’d actually see this time of year, but she understood the work needed to get done. She just hoped it wasn’t because of her. Olivia continued loading bacon on a platter while Jacob poured his coffee.

The conversation with Jacob two days earlier still sat heavily between them. She regretted approaching him the way she did. She’d replayed it more times than she cared to admit—what she’d said, what she should have said, what she wished she hadn’t said. She’d meant to explain things clearly, calmly. Truthfully. Instead, she panicked. Then, she’d cried like a child and left him looking confused.

He must think her a fool. She certainly felt like one. She pushed the thoughts aside and focused on breakfast. The children would be down soon, and she wanted everything to be ready for them. Their days seemed to start better when they weren’t rushing around, trying not to be late.

She’d just set the platter on the table beside the biscuits when she heard slow, dragging footsteps on the stairs. Too slow for John. Too slow and heavy for the usual morning rush.

Mabel appeared in the doorway, still in her nightgown and wrapped in her shawl. Her hair was tangled, and her face was pale.

Then, she coughed—a deep, rattling sound that made Olivia straighten at once.

“Oh, no,” Olivia said, tossing the towel on the counter and heading straight for Mabel.

“I don’t feel too good,” Mabel said, rubbing her eyes.

Olivia stepped closer and pressed the back of her hand to Mabel’s forehead. Warm, but not burning. “Looks like you’ve come down with a cold,” she told her. “I can make you a steam bath and some willow bark tea. For now, no school. Go back to bed, and I’ll be there in a minute.”

Mabel nodded, looking relieved. She turned to go, but Jacob’s stern voice stopped her.

“What’s wrong with her?” he demanded.

He sat at the head of the table, coffee in hand, watching everything with that squinty, assessing look he got when something concerned him.

“She’s got a cold,” Olivia said. “Nothing more.”

Jacob frowned. “I saw they walked home in the rain yesterday. Both of them. They were soaked through.”

Olivia felt the sting of that. “I met them on the road,” she said. “We walked together. The rain moved in faster than any of us expected. It couldn’t be helped.”

He didn’t answer, but the look he gave her felt like blame. She tried to keep the hurt from her voice.

“I talked to Naomi yesterday. She said a few of the schoolchildren were out sick with colds. I’m sure that’s all this is.”

Jacob pushed back his chair and stood. “If it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll go fetch the doctor.”

Olivia blinked. “Jacob, that isn’t necessary. It’s only a head cold. She needs rest, warm tea, and a day or two in bed to rest and recover. You

don't need to waste money on a doctor."

He shook his head stubbornly. "You can't know that. You're not a doctor."

Olivia steadied her breath. "I hear you," she said softly. "And I can understand why you're worried. But the doctor's in town, and it'll take you an hour to get there and back. Not to mention the money you'll be out for no good reason. Let me sit with her for a while. If she gets worse, if her fever rises or her breathing changes, I'll fetch him myself. I promise."

Jacob's jaw tightened. "You know, that's exactly what they said about Julie." His voice dropped, rough. "She had that same little cough. Just a tickle, they said. Bed rest and warm tea, they told me. And then—" He swallowed hard. "I remember the sound she made on her last night, like she couldn't get enough air. Couldn't stop coughing long enough to take a breath. I think they call it a death rattle. Well, I can still hear it. I even hear it in my sleep."

Olivia felt the words hit like a slap in the face. Grief, anger, and guilt all tangled together. Mabel wasn't Julie. And neither was she. She wasn't trying to replace his deceased wife. And she certainly wasn't going to stand by and do nothing if she thought for a second Mabel was that sick.

"Jacob," she whispered, hurt rising despite her best effort to swallow it.

But he was already brushing past her. He paused in the doorway and looked at her.

"They all told me Julie would be fine without a doctor, too," he said, his voice tight. "And look what happened to her."

He didn't wait for a reply. The door slammed shut behind him.

Olivia flinched. The dismissal landed harder than she would have expected. He spoke as if she were careless, like she'd risk Mabel's health without a second thought. The idea stung. She'd offered to tend to Mabel, do everything she knew to ease her discomfort, and still he looked at her like she was someone to be corrected, overridden, or doubted.

She stood rooted to the floor, heat rising in her face. She felt small, pushed aside, and angry in a way she didn't want to be anymore. He hadn't even paused to consider that she might know what she was talking about. He'd scoffed at her experience, her certainty, her care—like none of it mattered. Like she didn't matter.

She swallowed hard, trying to get a hold of her stampeding emotions. She hadn't meant to argue with him. She hadn't meant to stir up anything painful. She'd only wanted to reassure him, to keep him from spending money he didn't need to spend. But the more she replayed his reaction, the clearer it became that this wasn't really about her at all.

He wasn't seeing Mabel's cold for what it was. He was seeing something else entirely—something older and heavier. He saw Julie. The fear of losing someone else he loved was too much for him. And from what he'd said, she got the feeling he felt responsible for Julie's death. He felt guilty.

Olivia let out a slow breath. She didn't like how quickly he'd shut her out, or how easily he'd dismissed her, but she could understand the place it came from. He wasn't accusing her because he believed she'd harm his daughter. He was reacting to a wound that still hadn't healed, one she hadn't caused and couldn't fix.

It didn't erase the hurt, but it softened the edges. Enough for her to stand there, gather herself, and give him the grace he couldn't yet give himself.

She took a slow breath.

“Is Mabel gonna die?” John asked from the stairs, his voice clogged with tears. He was half-dressed, hair sticking up in every direction, looking broken-hearted.

“No!” Olivia said firmly. “No one’s going to die from a head cold. She just needs to stay home a couple of days and get some rest.”

“All right,” he sniffed, and then his whole manner changed. “I think I oughtta stay with her and keep her company while she’s feelin’ puny.”

He looked at Olivia and waggled his eyebrows, hopeful in a way that made her smile despite everything.

“Is that right?” Olivia chuckled.

“No, really,” he said, growing animated. “I don’t mind.”

Sighing, she shook her head. “I think you’ll be better served going to school today. But I’m sure your sister appreciates your concern.”

John’s shoulders slumped, but he nodded.

“Can you walk by yourself?” she asked him, knowing that he could.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up this afternoon, like always.” Olivia bit back a smile. “Now, hurry up and get dressed. Then, come down for breakfast.”

He trudged back upstairs to finish getting ready.

“I’m going back to bed,” Mabel announced, following John up the stairs.

Olivia watched them go, then turned back to the kitchen. She filled a pot with water, set it on the stove, and reached for the willow bark. She'd taken to keeping it in the cupboard where she could get to it more easily. Then she opened the tin and measured out a handful, dropping it into the simmering pot of water.

While it heated, she prepared a steam bath. She filled another pot with water and set it to boil in the fireplace while the tea simmered. When it was boiling, she poured it into a basin and added a spoonful of menthol crystals she'd found in the cupboard. She stopped fretting when the sharp, penetrating scent of menthol filled the kitchen.

When everything was ready, she loaded it all on a tray with a few towels and carried it upstairs.

Mabel's room was dim, the curtains drawn. She lay curled under the quilt, coughing softly. Olivia set the basin on the small table beside the bed.

"All right," she said. "Sit up for me."

Mabel pushed herself upright, though it seemed like quite a task. "Let's see if we can get your breathing easier."

She felt confident it would work. The entire room already smelled sterile and minty. "Bend your head down," Olivia instructed.

With Mabel leaning over the basin, Olivia draped a towel over her head and carefully guided her face closer to the steaming basin.

"Breathe in slow," Olivia said. "It'll help loosen the cough."

Mabel obeyed, eyes closed, shoulders relaxing as she took deep breaths of steam.

After a few minutes, Olivia removed the towel and put the basin on the table. Next, she handed Mabel the cup of tea. “Now, drink this. It’ll help with the fever and the aches.”

Mabel sipped it, making a face at the bitterness. “It tastes awful.”

“That means it’s working,” Olivia said with a chuckle, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Mabel leaned against her shoulder, tired and in need of comfort. Olivia stroked Mabel’s hair, feeling the warmth of her skin, the slight rumble in her breath. Nothing dangerous. Nothing alarming. Just a cold, the kind every child gets sometimes.

Unfortunately, Jacob hadn’t seen it that way. But she couldn’t blame him. Not after what he’d lived through.

Olivia kissed Mabel’s forehead, then looked toward the window, thinking of Jacob riding hard toward town, panic and fear pushing him faster than reason. She just wished she knew how to comfort him, too.

He wasn’t angry at her. Not really. He was afraid of losing Mabel.

She stopped stroking Mabel’s hair and rested her hands on Mabel’s cheeks.

“It’ll pass,” she murmured. “You’ll be yourself in no time.”

Mabel gave her a small smile and nodded, her eyelids already drooping.

“Here,” Olivia said, standing and fluffing Mabel’s pillows. “Lie back, and I’ll tell you a story.”

Olivia stayed with her until her breathing evened out. Then she sat quietly, watching Mabel rest and let her thoughts drift.

Jacob should have been back by now. She wondered what he would say when he got home. She didn't know if he'd still be angry or embarrassed or silent. But she knew one thing for certain. It was poor timing with the Harvest Festival coming and the livestock auctions at the stockyard that Jacob had mentioned the day before. But that couldn't be helped. Mabel was sick with a bad cold.

Would she ever understand the true depths of Jacob's grief? Would he ever unburden himself of the lot of it? She wasn't sure if she wanted him to or not. But she feared that if he didn't, they might never figure out how to live together under the same roof without hurting each other.

She sighed and brushed a strand of hair from Mabel's forehead.

Maybe she'd never have Jacob the way she wanted. But she had the children. And every day, she loved them a little bit more.

One step at a time. One day at a time.

And today, her job was simple. Take care of Mabel.

She'd worry about the rest later.

Chapter Seventeen

“You all right?” Jacob shouted over his shoulder.

He thought he heard the doctor grunt. At least, he hoped he did.

He rode hard all the way back, Dr. Stephens somehow keeping pace beside him. Although older, the man didn’t seem bothered by the speed. But Jacob knew he was pushing his horse more than was polite. He couldn’t help it.

It was that cough. She’d sounded just like Julie with that chesty cough. He kept seeing Mabel’s pale face in his mind, hearing that cough, and remembering the way Julie had looked the last morning she’d been well enough to sit up. He couldn’t go through that again. Not with his sweet Mabel.

He didn’t say any of that aloud. Voicing those thoughts might give fear more room to take hold than he could afford. Dr. Stephens wasn’t much for talk anyway, and he didn’t seem to mind the silence.

When they reached the house, Jacob swung down before his horse had fully stopped. He didn’t bother tying the reins. He took the porch steps two at a time and didn’t look back. The doctor took a moment to collect his bag, then followed at a slower, more measured pace.

Jacob was tapping his foot, his hand resting on the doorknob. He waited until Dr. Stephens was on the porch steps, then he pushed open the door. He hit the stairs, again taking them two at a time, then hurried to Mabel’s room. The house smelled like menthol and herbs, and it got closer as he neared Mabel’s room. Her door was cracked, and a soft voice drifted into the hallway—Olivia’s voice.

Jacob froze, one hand on the doorframe. Dr. Stephens paused beside him.

She was telling one of her stories, the kind he thought she made up on the spot. They were always full of small adventures and gentle lessons. He just figured Olivia was spinning tales because nobody had a mother like the one she described.

He had a healthy respect for his own ma. But if Olivia's stories were true, her ma must've been the kindest, wisest, and wittiest woman he'd ever heard tell of. Either way, he knew Olivia had learned from someone how to look after folks, to care for them, and show them love. She was taught to do that by someone because that's exactly what Olivia gave to his kids.

Mabel and John both loved her stories. John always listened as if the world depended on it.

He pushed the door open a bit so he could see. Olivia sat on the edge of the bed, her posture relaxed but attentive. Mabel lay propped up on pillows, a warm cloth on her chest and another across her forehead. Her cheeks were flushed, but her breathing sounded better than it had when he had left.

Olivia held something in her hands—a necklace. He'd seen it before on her neck, though he'd never paid it much mind. It was a small silver cross on a worn chain. She lifted it so Mabel could see it better.

"This, my girl, is a special necklace," Olivia said softly. "My mother gave it to me. She said it had healing powers for anyone who wore it."

Mabel blinked up at her. "It's magic?"

"I guess you could say that," Olivia said with a small smile. "When I was little, whenever I was sick or scared, she'd let me wear it. And it always made me feel better. Now it's your turn."

Mabel reached out a weak hand. “Really?”

Olivia chuckled. “Really.”

“Will it make me feel better?” Mabel asked, her feverish eyes shining.

Olivia nodded, leaning forward to put the necklace on Mabel. “It sure will, beautiful. I guarantee you’ll be back on your feet in a couple of days if you keep this on.”

Mabel smiled, her hand coming up to clutch the pendant. “I think I can feel it.”

Jacob felt something tighten in his throat. Not because he believed in magic—because of course, he didn’t—but because Mabel did. And because Olivia said it in a way that made even him want to believe it.

Dr. Stephens watched the scene unfold with a raised brow, but not unkindly.

Jacob cleared his throat.

Olivia turned, startled. “Oh. We didn’t hear you come in.”

She stood and stepped aside so the doctor could reach the bed.

Dr. Stephens approached Mabel with the calm, experienced air of a man who’d seen far worse.

“Hello, Mabel,” he said.

“Hi, doc,” she replied.

“Your pa wants me to give you a quick look over. That all right with you?”

Mabel nodded, still grasping the pendant tightly. “I think I feel better,” she said.

Dr. Stephens chuckled. “Well, I’m already here. So, why don’t I take a look?”

“All right,” she said, her eyes slicing to Jacob. She gave him a smile.

Jacob thought his knees might give out. But he remained standing, smiling back at his girl.

Dr. Stephens checked Mabel’s forehead, felt her pulse, listened to her breathing, and asked her a few questions—Was she hot? Did she ache? Where’d it hurt? The entire exam took less than a minute.

When he was done, he turned to Jacob with a smirk that made Jacob feel both foolish and relieved.

“This girl has all the care she needs right here,” the doctor said, cutting his eyes to Olivia. “You’re doing everything right, Miss Olivia. Rest, warmth, fluids. Nothing more to be done.”

Jacob felt heat rise in his face. “But the cough—”

“It’s a cold,” Dr. Stephens said. “A plain old regular cold. She’ll be fine in a couple of days.”

He gathered his bag, gave Mabel a pat on the head, and walked toward the door. Jacob reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

“No. No, no.” Dr. Stephens shook his head. “There’s no charge for today.”

Before Jacob could argue, the doctor tipped his hat to Olivia, smiled at Mabel, and left.

The house fell silent after the front door shut behind him.

Olivia didn’t say anything. She just sat back down beside Mabel, smoothing her hair and adjusting the cloth on her forehead. Jacob stood in the doorway longer than he meant to, watching them. She didn’t look at him, but she didn’t seem angry either. She just kept her focus on Mabel. His daughter was happy to lie there and let Olivia take care of her. Her eyes fell shut, and soon she was asleep.

When he was sure Mabel was resting peacefully, he stepped away, not saying anything to Olivia. He didn’t know what to say. Once again, he’d acted like a fool. And once again, he was duty-bound to apologize. But not right now. He was still too raw, still too keyed up from this morning’s goings on, imagining he might lose Mabel.

He needed a few hours to himself.

That night, after the children were asleep, Jacob sat on the porch in his rocker. He could hear the horses shifting in the corral, a slight breeze brushing through the grass. It should have calmed him, but his thoughts kept circling the same place. He still hadn’t apologized to Olivia. And he still hadn’t agreed to a date for their wedding.

He’d let her down. Again.

And what would he have done if Olivia hadn’t been there? He shuddered to think. She was turning into more than just a childminder and a housekeeper. She felt more like a partner than anything else. It became clear to him that with her there, things were a lot easier to shoulder. She wanted

to help him carry his burdens—had invited him to share some of them with her. But he'd refused.

The door opened behind him, and Olivia stepped out, carrying two cups of something hot and steamy. She handed one to him.

"Tea," she said. "Chamomile to relax you and help you sleep well."

He took it, though he didn't know if he deserved it. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, sitting down in the rocker beside him. "The children are asleep. Mabel's fever is down, and she seems to be resting comfortably."

"That's good," he murmured, sipping his tea. "Thank you for taking care of her."

"Of course. I don't mind a whit." The rocker she sat in was not too close, but not too far, either. The lantern light from inside caught the edge of her face, softening the tired lines around her eyes. But even tired, she was still beautiful.

Would he ever get used to that? He doubted it. Every time she looked his way, he lost his breath a little. A man didn't grow accustomed to a face like hers. She was too beautiful. She didn't look like someone meant for a place this rough. She seemed made for somewhere easier, somewhere finer than anything out here.

He felt like he'd stolen something precious from the world—like he was hoarding all that beauty for himself.

He told himself to settle down, stop thinking like a lovesick calf, and cleared his throat. "I owe you an apology."

She didn't look surprised. But she didn't look smug either. She just sat there, waiting.

"I'm ashamed of how I acted this morning," he said with a sigh, before continuing, "Not just this morning. The other day in the field, too. Really, since the day you got here."

"You don't need to apologize." Olivia looked down at her hands. "You've had a lot on your shoulders."

"That's no excuse," he said, not wanting her to let him off the hook so easily. "I've been short with you. Rude. Cruel, even. I've treated you like you were here against my will, when the truth is... you've done nothing but help this family."

"That's not true," she argued. "You made me a wonderful meal and told me how much you appreciated me not even a week ago."

She lifted her eyes then, and his breath stuttered, as it usually did when he had her full attention.

"And then I yelled at you. And after that, I was rude and cruel." He only then felt the truth of it. "It's no wonder you don't trust me to carry out my promise to wed. I've given you no reason to feel safe."

She didn't reply. But he noticed that she didn't deny it, either.

"I'm sorry, Olivia," he said again. "I'll do better."

She gave him a small smile. Not bright, not triumphant—just honest. "I'll try, too."

He nodded, feeling something loosen inside him. Not completely, but enough that he could relax.

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the night creatures all around them. Jacob sipped the tea. It wasn't bad. Olivia did the same, rocking slowly and looking out across the dark yard. He wondered what she was thinking.

He couldn't know because he didn't know her. Not really. But that was something he could rectify. And it seemed like a good place to start.

"So, you were a nurse?" he finally said, breaking the silence.

She blinked at him, surprised. "Yes," she said. "In a little town called Granger. Do you know it?"

"Never been there," he replied, rocking and sipping his tea. "Tell me about it. Why were you there?"

They spent the next hour on the porch, drinking tea while Olivia gave him bits of her past. And he ate it all up, asking questions and making mental notes. For a young lady, it seemed that she'd traveled all over the state, been to almost every town, and lived in most of them. At least, for a while. She was a wanderer.

Hopefully, her wandering days were behind her now, and she'd gotten all the traveling out of her system.

Still, whether she did or she didn't, he was just selfish enough to keep her. And with that decision made, he knew what he had to do.

Chapter Eighteen

The house was quiet as she opened the door and stepped inside, Jacob right behind her. Olivia hadn't meant for the evening to stretch on so long. It was still warm enough; they hadn't lit a fire yet. So, except for the lantern flickering on the table, it was dark. The clock on the wall ticked loudly in the quiet. She glanced at it and blinked.

Almost midnight.

She hadn't realized how much time had passed since she sat down beside him on the porch. They'd been talking for hours. About her, mostly. He'd asked questions, and she'd answered them, and somehow the conversation had kept going.

She'd told him about the towns she'd lived in, the people she'd worked for, the odd jobs she'd taken when money was thin. She'd even shared a few of the stories she'd collected along the way—small things, nothing grand, but enough to make him chuckle once or twice.

Like that time in Sundance with Dr. Weaver, the dentist she'd worked for, who insisted she assist him while he pulled a stubborn molar from Tom Pratt's mouth. Mr. Pratt was a huge fella who owned a ranch on the edge of town. He was rough, tough, mean, and grizzled. The kind of man who made you wonder how many men he'd killed in his lifetime.

But the poor old fella fainted as soon as Dr. Weaver held up the tooth extractor for them to see. She couldn't blame him. It was terrifying, leaving her with a permanent reminder to brush her teeth each night before bed. Dr. Weaver didn't seem to mind. He just knelt on the floor beside Mr. Pratt and took the opportunity to remove one infected molar.

Olivia saw the moment the tooth gave way—and, in all the commotion, she joined Mr. Pratt on the floor, out cold. Dr. Weaver claimed

afterward that he'd never had two patients drop at the same time, and that he ought to start charging double.

She'd stared at him after she told the story, watching him laugh, thinking that she'd never heard anything more lovely than the sound of Jacob Hale laughing. She vowed to spend the rest of their time together striving to make him laugh.

The house was stuffy, so she went to the kitchen and opened a window. A light breeze blew inside, bringing with it the comforting smell of mint and rosemary. She took a deep breath, not remembering the last time she'd talked that much about herself. Not even with Naomi. She couldn't recall the last time someone had been that interested. Besides her ma, of course.

Jacob followed her into the kitchen, surprising her. She thought he'd go straight to bed, given the time. And she was prepared to go to her room, too, though she didn't actually feel tired. Not even a lick. And Jacob didn't look tired, either. He stood near the stove, rubbing the back of his neck, looking like he wasn't sure what to do with himself now that they were inside.

"Would you like another cup of tea?" she asked.

He looked up, his eyes gleaming. "Yes. I would."

She filled the kettle again, set it on the stove, and tried not to stare at him. Something was different about him. She couldn't name it, but she felt it. There was a looseness in his shoulders. A softness around his eyes. She couldn't say why, but he wasn't guarded the way he usually was and was not braced for trouble. Not waiting for her to say the wrong thing.

When the tea was ready, they sat down at the table. The lantern cast a warm circle of light between them, and a quiet breeze blew through the open window.

The cup clinked against a saucer as Jacob took a sip and set it back down on the table. “You know, I’ve had about a million cups of tea in my lifetime,” he said. “So, why does yours taste the best?”

Giggling, Olivia answered. “Probably because I’ve made about two million cups of tea in my lifetime, and that makes me experienced.”

He chuckled, taking another sip.

She watched him for a moment, noticing how at ease he seemed in the quiet. For the first time since she arrived, he looked almost content. It struck her then just how handsome he was. Something was captivating about the tousle of his dark hair, the strong lines of his jaw, and the quiet warmth in his eyes. She found herself drawn to his rugged appearance.

She’d always known he was appealing, but sitting there in the lantern’s glow, there was a quiet strength to him that was nothing short of magnificent.

Guilt crept in as she glanced away, feeling as though she was stealing something precious—knowing that several good women in town, Naomi included, would have been more than happy to take her place. That he’d chosen her to share his home and his children—it made her feel luckier than she dared admit. The thought put a warmth in his heart.

Olivia wrapped her hands around her cup. She didn’t want to ruin the peaceful moment, but there was something she needed to know.

“I know you were thinking about your wife this morning, right? And that’s why you were so upset.”

Jacob didn’t flinch. He didn’t deny it. He just nodded once. “That’s true.”

He stared into his tea for a moment before speaking again. “But that’s not an excuse for how I acted. I’ve spent a long time living in fear and stuck in the past. And that’s no way to run a house. Or raise children. Or treat someone who’s done nothing but help.”

Olivia let the words sink in. They were honest. And she reckoned it cost him to share.

It was time to put the hard question out there. “Are you ready to put all that behind you and start thinking about your future now?”

He didn’t answer right away. His jaw worked, and he looked toward the window as if the darkness outside might whisper the right answer.

“I’m not sure,” he said finally.

The words landed exactly where she feared they would. She felt them in her gut, heavy and cold. He wasn’t ready.

She’d known this was coming. She’d known it since the moment he’d hesitated two days ago in the field. But she was glad it happened. She hadn’t been totally honest with him then, and he hadn’t been honest with her. Hearing it out loud, now, made it clear what she had to do.

Thoughts of Laura’s letter ran through her mind—of Victor and the way her stomach had dropped when she’d read his name. She remembered Jacob’s refusal to marry her when she’d asked. And she thought of how badly she needed safety—real safety, like the kind marriage would provide her. If she couldn’t find that here, then she had to find it somewhere else.

Jacob wasn’t ready. And she couldn’t stay here waiting for him to be. She didn’t have the benefit of time.

She took a slow breath, almost whispering, “Jacob, I think it’s best if I leave.”

His head snapped toward her. “What?”

“I don’t want to force you into something you’re not ready for,” she said. “You’ve been honest with me. I owe you the same. I need to be somewhere safe. I need to feel secure. And if you’re not ready to marry, then I shouldn’t stay here.”

Before she could pull her hand back, Jacob reached across the table and set his hand over hers. Firm. Warm. Almost desperate.

“You can’t go,” he said.

She stared at him, startled. “I... thought you wanted—”

“I want you to stay,” he said, voice low. “I can’t imagine this place without you now.”

Her breath caught. She hadn’t expected that. Not from him.

He kept going, words tumbling out faster than she’d ever heard from him. “I could’ve lied,” he said. “I could’ve told you I was ready and I had no concerns. But you deserve the truth. I’m scared. I won’t pretend otherwise.”

Olivia didn’t know what to say. She’d braced herself for his kind words of agreement. That she’d have to refuse his sympathy and the money she felt sure he’d offer. She hadn’t braced herself for this.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Jacob swallowed hard. “I’ll marry you. Tomorrow, if that’s what you want. Just don’t leave.”

She stared at him, stunned. “But... you’re not ready.”

“The future’s coming whether I’m ready or not, and I’d rather face it with you at my side than without you.”

She couldn’t pinpoint what had changed in him or when it had shifted. But it had, maybe during their long talk. Or maybe he’d simply had an epiphany. Whatever it was, he’d changed his mind. But could he be trusted? Would he change his mind again?

“Jacob, I don’t think—”

“I give you my word,” he said, seeming to grope for the right words. “My solemn oath. We’ll get married right away. Wherever you want.”

Olivia blinked. Whatever the reason, the heartfelt offer hung between them like a lifeline. She couldn’t refuse now if she wanted to.

Still, the thought of stability, safety, home—and perhaps someday, even love—couldn’t be ignored. She would have a place that she’d never have to leave or look over her shoulder constantly. A place where Victor couldn’t reach her.

But even better, she’d have Jacob, Mabel, and John. They’d be hers to care for.

She felt the idea sink into her bones.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I’ll stay.”

Jacob let out a long, relieved breath, then leaned over and pulled her into his arms. She gasped, startled, then leaned into him, pressing her face into his neck. It felt good, better than she could have imagined. His arms tightened around her, just for a moment, before he let go, long before she was ready for him to.

They sat there in the quiet kitchen, the lantern flickering and the house still around them, discussing wedding plans.

Olivia felt like she was in a dream. She couldn't believe it was happening. But the bright smile on Jacob's face told her it could—and indeed was—happening.

She was getting married, and nothing was going to stand in their way.

Chapter Nineteen

Jacob woke the next morning, already feeling that the day was different. He lay there for a moment, staring at the ceiling, listening to Olivia move around downstairs. Today was their wedding day.

He hadn't expected to feel anything about it—no excitement, no nerves, nothing beyond duty. That's what he'd told himself, anyway. It was just another day.

But as he swung his legs out of bed, he felt something he hadn't felt in years.

He felt light.

He didn't trust it, not fully. But it was there all the same.

Jacob splashed water on his face and dressed quickly. He buttoned his shirt, ran a comb through his hair, and headed downstairs. The smell of coffee met him before he reached the kitchen. Olivia stood at the stove, stirring something in a pan, the front of her hair pinned up, but the back flowing like silk down her back.

As he stood there, watching her at the stove, he felt a quiet awe move through him. The realization that she would be his wife by day's end made her seem both familiar and entirely new. He noticed the gentle way she moved, the way the light from the lamp flickered against her hair, and a warmth he hadn't expected stirred inside him. She'd never looked more beautiful.

"Morning," he said.

She glanced over her shoulder, a smile breaking out on her lovely face. "Good morning."

He poured himself a cup of coffee, the warmth soothing him more than he expected. He took a sip, then held it with one hand, reaching for his hat with the other.

“I’m going out to feed,” he said.

She nodded, but when he reached the door, hand on the latch, she spoke again—quieter this time.

“Happy wedding day.”

He turned. She was looking at him shyly, almost as if she wasn’t sure she should’ve said it. Something in him loosened, and he couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face.

“Happy wedding day,” he said back.

He stepped outside, still grinning, and breathed in the cool, crisp air. He could hear the distant sounds of cattle lowing and horses running around in the pasture. But the ranch was missing something, and he knew immediately what it was—the usual laughter and banter of his men.

Yesterday he’d told them they could have the day off for his wedding, and they’d all taken him up on it. Even Thomas. So, it was only Jacob today. He went to the barn and loaded up the wagon before driving it out to the pasture.

The horses greeted him, snorting softly as he moved down the line with a feed bucket first, then the water.

He worked quickly and expertly, taking pleasure in these simple tasks. When he was finished with the horses, he set the feed bucket on the bench seat and hitched the wagon. He checked the harnesses twice, then drove out toward the south field.

The sun was starting to come up by then, and the morning light was pale against the still-wet grass. He saw the cattle gathered near the far fence. They were restless, which he chalked up to feeding time. But as he drew closer, he saw two cows lagging with fresh wounds on their flanks.

Coyotes.

Jacob took a deep breath, climbed down, and moved quickly. He kept his movements limited, speaking softly to the animals as he inspected the injuries. Both cows were bleeding but alert. He needed to treat them right away.

He coaxed the herd back toward the house, rattling a bucket of feed to draw them in. The cattle followed, bunching together, still uneasy. Once they were penned in, Jacob filled the troughs with water and scattered the hay in messy rows.

After he'd set out enough hay, he fetched the carbolic salve from the barn, cleaned the wounds with clean wet rags, and applied the ointment. The cows flinched but didn't pull away or offer a fight. Jacob worked fast, not wasting time. He checked the rest of the herd, counting heads. A cow limped near the gate—another injured leg, likely from another coyote.

After treating the last injury, Jacob stood a moment, watching the herd settle. The coyotes were getting bolder, and it would only get worse with winter coming. For now, he couldn't leave the cattle in the south field. Later, he'd need help moving them to the upper pasture. There wasn't enough time before the wedding. He'd just have to leave them here for now.

Jacob locked the gate, unhitched the wagon, and headed back toward the house. The windows glowed warm against the pale morning, and Jacob sighed, knowing his family was inside.

Thomas would be along soon with his rig to take them to the church. Jacob figured he was already late for breakfast, and he still had to bathe and

get dressed, too. He'd best get moving. He stopped briefly at the basin on the back porch to wash his hands, then hurried inside.

In the kitchen, the children were already at the breakfast table, talking over each other, too excited to sit still.

"I'm going to wear one of Olivia's hats," Mabel announced. "The one with the blue flowers on it."

She was obviously feeling better, he noted.

"You should do that," John agreed. "And hide all your hair so if the wind blows it off, everyone will think you're bald."

He would have laughed if he didn't have the stinkin' coyotes on his mind.

He took his seat at the table with them, and Olivia hurried over with a fresh cup of coffee. She set it in front of him, then began making him a plate—biscuits with jam, bacon, scrambled eggs, hotcakes, and oatmeal.

"What's all this?" he asked, staring at the food.

"It's our wedding feast," she told him.

"Wedding feast," he repeated, still eyeing all the food.

"Yes," she said, dropping a couple of hotcakes on his plate.

He started eating, but couldn't get past the wedding feast explanation. "I thought we were supposed to have the wedding feast *after* the ceremony?"

"We're having one then, too," she chuckled.

There was a knock at the door, and Jacob started to get up. Olivia placed a hand on his shoulder, keeping him in his seat.

“Wait,” she said.

He heard the door open, then Thomas’ boots on the living room floor. He’d let himself in like he always did.

“We’re in here!” Olivia shouted as she set another place at the table. “You’re just in time.”

Thomas’ smiling face appeared in the doorway. “Morning.”

After breakfast, Jacob was in his bedroom, trying to decide between two shirts that looked identical.

“Well,” Thomas said, leaning against the doorframe, “I never thought I’d see the day.”

Jacob grunted, scratching a small stain on one of the sleeves. “I reckon I’ll wear that one,” he said, pointing at the clean shirt and tossing the stained one aside.

Thomas smirked. “You getting married or heading to a funeral? You look like you’re headed to the firing squad.”

Jacob didn’t rise to the bait. He kept studying the shirts, though he wasn’t really seeing them.

“Bud, you sure you’re all right?” Thomas asked, dropping his smile and stepping closer. “If it helps, I think you found yourself a fine wife. Olivia is a great gal. But if you’re not sure...”

“It’s not that,” Jacob blurted, surprising himself as much as Thomas.

“No?” Thomas blinked.

Jacob shook his head. “No. I feel... good about that. I’m sure about Olivia.” It made sense. At least, that’s what he told himself. “The children are better behaved with Olivia around. The house runs more smoothly. Meals happen on time—and they actually taste good,” he chuckled. “There are a lot of good things—arguments break up faster, and kids go to bed without complaining every night. There’s value in that.”

So, when Thomas gave him that look—half-teasing, half-knowing—Jacob shook his head. “It’s not about anything else. A household needs order. And the kids need a woman’s hand. That’s all.”

But even as he said it, something in him knew it wasn’t the full truth. There was something else. He wasn’t about to name it. Practical was safer. Practical, he could defend.

Thomas studied him for a long moment. “Well, I’m glad to see my old friend back. You’ve been a ghost since Julie died.”

Jacob didn’t argue. It was the truth. He’d been walking around half-alive for years, doing what needed doing, nothing more.

“Yeah, I’m back,” Jacob said quietly. “Or trying to be. This is the first step.”

Thomas nodded. “I’m glad. I like Olivia. And you both have my help, whatever you need.”

Jacob knew that, and he appreciated it.

“But if you’re so sure, why the long face?” Thomas asked.

Jacob let out a slow breath. “It’s nothing like that. We got three head of cattle injured in a coyote attack last night.”

Now Thomas had a long face, too. He probably should have saved that till after the wedding.

“Did we lose any?” Thomas asked.

Shaking his head, Jacob finished up the last button on his shirt. “No. Not yet. I have them all penned in behind the corral.

“I’ll talk to Mason and Graham when we get to the church,” Thomas offered, but Jacob shook his head.

“No. Today’s about Olivia and the kids. I don’t want to have to work all day and leave them alone. We can worry about driving the cattle to the north pasture tomorrow.” Jacob shrugged on his coat and smoothed his hair. “Well? How do I look?”

Thomas grinned again. “I think your new, young wife will be pleased.”

Jacob frowned. This wasn’t about love or passion. Not like with Julie. This was about convenience. That’s it. And Thomas knew that. “Don’t forget why I’m doing this.”

“Oh, I won’t,” Thomas said. “But you might have to remind yourself of that later.”

“Shut up and straighten my collar,” Jacob ordered.

Thomas laughed, then straightened Jacob’s collar. Afterward, he clapped him on the shoulder.

“Now, you look like a man about to get married,” Thomas said.

Jacob snorted. “That’s because I am.”

They went downstairs and waited for Olivia and the kids. Jacob stood near the bottom of the staircase, hands clasped behind his back, trying not to pace. John sat on the sofa, fidgeting while Thomas leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching Jacob with a smug grin he didn't bother hiding.

It wasn't long before he heard Olivia's door open and close, then soft footsteps overhead. Mabel appeared at the top of the stairs first, dressed in her best clothes, her face bright with excitement.

"Pa!" John said. "Is it time yet?"

"Almost," Jacob said, staring at his daughter, who somehow grew up in the five years he was sleeping. She looked beautiful.

Mabel smiled and twirled once, showing off her ribboned braids. "Well? How do I look?"

"You look perfect," Jacob said, and meant it.

But then, Olivia appeared at the top of the stairs, smiling approvingly at Mabel.

She moved slowly, careful with each step. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her dress was simple and perfect. It was cream-colored cotton with a modest neckline and sleeves that reached her wrists. The bodice was fitted, the skirt falling neatly at her ankles. There was no lace, no frills, nothing showy. But the way it fit her, the way the fabric caught the light, made Jacob's breath hitch.

Her hair was pinned up, but a few loose strands framed her face. She wore no jewelry except the small pendant she'd given Mabel when she was sick, now returned to her. The dress wasn't new—he could tell by the faint wear at the hem—but she looked... beautiful. Not in a grand way. Not in a way that demanded attention. She was just quietly and naturally beautiful.

Jacob felt his throat tighten, and he worried he wouldn't be able to speak to say his vows. He should have expected this and prepared himself better.

A gurgling sound behind him made him turn to see Thomas, gawking at Olivia, the grin wiped smooth from his face.

Olivia reached the bottom step and gave him a small, nervous smile. They stood there for a moment, staring at each other.

“Can we go now?” John asked, breaking the tension.

He blinked, then nodded, trying to recover his voice. “Yes, let's load up.”

The chapel was small, the kind built by hands that didn't have much but gave their sweat and skills to build it. Naomi, Agnes, and Mrs. Fleming sat in the front row. A few others sat in the pews while Graham and Mason stood against the back wall, hats in hand, looking uncomfortable in their clean shirts.

Mason stepped forward when they walked past, his hat in one hand and a bunch of wildflowers clutched in his other. “Miss Olivia,” he said nervously as he held out the flowers. “These are from Graham and me.”

Olivia gasped, then reached out and took the flowers. Jacob could see tears glinting in her eyes. “Thank you, boys. These are... beautiful.”

Mason gave her a single nod, then stepped back to his place against the wall.

When Olivia looked up at Jacob, he could see the gratitude in her eyes. He glanced to the front of the church, where Pastor Fleming was waiting for them. Then, he turned back to her.

“Ready?” he asked.

She gave him a knowing smile, reaching her free hand around Mabel’s waist. Then, she looked at John. Whatever she saw there, she took as approval. “Yes. I’m ready.”

“Well, let’s go, then,” he said, leading his family up the aisle.

Thomas walked with them to the front of the church, then took a seat next to Naomi. Jacob stood beside Olivia, and the children hovered close, solemn for once.

The ceremony was brief. Pastor Fleming spoke the words with a strong voice, and Jacob repeated his vows carefully, feeling awkward and clumsy. For some reason, his tongue felt too big in his mouth, and he stumbled once or twice, but Olivia didn’t seem to mind.

Then it was her turn.

She looked at him, her hands trembling just a little. But instead of repeating the pastor’s words, she spoke her own:

“Jacob, I promise to always stand beside you. To care for your children as if they were my own. To keep your home warm and full of love and laughter, and share your burdens to make them lighter. I can’t promise I’ll never falter, but I promise I’ll always try my best. And I’ll be grateful for every day we face together.”

The words hit him hard, like he’d just been kicked in the gut by a Texas Longhorn. Simple. Honest. And just like Olivia, not fancy. But they went straight to the place he kept guarded, piercing his armor.

When the pastor finished and pronounced them man and wife, Jacob leaned forward awkwardly and gave Olivia a chaste kiss on the cheek. It felt strange and familiar all at once.

He offered her his arm, and she took it. A quiet pride welled up inside him, warmth spreading through his chest and making his steps feel steadier than before. Then, he led her back down the aisle, his children following close behind.

When they reached the doors, they stepped out together.

Husband and wife.

Chapter Twenty

The morning after the wedding felt strangely quiet. Olivia lay in bed longer than she meant to, staring at the ceiling, trying to decide if she felt any different now that she was a wife. She was married. The thought settled over her like a blanket she wasn't sure she wanted.

Her head ached a little. She'd had more wine than she should have at Naomi's house the night before. Everyone had. The small party had been louder and livelier than she expected. But she counted it a fine success. Naomi had insisted on hosting it, saying a wedding deserved at least a little celebration. They'd certainly done more than a little celebrating.

So, they'd eaten too much, laughed too much, and some even danced until their feet hurt. Not Olivia. But she enjoyed watching the others. Even Jacob had smiled all night. The only thing that she'd missed was Naomi herself.

Naomi and Thomas had slipped effortlessly into their own little world during the party. It felt almost impossible to catch Naomi alone. Every time Olivia managed a word with her, Thomas was quick to draw her back—offering her a drink, asking her to dance, leaning in to say something that made her blush or giggle. It was as if he couldn't bear to be more than an arm's length away from her.

Olivia had watched Naomi and Thomas with a quiet ache. Their courtship was the kind she had once imagined for herself—two people meeting, learning each other's ways, choosing one another freely.

It was simple and hopeful. She was glad for them, truly, but the sweetness of it pressed against something tender in her. She would never have that kind of beginning. Her marriage was one of convenience. Her husband was a man she barely knew, and she'd promised to build a life with him.

The thought carried no small amount of worry. Not dread, exactly, but a heaviness she couldn't really ignore. Marriage meant stepping into a new home, a new name, a new future she hadn't planned. She and Jacob might never find the kind of love people talked about in stories or whispered about at church socials.

If she were lucky, they could build something good. They could be partners. Friends, even. The children already trusted her, and Jacob—though guarded—treated her with a kind of respect she didn't take lightly.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe it could grow into something that made sense, something they could both live with. Their future wasn't set, and she knew she would walk toward it with her eyes wide open.

But one good thing happened. Olivia had made a new friend, Naomi's cousin, Marci Evans. Naomi had introduced them, saying Marci's husband, Eli, owned a ranch on the other side of town. Apparently, Jacob knew Eli well because the two men had stuck close together for most of the night.

Marci was a wonderful person, warm and talkative, and close in age to Naomi and Olivia. She was the kind of woman who made conversation easy. She had a quick laugh and a way of putting people at ease, and Olivia found herself relaxing around her faster than she expected.

Eli and Marci also had two young children about the same ages as Mabel and John, and the four of them had run wild through Naomi's yard until they were finally called back inside to eat. Olivia had watched them playing Blind Man's Bluff and Hide-and-Seek from the porch.

Their laughter had carried across the yard and only added to Olivia's happiness. Before long, other kids from the area, most of whom she didn't recognize, had joined them.

Marci had stood beside her on the porch, pointing out which child belonged to which neighbor, filling her in on small bits of town gossip,

nothing unkind—only the sort of things women shared when they were beginning to trust one another. It was just a shame that Marci and Eli didn't live closer.

By the end of the night, Olivia felt she'd gained more than a friend. She'd gained a place among the women of the town. And that pleased her. She finally belonged.

She was married now in a way. She wasn't a *real* wife in every sense of the word, but that was her business. Hers and Jacob's. Still, the thought was there, and it nagged at her in a way that made her raw. She was claimed, just not in the way that mattered. She wondered if that would ever change.

No, it wasn't the wedding night she'd once imagined for herself. Instead, she and Jacob had stumbled up the stairs, both of them tired and a little tipsy. He'd leaned against the doorway to his room, eyes half-closed, and said, "Goodnight, wife," before stumbling to his room, disappearing inside, and shutting the door.

She didn't resent him for it. She understood. They had agreed this marriage was for convenience. For him, it meant someone to care for his home and children. For her, it meant protection, a roof, a place to belong. Romance had no place in their agreement. But lying alone in her bed, she felt the emptiness of the space beside her.

She pushed the thought away and climbed out of bed. There was work to do. Married or not, breakfast wasn't going to cook itself.

She'd made oatmeal and hotcakes with a side of bacon. Jacob ate quickly, then stood and said he needed to join his men outside. "We've got a coyote problem," he added, grabbing his hat from the hook on the wall and adjusting it so it sat low on his forehead. She loved that. "We need to move the cattle to another pasture. I'll be home at lunch."

No, definitely not the way she'd pictured spending her first morning as a wife. But she nodded anyway. "All right."

He paused, looking like he was going to say something else, but he didn't. Instead, he gave her a small, almost apologetic smile before heading out the door.

She sighed and turned her attention back to the children. They both looked tired, so she decided to keep their chores light. Even if they had slept in a little later than usual.

"Can we go outside and play?" John asked, pushing his plate away.

"I want to see the new calf," Mabel said, placing her napkin on the table beside her half-empty plate.

"All right," Olivia sighed. "But first, clear the table. You can play for a while. But this afternoon, I want you both to clean your rooms. And that includes sweeping, mopping, and dusting."

The children groaned, standing and grabbing plates from the table.

"That's woman's work," John grumbled.

That earned a glare from Mabel. "I'm not cleaning your room. There's no telling what you've got grazing in there—lizards, snakes, frogs, or turtles." She shivered.

Olivia chuckled, heading into the kitchen to wash the dishes. When the table was cleared, the children bolted out the back door and disappeared. Olivia swept the floor, then started a pot of stew for supper. She'd go outside to the meat shed later to get some ham for lunch. But right now, the house felt too quiet and empty. She took a deep breath and decided to get on with it.

By midday, the house was warm and stuffy. It was a good reason to go outside and hang the washing she'd done that morning. She gathered the basket and stepped out onto the porch. She glanced around to find the kids, and her eyes lit on Jacob. He was sitting in the yard under a shade tree, a block of wood in one hand and a knife in the other. He looked up when he heard her.

"Didn't expect you back so soon," she said.

"I told you I'd be home for lunch," he said, returning his attention to the block of wood he held in his hand. "Mason and Graham took care of the cattle, and Thomas went to town for a few supplies. Didn't need all of us."

She nodded and started toward the clothesline. "Let me get these hung up, and I'll make you some lunch."

He was whittling behind her as she hung up his shirt. There was a stain on the sleeve that she thought she'd never get out. But she finally did.

"You know, my father used to make me toys like this," he said, breaking the silence as he held up the half-shaped piece of wood. "Little horses, mostly. Sometimes a dog or a cow."

She paused and turned around, gripping a clothespin between her teeth and surprised by the softness in his voice.

"When John was born," Jacob continued, "I figured I ought to do the same. Didn't turn out as nice as my father's, but he didn't seem to mind."

Olivia removed the clothespin and smiled at him. "I'm sure he loved them."

Jacob smiled faintly. "He did. Mabel, too. I made her a cat once and a pony. Hard to believe how much they've grown."

She stood there, listening. He wasn't performing. He wasn't trying to impress her. He was simply talking, the way a man talked when he forgot to guard himself.

She felt something warm bloom in her chest—and it wasn't just the hot August sun. It was something she suspected all along, but he confirmed it just now. Jacob didn't do anything halfway. And that included love. He loved deeply. Maybe he didn't know how to show it easily, but it was in his voice, in the way he spoke about the children and Julie. It was all-consuming.

She swallowed the knot in her throat and turned back to the laundry, hanging each piece on the line while he carved. He didn't say anything else for a while. And when he did, he surprised her.

"So, do you feel any different today? Being married and all, I mean." He didn't look up at her. He kept his eyes fastened on his task.

Olivia turned around, fixing the last clothespin on Julie's dress and considering how to answer his question. "Yes. I do."

Now, he looked up at her—studied her, more like. "How so?"

Olivia took her time before answering, considering each thought carefully. "I feel different in a few ways," she said, brushing a wrinkle out of Mabel's dress. "I feel like everything I do, from laundry to cooking, matters more. There's a new sense of responsibility, almost like the decisions I make ripple out farther than before."

Jacob nodded thoughtfully. "What else?"

"I think people look at me differently. It's not just Olivia now, it's Mrs. Fisher. Or Jacob's wife. Or Mabel and John's ma. There's a weight behind my name that wasn't there before." She paused, not daring to speak more about her own thoughts and feelings. And certainly not use terms like

love or need. Instead, her mind circled around duty, expectations, and the way the world seemed to shift just enough to take notice.

He didn't acknowledge anything she said. He was still carving, his focus unwavering. "But what about you?" she asked quietly. "Do you feel any different now?"

He stopped whittling and looked at her. "Different enough that I notice it, but not enough to make sense of it yet," he replied. Then, he must not have liked the look on her face because he hurried on. "But I don't feel wrong about it."

Olivia felt her lips twitch. She supposed she could live with that. She appreciated the honesty he was giving her, at least. She had held back, not telling him that she felt safer and more secure. Not completely, but certainly more than before.

She was married now. Victor couldn't have her—would never have her. But Jacob still didn't know about him. Had probably never heard Victor's name. And—God, help her—she hoped he never would. She hoped that once Victor heard she was married, he'd give up and leave her alone. It had been more than five years. Her ma was dead. She'd had enough.

The protection that Jacob offered was real, but not quite complete. A husband's name could shield her from gossip, suspicion, and snakes, but it couldn't shield her from the past.

And the weight of that truth pressed against her chest. She should tell him everything. Right now.

She waited too long, and the moment passed. Jacob went back to his carving, the wood beginning to take shape.

She watched him for a moment, caught between feeling safe and feeling like trouble was still close behind.

She was safer than she'd been in years.

But she was not free. Not yet.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Bang! You’re dead, soldier!”

Jacob looked over his shoulder just in time to see Thomas slap his hands over his chest and sink to his knees.

“It wasn’t me, Captain John! I didn’t steal all the gold from the fort. I swear!” Then, Thomas collapsed on the ground and didn’t move anymore.

John giggled and ran over, diving on top of Thomas to end the scene. They wrestled on the ground for a moment, then Thomas stood up. “Whoa, Captain. I need to go talk to your pa before I leave.”

“No! You’re my prisoner,” John informed him.

Thomas stood and tried to limp toward Jacob, with John holding onto his leg. “Just a minute, Jacob!” he called, limping faster.

Trying not to grin, Jacob walked back to see what Thomas needed. “What is it, soldier?” Jacob asked when he reached them.

“I just wanted you to know that Feona is close. I ‘spect she’ll go into labor any second now,” Thomas said.

“Hot dog!” John shouted, throwing down the stick he was pretending was a gun and forgetting all about his prisoner. “Can I stay in the barn with Feona tonight?”

Jacob sighed and looked at Thomas. His friend just grinned and gave him a shrug. “All right by me. That’s what I wanted to tell you. I can’t be here. I promised Ma that I would have supper at her place tonight. You know how it is.”

Yes, he certainly did. Mrs. Reed was a sweet old lady—the kind you didn’t want to disappoint. And if you did disappoint her, she’d make you feel guilty about it for years. “What about Mason or Graham? Either of them wants some overtime?”

“I can ask Mason. Graham’s already gone.”

“Let me know what he says,” Jacob replied, slicing his eyes to his son. “And you, Captain John, need to go get washed up for supper.”

“All right! See ya tomorrow, Uncle Thomas,” John said with a wave before he took off running toward the house.

Another surprise, John didn’t even argue. Usually, he dragged his feet, whined, and begged for more time. The kid loved the outdoors.

Thomas chuckled, watching John run into the house. “He’s growing up,” Thomas murmured.

“I know,” Jacob said, a bittersweetness in his voice. “Seems like we were just out here teaching him how to walk.”

“Yeah.” Thomas suddenly barked out a laugh. “I think he latched onto my leg then, too.”

Jacob howled with laughter. “I think you’re right. Julie had to run over from the porch and pull him off your leg. She spilled a whole bowl of black-eyed peas trying to get over to us.” Suddenly, Jacob stopped laughing and pressed his lips together.

Thomas noticed. He smiled and said, “I remember that, too. She was wearing a pretty little yellow dress and had her hair in braids. I recall wondering if it was too late to talk her into running off with me to get married.”

“You’re a dirty dog,” Jacob chuckled. “She was too fine a lady to even consider it.”

Nodding and grinning, Thomas said, “Yeah, she was.” The two friends stared at each other for a moment. “It was a good day, Jacob. And it’s a good memory.”

“It is a good memory,” Jacob agreed, Thomas’ smile reminding him that it was all right to talk about Julie. To remember the good times they had together.

“You know, Olivia’s a fine woman, too.” Thomas glanced over at the house. “I can already tell a difference in John. Since you two got married, I mean.”

“How so?” Jacob wasn’t sure what kind of difference Thomas saw in his son. He’d only been married for a minute.

“Well,” Thomas drawled. “For one thing, he doesn’t kick up a stink anymore when you tell him it’s time to go inside.”

That was true. Jacob hadn’t even noticed. “I reckon you’re right about that. That’s probably ‘cause Olivia always has a snack or a surprise waiting for him.”

Thomas’ eyebrows arched. “Can’t say I blame him, then. My ma always has a snack or a surprise for me, too, when I go over there.”

It was Jacob’s turn to laugh. “Well, you’d better get, then. You might not get your surprise if you’re late.”

Thomas grinned and turned on his heel. “I’ll find Mason and see if he can stay,” he said as he walked away.

“It’s fine if he can’t,” Jacob hollered back. “Me and John can do it.”

Jacob stood there for a moment, then started for the house again. It'd been a whole week since the wedding, and the time had passed more quietly than Jacob expected. He had braced himself for awkwardness, for missteps, and for the kind of tension that came when two people were suddenly bound together who barely knew each other or had enough time to adjust.

But the house didn't feel strained at all. It actually felt... surprisingly steady. Almost too steady, if he was honest.

Olivia moved through the house like she'd been there for years. She didn't take over, and she didn't hover. She simply worked—cleaning, cooking, and tending to the children—without fuss or complaint. She didn't ask him what needed to be done; she just saw it and did it. And the house responded. The children responded. Even he did, though he tried not to think too hard about that.

By the third morning, he caught himself asking her opinion on whether he should wear a tie when he dropped her off at the church social. And that wasn't all. He asked her if he needed to do any tilling in the garden? Did she need any herbs from the woods at the top of the north pasture while he was there? And whether the flour barrel needed refilling before his next trip to town.

These weren't questions he needed help with. He knew the answer. But she'd be standing there, drying a plate or kneading some dough, and it just felt natural to ask. Too natural. When she'd answer, he'd linger a moment longer than he should have, just watching her work or tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear before moving on to the next task.

He'd walked out of the kitchen, unsettled many times over the past week. Marriage had changed something between them, even without touch or promises. He didn't know what to do with that.

He told himself it was only the adjustment period. Anyone would feel off balance after bringing a new person into their house. Especially

someone who wasn't just a guest anymore. This was her home now. She was his wife. The word still felt strange on his tongue, as if he were speaking another language.

Still, she was fulfilling her duties, keeping the arrangement practical like they'd agreed. He reminded himself of that last part often.

As Thomas said, the children were the easiest proof that his decision had been right. Mabel followed Olivia from room to room, chattering about school, her friends, dresses, and whatever else came to mind. John, who usually kept to himself unless he needed something, had started asking Olivia to read to him in the evenings.

Jacob watched them sometimes from the doorway, the two of them bent over a book while Mabel practiced her needlepoint in the rocker. Olivia's melodic voice kept them calm and interested. John would lean against her without hesitation. And Olivia was just as quick to grace him with a kiss to his forehead or stroke his hair. It was good for John. Good for both of his children.

Still, Jacob wasn't comfortable with how often he found himself watching her. Or how often he caught himself listening for her footsteps. He didn't want to be the kind of man who needed a woman to survive. He'd managed fine on his own for years. He'd raised his children, kept the ranch running, and survived the worst of his grief without needing anyone. He didn't want to start now.

But he had to admit, the house felt different with her in it. Warmer. More inviting. In fact, he looked forward to this time of day every afternoon. Time to come home. And he didn't know what to make of that either.

Jacob paused by the back door, took a minute to wash up, and kicked the mud off his shoes. Inside, he expected to see Olivia by the stove, cooking something tasty. Instead, she was sitting at the table, drinking coffee with Naomi.

“Oh, you’re home,” she said, standing up and straightening her dress. “I didn’t realize it was so late. I’ll have supper on the table in five minutes.”

He looked at Naomi and tipped his hat. “Don’t rush. I’ll just go check on the kids.”

Naomi looked flustered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to stay this long. I lost track of the time.”

“It’ll be dark soon,” Olivia said as she rinsed their cups in the basin. “Why don’t you let Jacob see you home?”

“No, that’s—”

Naomi was cut off by a knock on the door. Jacob reached out and opened it to see Thomas standing there.

“Mason can’t stay tonight, either. His wife threatened to cut off his —”

Jacob cleared his throat, cutting his eyes toward the women. Thomas peered around the door and grinned. “Well, hello, ladies.”

“Oh, Thomas! I’m glad you’re still here.” Olivia ran over and dried her hands on a towel. “Can you see Naomi home? It’s starting to get dark, and I don’t want her walking home alone.”

“Well, of course, I will.” He pushed the door open further and stepped inside. “Are you ready to go now?”

Jacob watched as Naomi blushed and nodded. “Yes, that would be wonderful. Thank you.”

Thomas held out his arm. “Then, allow me.” He was still grinning when they walked out the door.

Jacob watched for a moment, then shook his head and closed the door. “That boy was born beneath a lucky star.”

Olivia giggled. “I admit, I didn’t think much of Thomas at first. But he’s starting to grow on me. Unless, of course, he does something stupid and hurts my friend.”

He was glad Olivia had a friend. She needed that. She deserved that. But he hadn’t expected to see her there in his kitchen tonight. Or that Thomas would magically appear at the door and sweep her away. He didn’t want any part of that relationship, just in case *his* friend fell back into his old ways. The last thing he wanted was for Olivia to blame him for letting Naomi get hurt.

“He won’t, will he?” she asked. “Hurt her, I mean?”

Uh, oh.

Jacob suddenly felt like he was balancing on a tightrope. “I can’t guarantee that,” he finally replied. “I can say I’ve never seen Thomas like this before. Not with any woman. He usually just drifts along from one girl to the next. But lately, he hasn’t talked about any girl except Naomi. And he hasn’t shown up to work hungover in weeks. So, I don’t know. Maybe this is it.”

Maybe this was it. Thomas seemed different. Things were changing all around him. And he wasn’t sure he liked it.

Olivia smiled, one of those that stole his breath. He forgot about Thomas. Forgot about the change. And forgot he was supposed to be checking on the children.

“Can I help you in here?” he asked.

That smile of hers got wider. “You could stir the gravy for me.”

Normally, stirring gravy wouldn’t have been one of his favorite things to do. But Olivia stood next to him, frying up some hoecakes. Their arms brushed several times, and when they both reached for the same spoon, he found his hand on top of hers. He didn’t move it right away. He just let himself enjoy the feel of her hand in his. He left it there until the gravy started bubbling.

“Sorry,” he said, taking his hand away and looking back at the pan.

“It’s all right,” she replied softly.

The silence between them wasn’t exactly uncomfortable. But he reckoned he was confusing things. He couldn’t rightly help it, given his own state of confusion. But it made him aware of things he didn’t want to notice—the soft feel of her skin, the way her sleeve brushed his arm when she reached for the salt, and the faint scent of lavender soap on her skin.

He kept his eyes on the gravy, determined not to let them wander. He needed something to say. Something simple. Something safe.

“The Harvest Festival’s next week,” he said finally, his voice sounding louder than he meant it to.

Olivia looked up. “Yes. Naomi and I were just talking about that.”

He nodded calmly, but inside, he was scrambling, scraping together some courage. “Figured I should mention it. A lot of folks usually go. There’s food, music, and contests. The children really like it.”

She was looking at him. He could see her from the corner of his eye. Then, he realized she was expecting more. His stomach tightened. He

hadn't planned this far ahead.

"I was thinking..." He cleared his throat. "If you wanted to go, I could take you."

He still didn't look at her. He didn't want to see her expression. He didn't know what he was allowed to want from her. They were married, yes, but that didn't mean she owed him her time or attention. Their marriage was practical. Necessary. That was the agreement. And he didn't want to push it too far past that.

But he wanted her to say yes. He hated that he wanted it, but he did.

There was a pause, long enough for him to regret opening his mouth. Then, she spoke.

"I'd like that," she said. "Very much."

He looked up despite himself. She was smiling. Not a polite smile. A real one. And it was for him.

Only for him.

The idea pleased him. A lot. And even though he had a long night ahead of him, sleeping in the barn with his pregnant horse, he smiled, too. He was happy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Oh, no. Is that a spot?” Olivia picked at the spot on her dress, only to find it was a piece of leftover thread.

She let out a relieved breath. Olivia hadn’t meant to fuss so much over her appearance for the festival. At first, she’d planned to go with Naomi, walk the grounds together, and enjoy the day without thinking too hard about anything.

But then Jacob had asked—quietly, almost awkwardly—if she’d go with him. The question had surprised her so much that she’d been unable to reply for several moments. And now, as she stood in her room getting ready, she realized she was taking more care than she meant to show.

She told herself it was only because it was her first festival in town and she wanted to make a good impression. She wanted to look presentable. Respectable. Nothing more.

But she knew better.

She laid the dress she’d made across the bed. It was the nicest thing she owned now, except for her wedding dress. She’d sewn it from the fabric she bought weeks ago at the mercantile, a soft blue calico that was understated, yet eye-catching. She’d added a bit of white trim at the collar and cuffs—nothing fancy, just enough to make it stand out a bit.

The skirt was full but not heavy, and she’d stitched tiny pleats along the bodice to give it shape. It wasn’t the kind of dress that would turn heads in a ballroom, but it was the kind that made a wife feel like she belonged at her husband’s side. And, hopefully, made a husband proud to have her on his arm.

She'd made Mabel a new dress too, a lighter blue with a small floral print. The girl had wanted ruffles, so Olivia added a modest row along the hem and sleeves. Mabel had loved it. She twirled in it that morning, pleased with how it fit and moved. Olivia's own dress was simpler, more grown-up, but they matched just enough to make Mabel beam.

She dressed slowly, smoothing the fabric, tying the sash, and pinning her hair with more care than usual. When she finally stepped back from the mirror, she felt a flutter in her stomach.

"For goodness' sake. It's only a festival," she reminded herself—just a day out with the family.

But she knew that wasn't true because Jacob had asked her. Not out of obligation. Not because the children needed her. He'd asked because he wanted her there with him.

She wasn't sure what to do with that. He'd been so adamant about the practical nature of their marriage. Then, he started wooing her. It was confusing.

Downstairs, she heard Jacob talking to John and Mabel laughing. She took one last steadying breath and started down the stairs.

Jacob was waiting at the bottom, already dressed in his nice clothes. The sight of him nearly made her stumble. He looked a little uncomfortable in the pressed shirt, tugging at the stiff collar. But he was handsome in a way that snatched the breath right out of her. She'd seen him in work clothes every day—dusty, tired, sleeves rolled up. He was handsome then, too. But this was different.

This was a man prepared to take his wife to a public event.

Her husband.

The thought still gave her goosebumps.

Jacob looked up, and his eyes widened. His mouth fell open slightly, and he didn't seem to notice. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then, John broke the spell.

"Olivia, you look like a fairy princess!" he shouted, proving the stories she'd been reading him were sinking in.

Olivia laughed, grateful for the interruption, as well as the compliment. "And you look very handsome, too," she said. "I love your new shoes."

John grinned and stuck out his feet for everyone to admire. They were stiff and shiny, and he was clearly proud of them. She reckoned they'd be well broken in by the end of the day.

Mabel stood beside her father, smoothing her skirt. She was obviously waiting for her compliment, too. So, Olivia didn't disappoint her.

"And Mabel, my dear," she said, pausing to shake her head and sigh. Then, taking her hands, she told her, "You look so beautiful."

Mabel lit up. "Thank you. Do you think Naomi will like my dress?"

"I know she will. She'll love it," Olivia said with a chuckle.

Jacob cleared his throat, still watching Olivia with an expression she couldn't quite read. "We ought to get going," he said, though his voice sounded a little rough.

Jacob helped the kids into the back of the wagon before lifting Olivia onto the bench beside him. The air was pleasant for that time of year,

the sky clear, and the road stretched out before them. The children laughed and sang, pointing out decorations and booths as they came into view.

It was early, but the festival grounds were already busy—families gathering, vendors calling out, music drifting from the far end where a dance floor had already been set up. There was excitement in the air, a distinct feeling of anticipation.

Olivia felt herself relax as they stepped into the crowd. The noise, the laughter, the smell of roasted corn and fried dough wrapped around her like a comfortable blanket. She hadn't been to a festival in years. She'd forgotten how alive they felt.

The children tugged them from one game to the next. Jacob tried his hand at the ring toss and missed every time, which made John howl with laughter. Olivia managed to knock down three milk bottles in a row, surprising herself and everyone else. The man gave her three hair ribbons as a prize. She gave Mabel two and kept one for herself.

But Mabel later won a small ribbon of her own in the sack race, and she wore it proudly pinned to her dress.

“Pa, we need to win something now,” John said. “We can't let the girls beat us.”

Jacob chuckled. “We'll play some more later. I think Olivia wants to look at some pies first.”

“I could do that, too,” John said. “I'm getting hungry.”

“You're always hungry,” Mabel scoffed.

Naomi found them near the pie-judging tent, her cheeks flushed and her apron dusted with flour. “I'm so nervous I think I might faint,” she whispered to Olivia, fanning herself.

“You’ll do fine,” Olivia assured her.

She did more than fine—she won first place. Thomas lifted her off the ground in celebration, spinning her once before setting her down, both of them red-faced and smiling. Olivia caught Jacob watching them with a thoughtful expression, as if he was seeing something he hadn’t expected.

Finally, he looked at Olivia and arched his brow. “See? Another first.”

After that, they wandered around for a while, checking out some of the contests. When it was time for the pig chase, John insisted on joining. Olivia tried to talk him out of it.

“You’ll ruin your new shoes,” she told him, but he was determined.

Olivia looked at Jacob for support, but he only grinned and said, “He’s a boy. Let him have fun.”

Shortly afterward, John came back covered in mud from head to toe, his shoes ruined, still holding a squealing piglet in his arms. The look on his face was nothing short of triumphant. The crowd cheered, and Olivia couldn’t help but laugh, even as she shook her head.

“You’re taking care of him,” Jacob informed him.

“Pa,” John huffed. “It’s a *she*.”

“Well, you’re taking care of her, then,” Jacob said with a chuckle.

They spent the rest of the afternoon sampling treats, checking out vendor booths—Jacob bought John a watch and Mabel a necklace. It looked a lot like Olivia’s, and Mabel put it on immediately.

He waited until the kids' attention was absorbed by the men's archery competition, and he reached over to take Olivia's hand. She jerked with surprise, then let him lift it toward him.

"What are you—"

Then, he held up a ring. Her mouth dropped open as she gasped.

When Olivia first saw the ring, she didn't understand what she was looking at. But as he slid it onto her finger, the truth of it became clear. She nearly swooned.

"Jacob, it's beautiful," she murmured as she held up her hand, studying her finger closely.

The ring suited her perfectly—exactly what she would have picked out for herself. It was simple, but not plain. A narrow gold band, polished smooth, with a small round stone set neatly in the center. It wasn't a diamond; she would never have expected anything that costly.

"The vendor called it a pale blue topaz," Jacob said.

She smiled, looking up into Jacob's eyes. "Thank you. I love it."

And she really did. The band fit perfectly. It was still warm from Jacob's hand. She turned it once, hardly believing it was hers. It was more than she expected. More than she ever thought he'd give her. And knowing that he'd picked it out himself—quietly, without asking for praise—made her sigh wistfully.

Olivia heard a violin warming up somewhere across the grounds. It was soon joined by the bright plucking of a banjo. Jacob ran his fingers along hers, grasping her ring and giving it a small twist. It was a quiet, intimate gesture that made her blood warm. He smiled, then called to the children. "Come on, kids. Let's head over to the dance."

It was a good day. Better than she'd hoped for. She found herself glancing at Jacob more than once, catching him watching her with a softness she didn't know how to handle. She looked away each time, unsure what to do with the warmth that rose in her chest.

At sundown, lanterns flickered to life around the dance floor. The players finished tuning their instruments, and soon the music came together in a slow, steady rhythm. Couples began drifting toward the open space, ready for the first dance of the night.

Olivia stood at the edge, watching Naomi and Thomas take the floor. Naomi looked shy but pleased. Thomas looked like he'd been waiting all day for this.

Then Jacob stepped beside her.

He didn't speak at first. He just held out his hand.

Her breath caught. She hesitated, not because she didn't want to go, but because she wasn't sure she should want it as much as she did.

But she placed her hand in his, the ring pressing against her fingers and reminding her that practical or not, she belonged to this man. Her husband. If he wanted to dance, she would oblige.

He guided her onto the floor, one hand settling carefully at her back. She rested her hand on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of him through the fabric. Then, they began to move. She followed his lead easily, surprised by how natural it felt.

They'd danced together at their wedding celebration. But that dance had felt stiff, forced, full of nerves and awkwardness. This was different. This felt... comfortable. Right. Like she belonged in his arms.

Jacob's eyes met hers, and something unspoken passed between them. He was changing the terms of their agreement. At least, she thought he was. She could see something in his eyes, feel it in his touch.

The music faded, and she let out a small breath, smiling without meaning to.

Then, her gaze drifted toward the edge of the festival grounds, and she froze.

A man stood apart from the crowd, half in shadow. His posture, the tilt of his head, the slope of his shoulders, it all struck her like a physical blow.

"No," she breathed. "It can't be."

Her heart dropped. The light was poor, but the resemblance was too strong to dismiss. Her pulse hammered in her ears as her hand tightened on Jacob's arm.

The man turned to face her then, and for a heart-stopping, terrible moment their eyes locked. Something flickered across his face—an unmistakable recognition that hollowed her out.

It was Victor Kellan.

"What's wrong?" Jacob asked, scanning the crowd.

"I... We need to go home," she blurted, her voice panicked. "Now."

She didn't explain. She couldn't. The fear was too overwhelming.

Jacob didn't question her. He nodded, gathered the children, and led them through the crowd with a firm hand at her back. He knew something was going on. But he couldn't have any idea that this was all her fault.

Olivia clung to him and the children, shaken by how quickly joy had given way to this all-consuming fear. The festival sounds faded behind them, replaced by the pounding of her own heartbeat. When they reached the wagon, she watched as Jacob lifted the new pig into the back. Then, she helped the children climb in after it.

She sat as close to Jacob as she could get. He was holding the reins; she was holding his sleeve. But she could still feel the weight of someone's gaze on her back long after they left the lights behind.

She didn't look back. She didn't dare.

Chapter Twenty-Three

For three days, Jacob hadn't been able to shake the image of Olivia at the harvest festival. It followed him everywhere, keeping him company out to the pasture, into the barn, feeding the horses, feeding the cows. It didn't matter.

He kept seeing her in that blue dress, the way she'd smiled at him after the dance, the way her hand had rested in his like a soft pillow. And then afterward, the way her face fell. She'd wrapped a wall around her, trying to protect herself. And so far, he'd not been able to get through it. He tried to push the memory aside, but it stuck to him like glue.

It had been a perfect day. The dance had felt so real. Like something two people might do because they wanted to, not because they were trying to make the best of a practical arrangement. He'd felt her relax into his hold, felt her trust him to lead. And for a while, he'd let himself believe he was leading her toward something genuinely good.

Then, everything changed.

One moment she'd been smiling, the next she was gripping his arm hard enough to leave marks. He'd looked around, searching for whatever had frightened her, but saw nothing—no threat, no stranger, no reason for her to pale the way she did.

He'd asked what was wrong, but she only said they needed to go home. Right then. No explanation. He had hoped she'd volunteer some information. When she didn't, he decided not to press her. But after three days, she still hadn't offered him anything.

Maybe he'd crossed a line without realizing it. Maybe he'd pushed their agreement too far. They had, after all, only agreed to a marriage of convenience. He was the one who'd insisted on that, and she agreed. He reckoned that he might have been too obvious about his intentions at the

festival. He'd wanted her time, her attention, and her company. Maybe she'd felt cornered.

But if that were the case, it seemed like she'd have been angry. Not afraid. She wouldn't have clung to him like a nervous cat. She wouldn't have been constantly looking over her shoulder for the next few days.

Now, he still had no idea what had happened, and it had him jumping at shadows. He kept bracing for a face to appear in the kitchen window at suppertime, or someone kicking the door in. Worst of all was the thought of them waiting until he was out in the fields—Mabel answering the door, and letting danger walk right in before she even knew it. He didn't like it. He didn't like not knowing what had scared her. And he didn't like the feeling that something had followed them home.

After Olivia and the children were in bed, Jacob stepped onto the porch with his shotgun. That was something else he felt compelled to do these days—carry his shotgun everywhere he went. He sat in his favorite rocker and let his thoughts run free. Probably a bad idea, but he was tired of fighting it.

Not long after, he heard a rider coming down the drive. He tightened his grip on his gun and waited.

It was Thomas.

"You look like you've been chewing nails," Thomas said, dismounting and walking up on the porch.

"What are you doing out here so late?" Jacob asked.

"Coming back from Naomi's," he said with a grin. "She made me supper."

Jacob chuckled. "Do you ever cook for yourself?"

“Not if I don’t have to,” he laughed as he dropped into the chair next to Jacob. “Honestly, I just swung by to make sure Graham put the farrier tools back in the barn. I didn’t expect to see you sitting out here alone. Everything all right?”

Jacob hesitated. He wasn’t one to talk about his private life, not even with Thomas. But the worry had been gnawing at him for days, and he needed to say something before it ate him alive.

“No,” he said finally. “Everything’s not all right.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

Jacob didn’t answer right away. He stood, leaned against the railing, and faced Thomas, his arms crossed.

“It’s my wife,” he said.

Thomas’ forehead creased, but he said nothing. He just looked at Jacob and waited.

Jacob told him how happy they all were the day of the festival, how Olivia had laughed and danced and seemed more at ease than he’d ever seen her.

“And then, something happened,” Jacob said.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Jacob said, obviously frustrated. “She grabbed my arm like she was terrified and said we had to leave. Immediately.”

“That is... strange,” Thomas agreed.

Jacob nodded, scoffing. “You’re telling me. I don’t know what happened, but I’ve been looking over my shoulder ever since.”

Thomas let out a slow breath. “She hasn’t said anything at all? Give you any clue?”

“Nothing,” Jacob replied. “She moves around like she’s walking on eggshells every day. She will hardly even step outside. And she stares out the window, watching the children whenever they put a foot in the yard. She hasn’t laughed or told any stories. And she barely speaks. She’s like another person.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s probably just nerves.”

Jacob frowned. “Nerves?”

“Yeah. You know, a girl like Olivia—a *good* girl—might be a little intimidated by your... um... advances.”

“My advances,” Jacob murmured as though Thomas were ridiculous.

“Yeah, advances. You said you were pressing the relationship,” Thomas said with a shrug. “You might have scared her.”

“Scared her?” Jacob repeated.

“Are you going to repeat everything I say? ‘Cause it’s a lot like having a conversation with myself.”

Trying not to roll his eyes, Jacob gestured for him to continue.

“So, yes. Maybe you were being more aggressive than you realized. I mean, you asked her to the festival. You danced with her. You were obviously letting her know you were open to changing the terms of your

marital agreement. Maybe it just made her nervous. Some things just take time.”

Jacob shook his head. “She wasn’t nervous, Thomas. She was scared. No, she was terrified.”

Thomas studied him for a moment. “Jacob, I know she’s had to deal with a lot from your past. And because of that, she’s very well-versed on everything you’ve been through. But you don’t know hardly anything about her history. Do you?”

Blazes! He was right. He couldn’t do anything but blink in response when he realized he’d never really talked with Olivia about her past.

Her ma had raised her—a strong, kind woman who taught her daughter to be the same. And she’d done that by reading to Olivia and telling her stories and tales about the past. He knew that much.

He also knew that Olivia’s pa had disappeared when she was young, too young to remember him. And Jacob remembered thinking that it must have been hard for her and her ma. But he never asked much about it, and he regretted it now.

And finally, he knew that Olivia had spent years moving from place to place, picking up different jobs wherever she could. And that was about the extent of his knowledge of Olivia’s past. He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t asked more, why he hadn’t pressed for any details. Maybe he thought it was enough to know the basics, or maybe he just assumed she’d share more when she was ready.

But as he considered her restless history, Jacob questioned if all that wandering was a sign of something deeper. Something darker. He found himself wishing he’d paid closer attention, that he’d noticed the gaps and tried to fill them. Now, he felt the weight of not knowing, and the uneasy sense that there was more to Olivia’s story than she’d ever let on.

He wondered if it was even fair to expect Olivia to tell him every little thing about her past. He hadn't told her everything about his own. She knew the highlights—nothing more—and much of that she'd picked up from others, not from him. Was she holding something back?

The thought sat uneasily. Out here, folks carried old hurts the way they carried their bedrolls—tied tight, seldom opened unless there was no choice. And he was no exception. If he wanted her to share more, then he had to be prepared to do the same.

“That’s what I thought. You really don’t know anything about her,” Thomas said with a chuckle. “Whatever unsettled her might not have had anything to do with you or the dancing or the evening at all. Marriage doesn’t erase old fears. Not for you. And not for her.”

Jacob looked out across the yard, lit up in the silvery moonlight. “What kind of fear makes someone look like that?”

He could guess, but none of them would be good. Sometimes a woman carried the memory of a man who didn’t know how to let go. Sometimes trouble followed a person, and they just can’t shake it off. And sometimes, just a stranger’s face could dig up an old memory that won’t stay buried.

Whatever this was, it wasn’t the kind of fear born from a prowling wolf or a fall off a horse. This was the kind that came from another human being—someone trying to terrorize or do her harm. She was too afraid for it to be anything less.

“Maybe that’s for her to work out,” Thomas said with a shrug. “Not you.”

Jacob didn’t answer. He didn’t like the idea of standing by while Olivia carried something that heavy alone. But he also knew Thomas was right. He couldn’t force her to talk. He couldn’t demand answers she wasn’t ready to give.

Thomas clapped him on the shoulder. “Give her time. She’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

Jacob nodded.

“Now, I need to go make sure Graham put everything up where it belongs. We got three horses to shoe tomorrow, and I don’t want our tools disappearing.”

After Thomas left, Jacob stayed on the porch for a long while. The night was quiet, but he felt restless. He walked the yard, checking the barn doors, the windows, and the fence line. He told himself he was just being diligent.

But that was a lie, and he knew it.

He paused by the pigsty that housed John’s new pig, General Pork. The little animal snorted and rooted around in the straw, unaware of anything beyond its next meal. Jacob leaned on the fence rail and watched it for a long moment, his thoughts circling the same question that had followed him for days: what had followed Olivia here?

He tried to imagine the possibilities, though none of them sat right. Maybe her father had returned, and there was more to his leaving than Jacob thought. Some men didn’t let go easily, especially when slighted.

Or maybe it was a past employer—someone who’d treated her poorly or was trying to blackmail her for something. Though that seemed far-fetched, still, he’d heard stories of ranchers or shopkeepers chasing down former help over imagined debts or grudges. It was possible, he reckoned.

But none of those guesses explained the look on her face at the festival. That kind of fear didn’t come from a scolding or a debt. It was deeper than that. Something she’d carried on her shoulders long before she came to his ranch.

General Pork squealed and flopped onto his side. Jacob chuckled but didn't move. He just kept staring, wishing he knew what Olivia was running from.

Something was haunting his wife, and he was determined to keep her safe, to protect his family.

Even if he had no idea what he was protecting them from.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I can’t do this,” John said, frustrated.

Olivia sat with him at the kitchen table, the afternoon light slanting across the wood. His schoolbook lay open in front of him, a piece of chalk clutched tight in his small hand. He was working through his numbers again, his jaw set, and his brows pulled together in concentration.

Every few minutes, he let out a frustrated sigh and pressed harder on the slate, as if force alone might make the numbers behave.

“You’re doing fine, John,” Olivia said, keeping her voice calm. “Let’s take a break from these, and you can recite your tables. Go ahead.”

John groaned but did as she asked. He recited them perfectly until he reached his fours. She had to correct him a couple of times, but he was trying. He always tried. She leaned closer, sliding his slate board in front of him. She’d scribbled a few of the numbers on there for him. “If you get stuck, you can look here.”

He finished his nines, only having to look at the slate board a couple of times, and grinned. “I did it,” he said proudly.

“Yes, you did. That was much better. You’re getting the hang of it.”

He looked up at her, as if he was searching her face for any sign of disappointment. She smiled at him, and his shoulders eased. Then, he bent over the page again to finish working on his numbers.

He really was a good boy. He didn’t always understand the lessons, but he gave them everything he had. She praised his effort more than the result, because she knew how much he needed to hear it. And because she meant it. He made her proud, even when the answers weren’t right.

As she watched him, a strange feeling washed over her—this was how it was supposed to be. The normalcy of the moment hit her hard. Sitting at a table with the children she loved, helping with his homework while the other was finishing up her letters at the other end of the table. The house was warm and peaceful around them.

This was what she had always wanted: a quiet evening with family. Children to love and care for. A husband who worked hard and treated her with kindness. A home that felt safe.

She had it all.

And now Victor was threatening to steal it from her.

She tried to push the thought away, but it never went far. She hadn't slept well since the festival. Every sound outside pulled her awake: a horse snorting in the barn, a branch knocking against the window. Even Jacob's footsteps on the porch made her heart jump every time.

In her dreams, Victor's face would appear. It was twisted with anger and hatred as he moved toward her. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw him there. Again and again, she watched him hurt her family. She'd wake with her pulse racing, her nightgown damp with sweat.

During the day, she tried to go about her chores as usual, but it felt like she was slogging through water. Slow. Heavy. Detached. She tried not to draw attention to herself, but she knew she wasn't fooling anyone. Mabel watched her with worried eyes. John stayed close, as if afraid she was going to run away. Olivia forced herself to smile, to speak lightly, to pretend nothing had changed.

But they could tell.

To make matters worse, the fear made her clumsy. She dropped spoons, knocked over a bucket, and forgot small tasks she'd done a hundred times before. She startled at the slightest noise. She wouldn't leave the

house unless she had to, and even then, she stayed close to the door, scanning the yard before stepping outside.

Jacob had said nothing about it. His restraint only made her unease worse. He knew something was off, but he didn't question her or demand an explanation. He didn't press her or look at her with suspicion. He simply carried on—quiet, supportive, patient. She didn't deserve his kindness, and that made her guilt even worse.

She had brought danger into his home without telling him. She had married him for safety, but hadn't told him what she was running from. She had let him believe the threat was gone. And now she was hiding the truth from him, even as her fear grew stronger.

Happy as she was here, she thought about leaving. Running had always been her safest bet. Moving around was the only solution she'd ever known that truly worked. So, when trouble came, she packed her things and disappeared. It was how she'd survived this long. She knew how to vanish. She knew how to start over.

She'd done it more times than she cared to count. Once, Victor showed up at the boardinghouse where Olivia and her ma were staying in Cheyenne. It was before dawn, and Victor was yelling, demanding that someone take him to her immediately.

They'd slipped out the back door, carrying their boots so the floorboards wouldn't creak and give them away. Her ma hurried along beside her in the dark. They'd walked half a mile barefoot before even daring to speak.

By noon that day, they were on a wagon headed south, working out new names as the past faded behind them.

But she couldn't do that this time.

She couldn't bear the thought of leaving the children without any explanation. It would hurt them too much. John would think she didn't care. Mabel would think she'd done something wrong. She tended to take on blame for every little thing that went wrong. It was a bad habit that Olivia was working to fix. Who would do that if she left?

And then, there was Jacob. She didn't want to hurt him either. The thought of walking away from him made her chest ache. She didn't want to face a future without him in it. She wasn't even sure she could.

But if she stayed, he deserved to know the truth. He couldn't protect them unless he had all the facts. And once he knew, he might not want her there anymore. So, she might lose him either way.

Still, she understood that staying silent was no longer an option. She wasn't protecting anyone by keeping the truth to herself. She was only delaying the inevitable.

John tapped his pencil against the table. "Is this right?" he asked, jabbing at his slate board.

Olivia blinked, pulled from her thoughts. She leaned in to look. "Yes," she said softly. "That's just right."

He grinned, pleased with himself, and moved on to the next one.

"Well done, squirt," Mabel said from the other end of the table. "Maybe we can bake an apple cake to celebrate?"

"I'm sure we can do that," Olivia said, smiling at John. "Now, go play a while before supper."

She watched him run for the door, her throat tight. She wanted to freeze this moment, hold onto it, and keep it safe. But that familiar fear

closed in on her, reminding her that nothing was safe until she faced what she'd been avoiding.

She reached out and smoothed Mabel's hair. She was such a pretty girl. Mabel looked up and smiled at her, then went back to her work.

This was her family now. Whether she felt she deserved it or not. Whether she believed she could keep it or not. And that meant it was her job, too, to keep them safe. She knew the best way to do that.

She had to tell Jacob. Not tonight, maybe. But soon. Before Victor made a move and before she lost everything she'd finally been given.

"I'm going to go get supper started," she said as she stood, grabbing John's slate to put away.

"I'll come help with the cake when I'm done," Mabel replied with a grin.

Olivia chuckled. "Good. You can peel the apples and get those started."

In the kitchen, Olivia stared out the window to see if she could spot John. He liked to wander out to the pasture to talk to the ranch hands, and she could usually keep an eye on him there. But today, no one was there.

"They're probably working in a different pasture or out near the barn," she whispered to herself. But her hands shook as she reached for a pot, and she had to steady herself against the counter.

She couldn't keep living like this. She couldn't keep pretending. Between the fear and the guilt, the lack of sleep, and her frayed nerves, it was taking a real toll on her body. She had to tell Jacob the truth.

Even if it meant losing the life she'd always wanted.

Even if it meant losing Jacob.

She stirred the pot, listening to the quiet sounds of the house—the ticking clock, John shouting to the ranch hands in the back yard, the faint creak of the porch boards as Jacob walked by outside. She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering her courage.

Soon, she told herself.

Soon, she'd tell him everything.

And whatever came after, she would face it. Running wasn't an option anymore because she wasn't alone anymore. Because this family meant more to her than her own safety.

And because the truth, however painful, was the only way she could think of to protect them now.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Good night, sweetheart,” Jacob said, leaning down to kiss Mabel’s forehead.

“Pa,” she said before he had a chance to leave.

He arched a brow and waited.

“Is Olivia gonna leave us?”

He blew out a breath like someone had punched him in the gut. He knew why she’d asked. Olivia had been acting strange since the night of the festival. Jacob tried not to press her about it. He wasn’t the kind of man who liked to pry into other people’s business or poke at another person’s feelings. But this was different.

For the past week, she moved through the house like she was listening for something no one else could hear. She startled at small noises. Jumped at her own shadow. And she glanced toward every window she passed as if expecting someone to crash through it at any time. She smiled when the children spoke to her, but it never reached her eyes. She was afraid. But he didn’t know why.

Whatever the reason, she wasn’t the same Olivia they were used to. Not the woman who hummed while she cooked, showed patience when she taught Mabel needlepoint, or John how to make a windmill from paper. Or who teased him about needing a haircut.

And she definitely wasn’t the woman who had stood strong and proud through a wedding ceremony with a man she didn’t know and a life she’d stepped into without complaint.

“No,” he said. “She isn’t going anywhere.”

Mabel nodded, but she didn't look convinced. She rolled over and sighed, apparently dismissing him. Jacob picked up the lamp and left with a heaviness he couldn't shake. He'd given her plenty of opportunity to talk. And she hadn't. So, now, he thought it might be time for him to start the conversation.

The question lingered with him long after the children went to bed. He sat at the kitchen table, staring at the lamp flame, and thinking about the way Olivia had flinched when he'd walked into the kitchen behind her earlier that night. She'd apologized, which seemed strange. She apologized for everything these days.

It was definitely time to approach her about it. He couldn't protect his family from something he didn't understand.

When he finally stood and went to find her, she was sitting in the living room, sewing a button on one of John's shirts. "Olivia," he said, "why don't we go sit on the porch for a bit?"

She looked up, startled. He could tell she didn't care much for the idea. Finally, she waved her hand at the stack of clothes beside her and said, "But I still have all this mending to finish."

"It can wait," he stated firmly.

She opened her mouth like she meant to argue, then pressed her lips together. After a moment, she nodded.

"Thanks." He headed to the front door and stepped outside on the porch, taking a seat in his favorite rocker.

A few minutes later, she came out with two cups of tea, handing one to him before settling into the rocker beside him. She sat straight, hands wrapped around her cup, but her eyes were scouring the yard.

The night was cool and lit by a half-moon. He could hear the cattle shifting in the far pasture and the faint rustle of trees along the creek.

He didn't speak right away. He didn't want her to feel cornered. He took a slow sip of tea, letting the quiet settle between them. "Tea's good," he finally said.

"I added some peppermint," she said. "I'm glad you like it."

They rocked in silence for a bit before Jacob finally said, "The children are worried about you, Olivia." He was worried about her, too, but he didn't say that aloud.

He saw her fingers tighten around her cup. When she didn't reply, he continued.

"They can feel that something's wrong," he continued. "And so can I, for that matter. They're asking questions. And I don't have any answers for them."

She stared down at her lap. He could see her throat move as she swallowed.

"We're married now," he said. "Whether I planned it that way or not. Whatever's troubling you... You don't have to carry it alone. I can't protect you from something if I don't know what it is."

For a long moment, she didn't answer. He thought she might refuse to speak at all. But then she let out a breath, shaky and thin.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you," she said quietly, her fingers tightening around the edge of her skirt. "It just never seemed like the right time."

Jacob didn't move. He simply waited, giving her the space she needed.

"His name is Victor. Victor Kellan."

He felt the name tug at something in his memory, but he kept his face still, refusing to let the flicker of recognition show. His eyes stayed on her, quietly willing her to continue.

Olivia swallowed hard. "He's from upper Laramie," she managed, her voice thin. "He made a very good living dealing in property—land contracts, negotiations, that sort of thing." She bit her lip, eyes darting away as though the words themselves stung. "He convinced my mother he was a fine, upstanding citizen with social standing. She asked around. Everyone said he was dependable, generous, and invested in the community. His reputation was impeccable."

Her breath hitched. She blinked rapidly, fighting tears, and lifted her cup with a trembling hand. The sip she took wasn't for thirst—it was to keep herself from breaking apart. Jacob watched her closely, concern etched on his face.

She paused, frowning as she took another sip of tea.

"I was twenty-one when he first approached my mother and asked for my hand in marriage. She didn't agree at first. Victor was a lot older than me—around forty-five or fifty, I think. She asked me if I was willing, and I could tell that she wanted me to say yes. I'd only met the man a few times at church functions. But Ma said it would secure my future. Our future. She didn't want to become a burden on me, you see."

Jacob nodded.

"Anyway, I was engaged to him," she said. "Briefly. Years ago."

Her voice was flat, like she was reciting something she'd practiced too many times.

"It didn't take long for me to see that he wasn't... kind," she said. "At first, he pretended to be. He said all the right things. Did all the right things. Promised he'd take care of me. Promised to care for Ma. But once he knew I was trapped, everything changed."

Jacob's jaw tightened, but he didn't interrupt.

"He controlled everything," she said. "Where I went. Who I spoke to. What I wore. What I didn't wear. He'd get angry if I didn't answer fast enough when he asked me a question. Angry if I looked at someone too long or in a way he didn't like. Angry if I didn't look at him enough." She paused. "And then, he hit me one day. After that, he seemed to think it was all right to hit me whenever he wanted. Ma and I both agreed that I should cancel the engagement. So, I did."

She looked at Jacob, and he could see that she was sad. Ashamed, even.

"Maybe I could have lived with that," she said sadly. "But then, he hit my mother. I couldn't live with that, Jacob. We packed what we could and ran."

Jacob felt something cold settle in his chest. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. But you did the right thing," he finally said. "Canceling the engagement, I mean. I don't like that you felt you had to run, though."

She gave him a sad smile. "You're probably right. It didn't do any good, anyway," she admitted. "Because he followed us. Not just out of town. He tracked us everywhere we went, all across Wyoming. Always just a step behind. Whenever he'd get close, and we'd hear he'd been asking after us, we'd leave again. He was dogged. Determined to find me."

"Why?" Jacob shook his head, confused.

“I don’t know why.” Her voice wavered, and she pressed her lips together as if the words might spill out too fast. “I’ve often wondered that myself. Ma said I wounded his pride.” She drew a shaky breath, fingers twisting in her skirt. “But I never told anyone why I canceled the engagement. Except him, of course.”

Her throat tightened, and she blinked hard, fighting the sting in her eyes.

“I thought maybe he wanted to force me to go through with the marriage,” she whispered. “And that by marrying you, he would give up. But...” She shook her head, a small, helpless motion, tears gathering despite her efforts to hold them back.

“It doesn’t matter if you did or didn’t. He’s got no right to do this.”

She rubbed her thumb along the rim of her cup. “After Mama died, I just kept on moving. Every time I started to feel safe, someone would mention a stranger asking questions. Or I’d see a man who looked like him. And I’d have to run again.” Olivia paused and looked him in the eye. “I thought for sure he’d stop if I got married. Because what would be the point?”

Jacob understood now. The way she’d gone pale at the festival. The way she’d clutched his arm so tightly. The way she’d barely spoken since.

“You saw him at the festival, didn’t you?”

She frowned and hung her head. “I think so.”

“Is he dangerous?” Jacob asked.

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes. He’s violent when he’s angry.”

“What do you think he’ll do if he finds you?” Jacob asked, genuinely curious what the man thought he was going to accomplish by chasing her like this. Maybe it was time for a confrontation?

Olivia brought the teacup to her lips, and he saw that her hands were trembling. She was obviously terrified.

Finally, she answered. “I think he’ll kill me,” she said matter-of-factly.

Jacob blinked. No wonder she was so afraid. He looked out into the dark yard. His home. His land. His children are asleep inside. And his wife was sitting beside him, shaking from a fear she’d carried around for years.

He took a deep breath, doing his best not to judge her. He didn’t question her choices. He didn’t ask why she hadn’t told him sooner. None of that mattered now. This is where they were. And he had to protect his wife. His family.

He set his cup down and turned toward her. “You’re not alone anymore, Olivia. You can’t keep all this bottled up and not share with me.”

“I know,” she breathed. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’ll go see the sheriff tomorrow,” he said, musing aloud. “And I’ll let the men know that we need to be on our guard for any strangers hanging around. But whatever happens, we’re in this together.”

Her breath caught. She looked at him like she wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“You aren’t angry?” she asked, her voice thin.

He thought about it for a moment. “Not with you.”

“But...” her eyes shimmered, but she blinked back her tears. “I thought you’d be angry that I brought danger to your home.”

“Our home,” he corrected her. “You’re my wife. This is our home. Our children. I mean it,” he said. “I’ll protect it. And I’ll protect you.”

She nodded once, small and quick, like she was afraid to believe him fully. “I will, too,” she said, her voice shaking.

Jacob reached over and covered her hand with his. She didn’t pull away. She leaned into him, her shoulders shaking with silent tears.

They sat like that for a long time, even after she stopped crying. He stroked her back, rested his cheek on her head, and breathed her in. The night was quiet around them. The fear wasn’t gone, but she didn’t have to carry it alone anymore.

If Victor ever came near this ranch, he wouldn’t find the frightened girl he once controlled.

He would find Jacob.

And Jacob would be ready for him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Thank you,” she finally said once she stopped crying. She wasn’t even sure what she was crying about. Relief maybe?

Jacob squeezed her tighter to him. “You don’t need to thank me. This is what husbands do.”

“Do they?” she sniffed.

“Well, any that are worth their salt do, I reckon.”

She sighed, a sound that felt pulled from the bottom of her lungs. She’d done it. After years of running, hiding, and keeping her past locked down tight, she had finally told Jacob everything. Nothing but the truth sat between them now, and Olivia felt wrung out.

Her hands still trembled in her lap, and her eyes burned from all the tears she’d cried. But as the minutes ticked past, she felt her shoulders loosen, and the tight band around her ribs ease at last. She no longer had to guard every word or remember which parts of her story she’d tucked away. For the first time in years, she could simply breathe.

She’d been pleasantly surprised. She thought speaking Victor’s name aloud would make the fear worse, make him come alive, but instead, it was just the opposite. It felt like she’d set down a heavy weight she’d been lugging around for years. And by speaking his name aloud, it seemed to make him smaller.

What she *had* expected was for Jacob to pull away. Or going quiet in that way men did when they were deciding whether something was worth the trouble. She had braced herself for blame, for anger, all old reflexes she’d learned too young.

Part of her had already pictured Jacob's face tightening the way Victor's used to when he thought he'd caught her in a lie, even when she wasn't lying. She'd rehearsed half a dozen explanations over the past few weeks, each one trimmed down to something small and harmless, something that wouldn't make Jacob pull back from her.

All those fears had sat heavy in her chest as she spoke, each one waiting to be proven true. And now—none of them were.

Jacob had listened. Really listened. And when she finished, he didn't look at her like she was a burden or a fool. He looked at her like he understood. Then he told her she wasn't alone anymore. He said he would stand by her. Protect her. Face whatever came together.

It was more than she had ever hoped for, more than she had ever dared to imagine.

When they finally rose from the porch, the tea had long gone cold. She was ready for bed. Jacob reached for the door, but before she could step inside, he caught her arm gently. She turned, surprised by the hesitation in his eyes.

"Do you regret marrying me?" he asked.

"What?" She blinked at him.

For a heartbeat, she couldn't tell what lay beneath his voice. Was it simple curiosity or something deeper? The question hung there, and she felt her stomach tighten the way it always did when she feared she'd made a misstep.

He wasn't looking at her, not at first. His thumb traced the edge of his wedding band, slow and uncertain, and that small motion made her chest feel hollow. She drew in a breath, steadying herself, and trying to read his posture before she trusted her own voice. Only then did she meet his eyes and smile reassuringly.

“I need to know if you’re unhappy here,” he said quietly. “If you wish you’d made a different choice.”

She shook her head, finding her voice. “No. I don’t regret coming here at all, Jacob.”

He searched her face, as if making sure she meant it.

She sighed slowly. “My only regret is that Ma didn’t live long enough to meet you and the children. But do I regret marrying you? Not even a little bit. In fact, I think it might be the best decision I’ve ever made,” she said, still smiling. The words surprised her with how true they felt. “Despite everything... there’s no place on earth I’d rather be.”

Jacob grinned, and she could see the tension already easing from his shoulders. He nodded once, then stepped back and gestured for her to enter. She moved past him, the familiar warmth of the house already enveloping her. It was the first time in days she felt anything close to safe.

She hung her shawl on the peg and listened to Jacob close the door behind them. The simple sound eased her further. For a moment, she let herself breathe, slow and even, without the tight pull of fear in her chest. Nothing had changed, but just being here, with him close and the children asleep upstairs, made the danger feel farther off.

Jacob walked past her toward the table, giving her a quick, searching look. She met it without flinching, grateful for the concern she saw in his face. Immediately, she thought of a quote from Ecclesiastes that her mother used to tell her: *Two are better than one... For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow.*

She was still scared. But she wasn’t carrying the burden alone anymore. She didn’t feel hopeless. And she loved that Jacob wanted to protect her.

The next night, Olivia sat with the children in the living room before bed. The house was quiet except for the soft crackle of the fire and the rustle of blankets. Jacob was in his chair, whittling something.

Olivia read to them from one of the few books she brought with her, a worn copy of Longfellow's poems. Mabel leaned against her shoulder, half-asleep and covered with a quilt, while John sat cross-legged at the foot of the sofa, watching her with a seriousness that didn't match his eight young years.

When she finished, she closed the book and smoothed the cover. "That's enough for tonight," she said gently. She looked at John and smiled. "Do you like poetry that much?"

Mabel mumbled something and curled deeper under her quilt. John didn't move. He kept staring at her like he was trying to figure something out.

"John?" she asked. "What is it, sweetheart?"

He swallowed, then reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He held it in both hands as he stared at it. Slowly, he opened his hand and showed it to her.

It was his favorite figurine, a small toy soldier, Jacob said he had carved for him years ago when John was still a baby. The edges were worn smooth from constant handling, and one of the arms looked as though it had been glued back on more than once.

John held it out with both hands, letting her see it clearly. The tiny wooden rifle was still intact, and at the end of it sat a little bayonet—a sharp sliver of wood Jacob had carved to add another level of reality to the likeness. Olivia noticed it now—the way John treasured the little figure, holding it with a quiet, deliberate pride. He was so clearly pleased with its small, dangerous precision.

It was the kind of detail only a child who'd seen a real soldier up close could really appreciate. John had told her once that he and Jacob had seen this soldier when they visited Fort Laramie. Jacob's attention to detail was more than a little impressive, and John would never part with it lightly.

Olivia blinked. "John... what are you doing?"

"He always makes me feel safe at night," he said. His voice was quiet and serious. "Maybe he can sleep in your room for a while? He can protect you if you need it."

Her breath caught. She looked at the little soldier, then at the boy offering it to her. His face was earnest, his eyes wide and worried in a way that made her heart squeeze in her chest.

She took the toy carefully, as if it were something fragile. "Thank you," she said. "I'll sleep with it every night and keep it close to my heart."

John nodded, satisfied, and stood up. "I'm going to bed," he announced, which was unusual for him. Normally, Jacob had to make him go to his room.

Olivia placed the back of her hand on his forehead and checked for a fever. Satisfied he wasn't ill, she told him to go up, and she'd be there to tuck him in shortly.

"Me, too." Mabel stood, gathering her quilt and following John to the stairs. "Night, Pa. Night, Olivia."

"Goodnight, sweetheart," Olivia called after her.

Olivia sat there for a moment, fondling the wooden horse in her pocket. This, this small, simple act, hit her harder than anything else had these past few days. And to think, she had put this at risk. Not just herself. Not just her marriage. But the trust of two children who had accepted her

without hesitation. Who had let her into their lives, their routines, and their hearts.

It had helped that Jacob had chosen to stand with her. But now, she knew the children had chosen to be there for her, too.

She patted the toy in her apron pocket and looked toward Jacob. "I'll go tuck them in."

"I can do it," he said, already setting his carving aside.

"No," she snapped, firmer than she meant to. "Sorry. I want to do it."

Jacob smiled, then returned to his whittling.

Olivia waited until the house settled again before she slipped her hand into her apron pocket. John's soldier rested there, warm from her body. She drew it out and turned it slowly in her palm, tracing the worn edges, the tiny bayonet carved with such care.

It reminded her of the time she gave Mabel her necklace and told her it was magic. It was ridiculous, really, thinking a child's toy could protect her from things far larger than either of them could name. And yet her throat tightened. He had trusted her with what made him feel safe.

She pressed the little figure to her chest and closed her eyes, letting it anchor her. If danger ever did come to this house, it would reach them through her. The thought hollowed her out and brought her back to reality. She slipped the soldier back into her pocket, a quiet promise forming in her heart. Victor would not touch these children.

A few minutes later, she stepped into the hallway, closing John's door softly behind her. Olivia paused halfway down the hall, enjoying the

moment of calm surrounding her. The house felt different tonight, softer somehow, the floorboards creaking in a way that no longer startled her.

She could hear the faint sound of Mabel's blankets rustling in her room as she settled in for sleep. She heard John murmuring something about his prisoner, Thomas, as he was obviously already dreaming of new adventures. The sounds brushed against her like a reminder that she was part of this place now, not just passing through. She drew a slow breath, steadying herself before she moved on.

She glanced up to see Jacob waiting at the end of the hall, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He raised an eyebrow in question.

Olivia touched the pocket where John's toy rested. "They're asleep," she said.

Jacob nodded. "You all right?"

She thought about it for a moment, then decided she was more than all right.

"Yes," she said. "I'm wonderful."

Jacob grinned. "Good. Then, I'm going to bed, too."

Olivia nodded, then looked down at the floor awkwardly.

Blushing, she glanced at him. "Sleep well."

"You, too," he said, walking past and reaching out to brush her arm.

His touch was charged, sending a bolt of lightning through her veins. A real wife would be going with him. She knew that. A wife stood beside her husband without hesitation, trusted him, leaned on him the way

the Scriptures taught, to love, honor, and walk beside her husband in mutual faith and support.

But fear still held her back. Not fear of Jacob—never him—but of what followed her, of what might break the fragile peace she'd found here. She wasn't ready to step fully into the role she owed him.

Soon, she hoped.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“I’m going to be working in the north field today,” Jacob said as he pulled on his coat. “We had another attack yesterday. A bull this time.”

“Oh, no,” Olivia turned. She stood by the stove, tying her apron so that she could clear the breakfast dishes. She tipped her head, calm in a way she hadn’t been since the night of the festival. Maybe even before that. “I hope he’s all right,”

“He’ll survive,” Jacob said. “But the next one might not. We have to try and thin those packs out before winter.”

Olivia nodded. “Just give me a few minutes, and I’ll finish putting some lunch together.”

Jacob watched her as he said, “I’ll be working pretty far off today.” And, before he could say anything else, Olivia was already reaching for the bread tin, pulling out the cloth-wrapped loaf, and setting it on the counter.

She moved with purpose, not flustered, not anxious, just... thinking of him. Thinking of him and his men, packing enough lunch to feed them all without being asked. Jacob stood there, hands idle at his sides, and felt something that he hadn’t expected when he agreed to this marriage. He liked being married more than he’d ever liked being on his own.

He liked the way Olivia fussed over him—even if he grumbled sometimes. He liked the way she checked the weather out the window as if she could shield him from any rain. And he liked seeing her like this, relaxed, unafraid, humming under her breath as she wrapped the food.

He’d done that for her. Not by solving anything, not by chasing down the man who’d hurt her, but just by giving her a place where she could talk without fear. He reckoned that alone had eased something in her.

But he'd vowed to protect her, too, whatever came. And watching her now, calm and happy in her kitchen, he was glad he had.

"Mason's going to stick around here today while we're gone," he said. "Got a few horses that need shoeing. So, he'll be out by the barn most of the morning. After that, he's going to work on the pen for John's pigs."

Olivia smiled. "So, you're going to do it, then? Get him some more pigs, I mean?"

Jacob chuckled. "Of course, I am. You knew I would."

"He'll be so happy." She turned and hurried over to the pantry. "I'll put the rest of that cake in there for y'all, too. It's apple. So, it's just as good the second day, if not better."

"I'm sure the boys will appreciate that."

She finished up, packing all the sandwiches, cheese, pickles, and pie into a large basket. He enjoyed watching her. It had been days since she'd confided in him. And she seemed stronger every day. Jacob hadn't brought the man's name up again. There was no need.

The knowledge sat between them now, shaping every choice he made, every glance toward the road, every time he checked the latch on the door before bed.

It bothered him. Of course, it did. But it was worth it because Olivia was slowly returning to herself. Maybe even more than before. She moved with a little more ease. She smiled more. She laughed with the children without that shadow in her eyes. She seemed... free. Happy. He didn't know what to do with the relief that stirred in him every time he glimpsed it.

“There you go,” she said, handing him the basket. Then, asked, “If you want, I can make up a jug of lemonade.”

“No need.” He grinned, amused. “Water’s fine. We all have our canteens.”

She walked him to the door, and he opened it. He paused, doing something he hadn’t done before. He leaned over casually and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. “We’ll be back before dark.”

Then, he stepped outside, taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air. She didn’t say anything else. He reckoned he’d left her speechless. This made him grin. When he got closer to the barn, he saw that Thomas was already saddling his horse, humming under his breath. What was it with everyone humming these days?

Jacob walked over, pulling on his gloves.

“Heading north?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “Bring the rifles.”

“What’s that?” Thomas nodded at the basket on Jacob’s arm.

Jacob grinned. “Lunch.”

Smiling, Thomas began collecting saddlebags to distribute the food. He picked up Mason’s, and Jacob shook his head.

“Mason’s staying here,” Jacob said. “He can shoe those last few horses we didn’t finish the other day. And when he’s done with that, he can set up a new sty for John’s pigs.”

“What pigs?” Thomas asked.

Rolling his eyes, Jacob replied, “The ones we’re going to buy for John so that General Pork don’t get lonely.”

Thomas barked out a laugh. Then, he grew more serious. “I can shoe the horses tomorrow, like we planned. And it won’t take any time at all for the three of us to build out the pigsty for John,” he said. “We could really use Mason’s rifle if we’re going after coyotes.”

“Not today,” Jacob said sternly. “Today, I need him here. I need him to keep an eye on the house, on Olivia, and the kids. And I need him to keep a lookout for any strangers.”

Thomas stared, waiting for an explanation that didn’t come.

“Go tell him for me,” Jacob said, leading Thunder out of the barn.

Thomas nodded, then left. Once he’d given Mason his tasks for the day, Thomas returned, mounted his horse, Bug, and joined Jacob and Graham. Then, the three men rode off toward the ridge, leaving Mason behind to keep an eye on the ranch.

It was later that morning before Jacob and Thomas were alone again. Graham had ridden ahead to look for tracks, and the two of them were meandering, letting the horses set their own pace. Jacob could tell that Thomas was still brooding. He’d been watching Jacob since they left the ranch, giving him space but expecting the moment when Jacob would finally explain.

So, Jacob finally did.

He took a deep breath and spilled the whole story. He told Thomas everything, not in a rush, not with any drama, just the plain, unvarnished truth. He told him about Olivia’s past. The man who’d been hunting her. The years she’d spent running. The fear she’d carried into their home. And the way she’d finally told him, sitting on the porch with her body trembling.

Thomas didn't interrupt. He didn't frown or question or doubt. He just listened, his jaw tight, eyes steady.

When Jacob finished, Thomas let out a slow breath. "All right, what do you need me to do?"

And Jacob suddenly remembered why Thomas had been his best friend for all these years. Thomas might have been loose where liquor and women were concerned. But he was the man Jacob trusted if he ever needed help burying any bodies, which he'd never needed before. But if he ever did, Thomas was the man he'd call on. Thomas would be there for him, no questions asked.

Thomas had been there for him through Julie's illness. He'd helped hold him together. He watched over the children, even feeding them sometimes when Jacob was overwhelmed and forgot. Thomas was a quiet, loyal figure in his life.

It also struck him that Thomas had given him almost the same response that Jacob had given Olivia when she first told him her story. There was no judgment, no hesitation, just readiness.

"I just need you to keep your eyes open," Jacob said. "Talk to the men. Make sure everyone's alert to strangers. I think that's all we can do for now."

Thomas nodded. "I'll keep an ear out. Folks in town talk when someone new shows up. And Naomi can probably visit more after school, too. She won't be much help in a fight, but it'll keep Olivia and the kids from being alone."

Jacob gave a short nod. "Good. Thank you."

Graham whistled up ahead, signaling that he'd found something. They took off down the trail together, the horses' hooves throwing up dirt behind them. The north pasture led to rockier soil the closer they got to the

ridge. It was time to slow the horses, so they didn't trip or get a hoof caught. Jacob had just pulled back on the reins when Thomas called to him.

"There he is." Thomas pointed toward the side of a short cliff where Graham was bent over, scouring the ground as he walked.

They dismounted, grabbing their rifles and tying the horses to a stand of scrub oak. They went the rest of the way on foot.

"What you got?" Thomas asked as they joined Graham.

Jacob didn't need Graham to answer. Even from a few paces back, he could see prints everywhere, crossing and doubling back, the dirt churned like something had milled around in a hurry. A flicker of movement on the ridge caught his eye: two coyotes slipping through the sage, then another pair ghosting after them.

"That's a big pack," he said.

"You ain't speaking hay," Graham replied. "I'm thinking it might be two packs."

Thomas let out a low whistle. "Look at the size of those two. They're huge."

"Two alphas," Graham murmured.

"These tracks are fresh, too," Thomas added. "Isn't it unusual for two packs to join up like this?"

Graham reached up and scratched his chin. "It happens. I've seen it before. But it's usually in winter when food is scarcer. They'll combine resources and hunt together. But I've also seen them appear in larger numbers when there are several family units, and they're all drawn to the same food source." He glanced at Jacob.

“My cattle,” he guessed.

Graham nodded.

Jacob frowned and stood up straight, glancing around as if he might be able to spot them. Fat chance of that. They’d be burrowed in somewhere, well-hidden while they rest up for tonight’s raid. “Let’s see how far we get tracking. If we can’t find them, we’ll have to move the cattle and set up a rotation.”

Thomas sighed, then flashed a crooked grin. “You’re cramping my courting time, Graham.”

“What courting time?” Graham teased. “You’re as good as spoken for.”

Jacob sniggered, then mounted his horse. “Daylight’s burning, boys.”

“Yeah. We want to get home early enough so that Thomas has time to get all gussied up for his courting time.” Graham laughed.

Suddenly, a slap to the head had Graham’s hat flying off his head. It only made him laugh harder.

Once they were all mounted, the men headed toward the top of the ridge to find where the coyotes had bedded down. It was a long shot, but they had to try.

After a full day of searching, they’d seen at least a hundred squirrels, some rabbits, a few bobcats, a family of black bears, and a whole herd of mule deer. But not one coyote. Three of the mule deer were making the trip back home with them—one across Jacob’s saddle, one across Graham’s, and the last one across Thomas’. There was enough meat for all of them and their families.

As they approached the house, Jacob spotted Naomi's horse tied near the fence.

"Looks like we have company," Jacob said.

Graham chuckled behind him.

Thomas tried to hide his smile and failed. "She's crazy for me, boys. Can't be helped."

"Y'all can go on in," Graham said. "Don't keep your ladies waiting. I'll get these hung up tonight, and Mason can butcher 'em in the morning."

"Are you sure?" Jacob asked, feeling a little guilty for leaving Graham with the clean-up.

"I'm sure," he told Jacob. "I'll head home as soon as I get them strung up."

"Thanks, Graham," Thomas said as they slid the last buck off his saddle. "I'll do the skinning next time."

Graham nodded. "Tell Naomi I said *hey*."

Inside, Naomi and Olivia were sitting next to each other at the table, teacups in hand, talking in low voices. Mabel was sitting at the end of the table, reading a book that he'd never seen before, while John played with one of his toys on the floor.

Supper simmered on the stove, and he smelled fresh bread in the oven.

"Pa!" John yelled, jumping up and running over to him. He caught Jacob around the midriff and squeezed.

“Hey, big fella,” he wheezed, unable to breathe.

“Not so hard, John,” Olivia reminded.

“Hi, Pa,” Mabel said, glancing up from her book and smiling. “Hi, Uncle Thomas.”

“Hello, beautiful,” Thomas replied with a grin, then looked to Naomi and winked.

Olivia looked over at Jacob and smiled. Her face lit in a way that still caught him off guard. “You’re back,” she said. “Did you get any coyotes?”

“Sadly, no,” Jacob replied. “But we bagged three bucks. Graham’s putting them in the meat shed now.”

Naomi stood to greet them, smoothing her skirt. “I just thought I’d stop by for a quick visit,” she said. “Didn’t mean to stay so long. I guess I should know better by now. I always lose track of time.”

“You’re welcome anytime,” Jacob said, and he meant it. He would rather Olivia not be alone, and he was happy to see her and Thomas getting along so well.

“Mabel, can you get the bread out of the oven?” Olivia asked.

“Sure,” she said, jumping up and hurrying to the oven.

Jacob took that moment to see what she was reading. He sat down in her chair and picked up the book, reading the title, *The Lamplighter*.

“Oh,” Naomi said, cutting her eyes to Jacob. “I had that book at home and thought she might enjoy it. It’s a lovely, wholesome story that shows how love and patience can transform a life.”

It didn't sound like anything Jacob would want to read, but he appreciated her thoughtfulness toward Mabel. He smiled. "Thank you, Naomi."

Thomas joined them at the table, and Mabel brought a cup of coffee over for the men. Soon, the four of them were talking over hot brews, the conversation drifting from the coyotes to the harvest to the schoolhouse repairs that were needed. John and Mabel would interject occasionally, then bustled around, setting the table and putting the final touches on supper.

When supper came, Naomi and Thomas stayed. The children chattered throughout the meal, and even Jacob found himself talking more than usual. Afterward, Thomas offered to see Naomi home. She accepted, less awkwardly this time, and Thomas didn't bother to hide his grin as they stepped out into the cool evening air.

After saying their goodbyes, Jacob closed the door behind them. The house was quiet once again. Olivia gathered the dishes, humming under her breath. The children were in the living room, lighting lamps and banking the fire. It wouldn't be long before they got sleepy and went to bed.

He stood by the window, sneaking looks out at the dark yard, the fence line, the empty road stretching toward town. Graham was long gone, and the night was still, but that meant nothing. He'd lived long enough to know that trouble didn't announce itself. It stalked. It waited. It came when a man's head was turned.

Whatever was coming hadn't arrived yet. But it would.

He turned from the window and found Olivia watching him, her expression soft but searching. He smiled at her reassuringly. "Supper was good."

"Thank you," she said as if it were nothing, but he could see that she enjoyed the compliment.

“Come on,” he said gently. “Let’s go enjoy some peace and quiet.”

For however long it might last.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next morning, Olivia left the house to walk the children to school. They all waved bye to Thomas and Graham, but she didn't see Jacob anywhere near the barn. She thought he might be in the meat shed with Mason, butchering the deer they'd brought home the night before.

It was getting chillier in the mornings, and Olivia tugged her shawl tighter as she walked between the children. The hem of her skirt brushed against the tops of the frosted grass, and the sun was just starting to clear the ridge. Mabel swung her schoolbooks against her leg, humming something under her breath. John kicked a pebble ahead of him, chasing it every few steps.

"Race you to the fence post," John said suddenly.

"You always say that," Mabel replied, but she was already smiling.

"That's because I always win."

"You do not."

Olivia shook her head, amused. "If you two run, you'll be sweaty and out of breath before we even reach the schoolhouse."

John darted ahead a few steps, then circled back to walk beside Olivia again. "Can we have biscuits again tonight? The ones with the honey?"

"Those are Mabel's biscuits," Olivia said. "But maybe if you're nice to her, she'll make them for you."

"Can we, Mabel?" he asked, giving her a bright smile. "I can help. I'm good at stirring."

“You’re good at making a mess,” Mabel scoffed.

“Well, it’s better than being boring.” John lost interest, bending to pick up a rock that had snagged his attention.

They walked a few more steps in comfortable silence. The schoolhouse came into view, smoke curling from its chimney. Children were already gathering outside, shouting and running in circles. John tugged on Olivia’s sleeve. “Will you come get us after school?”

“Of course, I will,” she told him. “I’ll be right here.”

He nodded, satisfied. Mabel stepped closer and slipped her hand into Olivia’s for a moment, a small, quiet gesture she didn’t always make. Olivia smiled and squeezed her fingers.

“You two have a good day,” she said as they reached the steps.

“We will,” Mabel said.

John waved over his shoulder as he ran toward his friends in the yard. “Bye, Olivia!”

“Bye!” she waved. “And mind Miss Wilkes!”

Naomi stood near the steps, speaking with another mother. She caught Olivia’s eye and waved. Olivia lifted her hand in return, but she didn’t stop to talk. She had errands to take care of, supplies to pick up, laundry to do, a garden to tend, and lunch to make for the men. That didn’t even include all the sewing and mending or the venison stew she needed to start for their supper.

But despite everything, Olivia sighed happily. This was the life she’d always wanted. Everything felt simple. The sun was warm on her back, the children were happy, and everything seemed right with the world.

She held onto that feeling as long as she could.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hale,” someone shouted as they rode past.

It took a moment for her to realize they were talking to her. Smiling, she waved at the man. “Good morning, Mr. Underwood.”

She continued down the road, her basket tucked snugly against her hip as she made her way toward town. The main street was already humming with parents dropping off their kids at school, early risers carrying their packages, and shopkeepers swinging open their doors to start the day.

A few wagons rattled past, and she heard the blacksmith’s hammer ring out from behind the livery. Mr. Underwood’s horse was tied out front. She stopped at the general store and darted inside. Once she’d paid for her purchases of flour, salt, buttons, and a few other things they needed, she thanked the storekeeper and left.

The post office was next. Olivia hurried her steps, feeling a flutter of anticipation at the thought that there might be a letter from her friend Laura waiting.

“Good morning,” the clerk said, barely looking up. “I’ll be right with you.”

Olivia took her place behind two men and a woman, each waiting for the clerk. She hated being a busybody, but she couldn’t help overhearing their conversations. The first man said he was looking for a parcel from his wife back east. The next person wanted to send a telegram. Apparently, his uncle had just passed away, and he needed to let his brother know.

The woman requested stamps and news from Cheyenne. Her husband had gone there for work, and she hadn’t heard from him in several days. Olivia listened quietly, astounded by how much you could learn about

your neighbors by just standing in line at the post office. Her anticipation rose with each transaction as she got closer to the counter.

“Morning, Mrs. Hale,” the clerk said. “What can I do for you today?”

“Good morning, Mr. Finn. I was just checking to see if there’s a letter for me,” she said. “From my friend. Laura Bennett.”

He checked the pigeonholes behind him, running his finger along the row. “I don’t see anything yet,” he said. “But if it comes in, I’ll have Joey bring it to you.”

Olivia smiled brightly. “That would be wonderful. Thank you so much.”

Mr. Finn nodded, then added, “Did your uncle ever find you?”

She blinked. “My... uncle?”

“Yes,” he said, his forehead creasing. “He came in yesterday asking after you.”

Her breath caught. “Asking after me?”

Mr. Finn frowned. “Yes, ma’am. Older fellow. Wanted to know where you lived, how long you’d been in town. Asked if you had a family.”

Olivia’s hands went cold. She gripped the edge of the counter to steady herself. “Did he give his name?”

“I don’t think he ever gave his name. Didn’t say much at all. He just asked a few questions and said he wanted to surprise you.” Mr. Finn frowned. “I didn’t tell him anything. But Mrs. Fleming was standing in line behind him.”

“Did she—”

Mr. Finn nodded. “Yeah. She did. Told him that you’d married Jacob and had two children. She said Jacob had a ranch on the edge of town. I think she might have even given him directions.”

She nodded, but she barely heard him. Her mind had already gone somewhere else—back to the last time she’d seen Victor’s face, when he’d slapped her mother.

“Mrs. Hale?” Mr. Finn frowned. “Are you all right? You don’t look too good.”

“Yes. I... I’m fine,” she said, her voice sounding like someone else’s to her ears. “Thank you, Mr. Finn.”

She turned and hurried out, her mind echoing a single thought: he’s here.

Olivia stepped outside, blinking against the sunlight. The street looked the same as it had a few minutes ago, but everything felt different. She saw Victor’s face in every man she passed on the boardwalk. Every sound made her jump. She kept her basket close and walked fast, not stopping again until she reached the road that led home.

She checked behind her more than once as she headed home. No one followed, but that didn’t ease her worry. Victor knew she was here. He knew she had a family. And he knew where she lived. He wouldn’t stop now.

By the time she reached the ranch, her legs were shaking so much she could barely stand. She hurried inside, setting the basket on the kitchen table. She leaned on the table for support, standing there for a long moment and trying to breathe. She should tell Jacob. She knew that. But something didn’t feel right.

Jacob might try to confront him. What if he hurt Jacob? What if he hurt the children? Normally, this was the point where she'd throw her things into her bag and run. But she couldn't do that this time. She couldn't leave her family. Wouldn't leave them. So, what did that mean?

She'd have to protect them. Somehow.

She needed time to think. She didn't want to make things worse.

Olivia decided that she couldn't take the children out alone again. Not with Victor this close. They might get hurt if he attacked her. Or he might hurt them to get to her. No, she couldn't risk it.

She stepped outside to where Jacob and the men were separating out the venison for the families.

"Whose is that?" Thomas asked, pointing at the tall pile of deer steaks and strips.

"That's for your ma," Jacob said. He moved his hand down the table. "That's Graham's, that's Mason's, and that one's yours. That pile there is for Mason's ma. They've got seven other mouths to feed."

"And this one?" Thomas asked, nodding toward the last stack.

Jacob pursed his lips, weighing the portions. "The rest is for Olivia and me. We've got two kids to feed, too."

Olivia lifted a brow, surprised to hear herself included so plainly. The warmth that followed caught her off guard, but she didn't try to hide it.

"I don't need that much," Thomas stated firmly. "And that's probably a little too much for my ma, too. It's just her and me. Take half of ours and split it between you and Mason's ma."

“You can do the same with mine,” Graham offered. “It’s just me. I don’t need that much.”

It looked like Jacob was about to say something back when he noticed Olivia standing to the side.

“Howdy,” he said, smiling as he wiped his hands on a towel and walked toward her. His smile slipped as he got closer. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” she began. “I’m not feeling well, I’m afraid.”

“You don’t look very well,” Jacob said, studying her closely. “Go lie down. I’ll get Thomas to pick up the children from school today. It’ll give him an excuse to see Naomi. Don’t fret about it.”

Olivia looked at him gratefully. That was one problem fixed. But there were so many more.

When Jacob came home that evening, she was still deciding what to do. The children ran to him, chattering about their day, and she watched him give each of them a small piece of jerky from his pocket. Olivia stood there, admiring her family. They were happy and healthy. And she wanted to keep it that way.

“How are you feeling?” he asked when the kids ran off to enjoy their treat.

She sighed and gave a little shrug. “Not well. I might need you to take the children tomorrow.”

He nodded, but she could see his suspicions creeping in. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you,” she said, picking up the laundry basket and heading outside. “Supper will be ready in about an hour.”

She hurried out and rushed through the rest of her chores. She brought the linens inside to fold them, instead of folding them outside as she normally did. Once she'd finished, she put them away and headed back to the kitchen to check on supper.

After they'd eaten, when the children were playing in their rooms, she stood in the kitchen, fidgeting with John's toy—still in her pocket—and looked at Jacob. Hesitantly, she spoke.

“I've been thinking,” she said.

Jacob glanced up from the bridle strap he was working on at the table. “Yeah?”

Olivia cleared her throat. “I was thinkin' with you gone so much during the day, and with the coyotes being such a problem... Maybe we should leave a gun in the house. Something I can use if I need to.”

Jacob nodded thoughtfully. “That's probably a good idea,” he said. “I've got my pa's old shotgun in my room. I'll leave it out for you before I head out in the morning.”

She smiled, relieved he didn't ask more questions. She wasn't ready to tell him the truth just yet. Soon, though. She needed one more day to gather herself and come up with a plan.

Her eyes kept drifting toward the windows as she cleaned the supper dishes. The children were playing inside, but every shadow outside seemed like a threat. Every sound from the yard made her stiffen. He was probably out there now, watching them. She needed to tell Jacob. They could come up with a plan together. Tomorrow.

Later, when she tucked the children into bed, she lingered longer than usual. She smoothed their blankets, brushed the hair from their foreheads, and kissed them twice instead of once. They didn't notice

anything strange. They were tired and warm and safe. And that's the way she wanted them to stay.

The thought of not being able to walk them to school in the morning made her sad. But if Victor was watching, if he saw her with the children... he might attack her anyway. The children might try to help her and get hurt in the process. Or he could take the children, just to make her suffer. She couldn't risk it. She couldn't lead him to them. She just couldn't bear it if they got hurt.

Tomorrow, she'd talk to Jacob, and they would come up with a plan.

They certainly couldn't go on like this.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jacob heard the bull before he saw him. The low, rough bellow rolled across the yard, deeper than the usual morning noise. He straightened from the saddle he'd been checking and looked toward the front pasture. One of the bulls paced along the fence, head low, tail flicking in short, angry jerks. Even from a distance, Jacob could see the uneven gait.

He swore under his breath and started toward him. Thomas had just finished hitching the wagon to take the children to school. The kids were climbing in, chattering, unaware of anything wrong. Jacob gave them a quick wave, then motioned for Thomas to go on. Thomas nodded and snapped the reins.

Jacob reached the bull and saw the wound along the bull's flank. Not deep enough to kill him, but enough to tell the story. Coyotes. More than one, judging by the marks. And as he feared, they were close. Too close.

They hadn't even taken the herd into the north field since they got back from scouting it. That meant the coyotes had come down looking on their own.

He felt a cold shiver run down his spine as he stared at the gashes in the bull's hindquarters. The animal shifted its weight, hooves tearing at the dirt in short, angry scrapes. Each breath the bull took came out rough and fast, fogging in the morning air.

Jacob sensed the unmistakable metallic smell of blood, cutting through the usual barnyard scents. He'd smelled it lots of times before. Calves dragged off in the night, a colt and a good mare torn up before he could reach them. Predators always started small, testing the edges, seeing how close they could get.

Graham and Mason came up behind him, both staring at the bull.

“Coyotes,” Graham murmured.

Jacob nodded. “They’re getting bold.”

“That’s what we were afraid of,” Mason said, voice low.

Jacob didn’t answer. He already knew this was only the beginning. And he was already thinking ahead. If the coyotes were this close to the house, they wouldn’t stop at the cattle. Nothing was safe. They’d go after anything—chickens, pigs, dogs. Children.

He turned toward the house, grabbed his rifle from the porch, and checked the chamber. “Look after him,” he said, jerking his chin toward the bull. “Clean that wound and try to keep him calm if you can. I’m going to see if I can spot where they came in.”

Graham nodded while Mason climbed the fence.

With Thunder already saddled, Jacob headed out at a steady pace, scanning the ground for tracks. The morning was cold enough that his breath showed, but the sun was climbing, and the light was good. He followed the fence line north, then cut toward the trees. It didn’t take long to find prints—clusters of them, too many of them. A whole pack had come through.

He tracked them for nearly an hour, long enough to see the direction they’d taken and how close they’d been willing to come. He didn’t spot any coyotes, but he didn’t need to. They were out there, watching, waiting for another chance.

By the time he returned, Thomas was back from town, and the bull was bandaged and set loose with the other cattle. The wagon was empty, the horses were in the corral, and Thomas stood with Graham and Mason near the barn. When Jacob approached, they all looked up.

“A whole pack came through here last night,” Jacob told them. “We’re going to have to keep the herd up here. We’ll work out schedules. I can start tonight. We’ll do two-hour shifts. Mason, you can come on at midnight, then Graham at two, and Thomas at four. You’ll get overtime, of course.”

Thomas nodded grimly. “We’d better let the other ranchers know. They’re probably having the same trouble and can help us thin them out.”

Jacob nodded. “Mason, can you ride out to Henry’s place and spread the word?”

Mason nodded, biting into an apple.

“I’ll go see Ernest Henson,” Graham offered. “I’m sure his men can help spread the word, too.”

Jacob walked the fence line, rifle ready, his eyes sharp. The wind was light out of the west, carrying the scent of manure and fertile soil. Good enough for tracking, his own smell would stay downwind.

He kept his gaze low, studying the ground. The prints were widely spaced, indicating a fast trot rather than a full gallop. Three, maybe four animals. Fresh. The dirt still crumbled at the edges where their paws had pressed in.

He followed the trail until he spotted movement near a stand of brush. Three coyotes broke from cover, thin and fast, exactly where the tracks said they’d be. Jacob’s pulse kicked up, hard, but his hands stayed steady on his rifle.

He raised it, sighted quickly, and fired. One dropped. He worked the lever and fired again. Another fell. The third hesitated, turning back toward him as if unsure whether to flee or fight. Jacob didn’t give it the chance to do either. He fired a third time, and the animal went down.

Then everything went still.

No wind. No movement. Just the ringing in his ears and the sharp smell of gunpowder hanging in the cold morning air. He lowered the rifle and waited a moment, letting the quiet settle before turning back toward the ranch.

He stood still for a moment, listening. The wind moved through the grass. Nothing else stirred.

By the time he made it back to the house, the others were already there. Thomas had one dead coyote in the back of the wagon, then Graham tossed in another.

“There are three more over by the creek,” Jacob said, jabbing his thumb in that direction.

“Got one coming back from Henson’s place,” Thomas said.

“I got one over by the horses,” Graham added. “I just turned around, and there it was.”

Mason shook his head. “Didn’t see anything.”

Jacob nodded. “Well, that’s five fewer than when y’all left.”

He turned to Graham. “Take ‘em all out to the bone pile in the woods. Don’t leave any near the house.”

Graham nodded and looked at Mason. “Come on, kid. You can drive while I load ‘em up.”

Thomas wiped his brow with his sleeve as they watched the wagon rock its way down the fence line. “I’ll go pick up the children,” Thomas said. “I’ll see if I can finagle a supper invitation from Naomi.”

Jacob chuckled. “I don’t think you’ll have to work too hard at it.”

Thomas grinned. “You’d be surprised. We can’t all take a good home-cooked meal for granted.”

“Speaking of, have you seen Olivia? I know she’s not feeling well. I should go check on her.” Jacob scratched his jaw, looking back toward the house.

Thomas shook his head. “Like an old mother hen,” he said with a sigh. “She’s fine. She brought out some lunch while you were gone—sandwiches, cheese, pickles...”

“And let me guess, apples,” Jacob said with a grin. “Is there anything left?”

“We saved you a bite. Over there by the woodpile.” Thomas looked at the barn. “I’m going to take Blueberry with me to get the kids since Graham and Mason have the wagon.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. You want Thunder? He’s already saddled,” Jacob said.

“No. Won’t take a minute to get Blueberry ready. Mabel can ride with me on the way back, and John can ride Blueberry. We’ll be back shortly.”

Jacob waved and headed toward the woodpile. He was starving and hadn’t realized it until a minute ago. He reached the plate sitting on the stump and found a ham sandwich, a wedge of cheese, and a pickle waiting for him. No apple, though.

He chuckled, knowing Mason had eaten it earlier. He didn’t get mad. At eighteen, the boy was still growing, always hungry, and Jacob figured he could spare an apple. So, he let it slide.

After Graham and Mason returned, Jacob sent them back out to make sure all the cattle were rounded up in the front pasture. Jacob filled the water troughs and went to check on the horses. After he watered them and spread some hay, he looked around, trying to figure out the best hiding spot where they could keep an eye on both pastures tonight.

It wouldn't hurt if they could watch the house, as well. He wasn't concerned about any four-legged animals there. It was the two-legged kind that had him worried. He'd learned long ago that predators didn't always crawl or walk on four paws. Some walked upright, smiled when they shouldn't, while others waited for a moment when a man's back was turned.

The thought stirred an old memory he didn't care to revisit. One bad winter when he was a boy, a bad man had been hanged by an angry mob. Jacob's pa said the sheriff should have moved him to the next town. But the sheriff said no because the courthouse was closer here.

That turned out to be a bad decision. Because when the sheriff left to go fetch their dinner, three men snuck inside, kidnapped the prisoner, and hanged him from a tree behind the jailhouse. Jacob asked him what the man had done, but his pa wouldn't say. He said it was too horrible to repeat. When Jacob was old enough to find out, he agreed with his pa. And he wished he didn't know.

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. The point was, a man couldn't stay on guard every minute of the day. But letting his guard down had a cost, and he wasn't willing to pay it. Not with Olivia and the children. Not with his family.

He was taking the first shift tonight and planned to bring John with him. He didn't like leaving Olivia and Mabel alone in the house, though. He wondered if Thomas might stay the night on the sofa until it was his turn to keep watch. Then, Jacob could take over downstairs, keeping watch from the sofa.

He shook his head. It seemed like danger was creeping in from every direction.

By the time Jacob made his way back to the barn, Thomas was already there. One look told Jacob something was very wrong. Thomas stood stiff, jaw tight, eyes hard.

Jacob felt his stomach drop. “What is it? Where are the kids?”

“Inside,” Thomas said. “With Olivia.”

Jacob’s shoulders relaxed.

“But we got problems, Jacob.” Thomas scowled.

Glancing around the barn, Jacob said in a low voice, “Tell me.”

Thomas took a breath. “Naomi said a strange man showed up at the schoolhouse around lunchtime. He started asking Naomi questions about Olivia.”

Jacob’s pulse kicked hard. “What kind of questions?”

“Where she lived. How long had she been in town? Whether she had a family. All kinds of personal stuff.” Thomas shook his head. “Naomi didn’t tell him anything, of course. But one of the older students pointed out Mabel and John. Said Olivia was their new ma, and she’d be there after school to pick them up.”

Jacob felt heat rise in his chest. It wasn’t fear. It was anger. Immediate and all-consuming. If he got his hands on this Victor Kellan fella, he was going to rip his head off.

Thomas went on. “Naomi said the man lingered outside the school yard all afternoon. Said he was watching the children too closely. She didn’t

like it. So, she kept Mabel and John inside until I got there. He left before I could confront him.”

Jacob didn’t speak. He couldn’t. The weight of it hit him all at once. Danger wasn’t far off anymore. It was right here. At the schoolhouse. Near his children.

And Olivia hadn’t been there today.

But what if she had been?

The thought hit him so hard he had to steady himself against the barn wall. He pictured her stepping out of the schoolhouse, smiling at the children, unaware of the danger waiting for her outside. He pictured Victor walking toward them, closing the distance, then taking her, his children caught in the middle.

His hands curled into fists.

Thomas watched him carefully. “Man, I’m sorry I didn’t get to him at the schoolhouse. What do you want to do?”

Jacob shook his head. “You got them home. That’s what matters.”

But Thomas was right. They had to do something. Now. This man was threatening Jacob’s family and or stalking them, at the very least.

And he was close enough to see the children.

Close enough to know where Olivia would be and at what time.

Jacob’s body felt like a whip twisted tight—ready to snap if one more thing went wrong. Whatever Victor intended, he would not reach Olivia or the children again. Not while Jacob was still breathing.

From this moment on, everything was about keeping his family safe; every choice, every hour, every step.

No matter what it cost him.

Chapter Thirty

“...And bless this family, Lord, watch over them, and keep them safe in your arms.

In Christ’s sweet, holy name I pray,

Amen.”

Olivia stood, sniffing and wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. She sat down on the edge of her bed, hands clasped so tightly her knuckles ached, listening for any sign that someone might still be awake.

The children’s rooms had gone silent first. She could hear John’s soft snoring and Mabel’s restless shifting. Then Jacob’s footsteps had faded downstairs. She had waited another hour or two after that, just to be sure. The lamps were finally out, the fire downstairs burned down low, and the yard outside was dark as tar.

When she finally rose, her legs were wobbly and her eyes burned from all the tears she’d shed. She crossed to the small wardrobe and pulled out the few things she owned: three everyday dresses, her Sunday dress, the shawl she’d mended twice already, two bonnets, her wedding gown, and her Sunday shoes.

She laid them on the bed in neat stacks, the way she always did when she was preparing to run. It made it easier to make sure she had everything. Her hands moved with an old, familiar rhythm, and she hated how natural it felt.

From her dresser, she packed her brush, some stockings, and her undergarments. Then she opened the bottom drawer. The smell of cedar drifted up, and she closed her eyes, enjoying the scent of the sachet she kept

there. It made her think of her mother. She opened her eyes and sniffed, willing herself to continue.

She pulled out the picture of Jacob and the children next, her fingers trembling as she traced their faces. She'd borrowed it from the mantle downstairs, then decided to take it with her. But now she wasn't sure she could do it. She set it aside at first, telling herself she shouldn't. After a moment, she changed her mind again and tucked it into her bag, anyway. She just couldn't leave it behind.

Next came the little purse containing two dollars and sixty-seven cents, which she'd managed to hoard during her stay. Then, she packed the few escape necessities she'd put together earlier, a scrap of bread wrapped in cloth, a small tin of matches, a spare ribbon, and a few more bits of pin money she kept hidden in the hem of her shawl.

She'd learned long ago that every coin mattered.

The house was so quiet she could hear the soft click of the bag's clasp as she closed it. The sound felt too loud in the stillness, like it might wake the whole house. She froze, listening.

Nothing.

Just her own breath, shaky and uneven.

She tightened her grip on the bag. She'd done this so many times—packed in silence, left in the dark, slipped out before anyone could stop her. But this time, the weight of the bag felt different. Heavier. Like it knew she didn't truly want to go

Hands shaking, she folded everything and placed it into her bag, pausing only a couple of times to sob into a handkerchief.

Tears blurred her vision as she looked around the room. It had become hers without her even noticing. She eyed her quilt folded at the foot of the bed, her sewing basket by the window, and the new curtains she'd made and hung herself. But there was more than that.

The quilt still smelled like the children. Her sewing basket held a half-finished hem she'd meant to fix for Mabel, the thread still looped through the needle. And the curtains had faded a little on the side that caught the morning sun.

On the dresser sat the small dish where she kept her hairpins, though it was empty now. There was a notch in the bedpost marked by John the day he said he'd measured himself and declared he'd grown an inch, even though she doubted it was true. Every corner of the room held some quiet memory she hadn't even realized she was making.

She had never meant to belong here. She'd never meant to let herself want it. But the room told the truth she'd been too afraid to say out loud—this place had become hers because she had lived in it, loved in it, and been loved in return.

Before she left, she took the small wooden soldier John had given her from the nightstand and pressed it to her lips. The tears came harder. She set it gently on the empty shelf, telling herself it was better this way. She couldn't let him part with something that precious and never see it again. Besides, she needed a clean break.

But halfway down the hall, she stopped. Her breath hitched. She turned, ran back, and snatched the little soldier from the shelf, clutching it to her chest. She couldn't leave it. She couldn't leave them.

"But I have to," she murmured. "It's the only way to keep them safe."

She slipped the tiny soldier into her dress pocket and forced herself forward again.

The hallway felt longer than it ever had. Every step seemed to echo, though she moved as quietly as she could. She stopped at John's doorway and leaned against the frame, trying to fix the sight of him in her mind.

Moonlight lay across his small body. He was curled on his side, one arm thrown out, his hair falling over his face. His mouth hung open just a little. He always slept that way when he was worn out.

Today had been tough for him, and he had fallen into bed exhausted. One of the baby squirrels he'd been watching had died in the nest. John had been brokenhearted over that. Then, he'd scraped his knee chasing Mabel through the yard, and it bled thoroughly, soaking the bandage Olivia put on it. Now it was peeking out from under the blanket, crooked because he'd scratched at it in his sleep.

Clutched in his hand was another wooden soldier that Jacob had carved for him. It was the "twin" of the one John had given her. Her fingers moved to the soldier in her pocket. She forgot about the little bayonet, and it pricked her. She hissed, looking down at the little bead of blood on her finger.

Now, she really needed to check the other soldier. John never slept without one of them, and she was concerned it could put his eye out. She froze when John murmured something about coyotes. Sometimes he talked in his sleep, soft little mutterings she could never quite make out. Tonight, he let out a tiny sigh, shifting closer to the edge of the bed.

Her fingers itched with the urge to brush his hair back, to kiss his forehead, to hold him one last time. But she didn't dare. If he woke, she'd break. She eased the door shut, her breath catching as the latch clicked.

She moved on to Mabel's room.

Mabel slept on her back, her long blond hair spread over the pillow. There was a cup of water on her bedside table beside a picture of Julie they'd found in an old trunk. One of Mabel's braids had come undone, the

ribbon slipping loose. She had one hand resting on her stomach and the other lying palms up on a book at her side.

Faint calluses from chores were visible even in the dim light. She looked peaceful. Beautiful. And somehow older in sleep, as if the girl she'd been was already giving way to the young woman she was becoming.

Olivia stood in the doorway, gripping the frame to steady herself. She wanted to smooth Mabel's hair, fix her braid, and tuck the blanket around her shoulders. But touching her would undo her. She stayed where she was, memorizing every detail.

She had hoped to help guide Mabel down the long—and at times painful—road to womanhood, to be someone Mabel could lean on. Now she knew she wouldn't get the chance.

She closed the door softly, the sound barely there, yet it felt final. Jacob's door was closed, but she paused there, too. She imagined him asleep inside, one arm thrown over his eyes, the way he sometimes did when he fell asleep on the sofa. She thought about the crease between his brows, the one that deepened when he worried. She pressed her fingers lightly to the doorframe and closed her eyes, saying a silent goodbye.

She forced herself down the stairs.

The house was dark except for the faint glow of embers in the hearth. She moved slowly, careful not to let the steps creak. She was planning to slip out the back door, take the path through the trees, and be miles away before the sun rose. She had rehearsed her escape in her mind for hours, convincing herself it was the only choice.

But when she reached the bottom of the stairs, she stopped so abruptly she nearly stumbled.

Jacob was sitting on the sofa, his rifle balanced across his lap, and the firelight catching the edge of the barrel. He wasn't asleep. He wasn't

even drowsy. He was watching the stairs, as if he had known she would come. And now, his eyes rested on her.

Her breath left in a soft gasp.

He didn't move. Didn't raise his voice. He only asked, "Where are you going this time?"

She opened her mouth, but the words tangled in her throat. She swallowed hard. "I'm so sorry. I have to leave."

His jaw tightened, but he didn't look surprised. "Why?"

"You know why." Her voice cracked. "Victor found me. He found our home. He found the children. I won't let him hurt them. And I won't let him hurt you."

Jacob shook his head slowly. "You're forgetting something."

She waited, trembling.

"It's my place to keep them safe," he said. "Not yours."

She shook her head fiercely, the tears escaping before she could stop them. He didn't grasp how cruel or violent Victor could get. She was certain Jacob was underestimating how quickly Victor could destroy everything. And the thought of him or one of the children being hurt hollowed her out, leaving her unsteady as she tried to make it clear.

"You don't understand, Jacob. He's dangerous. He won't stop. He ___"

"I understand exactly what he is, Olivia." Jacob stood, setting the rifle aside. "And what he's capable of. But what I'm telling you is that he won't touch you. Or the kids. I won't let him."

Her tears came again, hot and uncontrollable. “It could have been worse,” she whispered. “He could have hurt them already. I can’t stay here and wait for that to happen.”

Jacob stepped closer, his voice low but steady. “Olivia, look at me.”

She did, though it hurt.

“I won’t let him near you or the kids,” he said. “I won’t let him near any of us.”

She shook her head again, but he reached out and caught her arm—not hard, just enough to keep her from turning away.

“You think leaving will fix this?” he said. “All it does is take you away from the people who love you.”

She froze.

He had never said it before. Not like that. Not plainly.

Jacob swallowed, his voice rough. “I can’t let him take you away from us. The kids love you. I love you, Olivia.”

Her breath caught.

She stopped crying—maybe even stopped breathing. “You... love me?”

Jacob sighed. “I didn’t plan it. I sure didn’t expect it. But I can’t imagine this house without you. I can’t imagine my life without you. And I don’t want to.”

She stared at him, stunned. The words didn’t seem real. Sure, she had imagined them, maybe, in her loneliest moments. But she had never

believed he would say them.

He stepped closer still. “You’re my wife. It might have started because of duty and circumstance. But somewhere along the way, that changed. You became the person I want beside me. For life.”

Her knees felt weak. She pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to hold back the sob rising in her throat.

“Stay,” he said softly. “Not because you’re afraid. Not because you think you owe me anything. Stay because we belong together now. Stay because you love me, too.”

She broke then. The tears came in a rush, her shoulders shaking. She tried to speak, but nothing came out.

Jacob pulled her to him, cupped her face gently, and brushed his thumbs along her cheeks. “Promise me you won’t leave,” he said. “Promise you’ll stay here with the kids and me. This is just one challenge, our first test. There’ll be a thousand more. But we’ll face them together. That’s what marriage is.”

She nodded, choking on a breath. “I promise,” she managed.

Relief washed over his face so plainly it made her chest ache. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight. She clung to him, burying her face against his shoulder, letting herself feel the safety she’d been denying.

When he finally tilted her chin up, his expression was fierce and tender all at once. He kissed her deeply, urgently, as if he had been holding back for far too long. As if he feared this might be the last chance he ever had.

The kiss hit her like a storm. The feelings were warm and unfamiliar, and so intense that they stole her breath. It felt clumsy and certain all at once, a rush of relief and want she'd never known. For a moment, she understood, with startling clarity, that this was what she'd been afraid of losing.

When they finally parted, she rested her forehead against his, breathing hard.

"Don't leave me," he said softly.

"I'm not going anywhere," she whispered. And she knew it was true. She wasn't leaving this. She wasn't leaving him.

Jacob exhaled shakily, his hands still framing her face. "Good," he said. "Because I'm not letting you walk out that door."

She leaned into him, letting the truth seep into her bones. She wasn't alone. She wasn't running anymore. Whatever came next, they would face it together.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jacob woke with the sense that something in the house had changed. Nothing looked different—the same pale morning light, the same quiet creak of the floorboards. But when he thought of Olivia, it felt different. It felt charged, like the slightest spark might set something off.

As he dressed, the memory of the kiss came back to him in pieces. The warmth of her mouth. The way she'd leaned into him, clutching his arm. The faint smell of her hair: soap and flowers, sweet and inviting. It hit him harder than he expected, enough that he had to stop and get a hold of himself.

He wasn't used to wanting things. Not anymore. He'd spent years teaching himself not to reach for anything that could be taken away. It was easier that way. Cleaner. But last night, he'd slipped past all that. It left him feeling off-balance, like he'd opened a door he'd nailed shut long ago.

Part of him almost wished it hadn't happened—not because he didn't want her, but because wanting her felt dangerous. Hope had teeth. He knew that better than most. Julie's absence had carved out a place in him he'd never managed to fill, and he'd told himself he didn't need to. But after last night, he knew that was a lie.

Olivia kissed him, and for a moment, he'd felt something warm and welcoming inside him, something he hadn't felt since before everything went wrong. He felt... normal for a few minutes. And that scared him a lot more than Victor ever had.

He tugged on his boots and headed downstairs, still unsure what he'd find in her eyes. What if she regretted it? What if she pulled away? He doubted it, but the thought stuck with him all the same.

Whatever this was between them, it wasn't small. It wasn't going away. And he was tired of fighting it.

Downstairs, Olivia moved around the room now with a kind of shy awareness, as if she wasn't sure how close she was allowed to stand or how long her eyes could linger on him. He felt it too. Every time she brushed past him, every time her eyes met his, his blood heated. Wanting her came easily in those moments. They were moving quickly, but nothing felt rushed.

He didn't know what came next, but whatever last night had started, he wasn't letting go of it. Not now. Not ever.

"Good morning," Olivia said, giving him a shy smile.

"Mornin'," he replied, leaning against the doorframe.

She hesitated—just a beat—like she wasn't sure if she ought to say more or keep her eyes on the skillet. Jacob caught it. She moved more quietly today, careful almost, as if last night had left her unsure of her footing. He didn't blame her. He felt off-balance himself.

The thump of small feet on the stairs saved them from having to fill the silence. Jacob stepped aside as Mabel and John barreled into the kitchen, arguing before they even hit the landing.

"It's spelling and reading today," Mabel declared.

"No, it's not," John shot back. "It's numbers. We did spelling yesterday."

"You don't know," she shot back. "You weren't even awake yesterday!"

"I was, too!"

Their voices bounced around the room, but both kids slowed when they reached Olivia. They looked at her a little too long, like they were

trying to figure out why she seemed different. Jacob noticed it. Olivia did too—her smile wavered before she steadied it.

“Good morning, you two,” she said, warm as always.

Mabel’s face softened. John ducked his head, suddenly shy. They didn’t know what had changed, but they felt it, too.

Olivia turned back to the stove. “Breakfast will be ready in a minute,” she said, glancing at Jacob as if waiting for him to approve.

He caught the look and gave her a reassuring smile. She seemed almost nervous around him now, and he didn’t like it. She kept her eyes down or pinned on the children. She made sure to keep a little space between them, like she was afraid he might brush against her.

He wanted the old Olivia back—the one from before the kiss, the one who talked to him easily and didn’t think twice about standing too close.

The kiss had been spontaneous. He hadn’t planned it, hadn’t even thought about it beforehand. It had just happened, as natural as breathing. Now he wondered if he’d pushed it too far, too fast. Hoping he hadn’t made her feel cornered.

He sat with that for a moment, his jaw clenched tight. He’d just followed his instincts. He’d wanted her, just for that heartbeat, that minute. So, he took her.

He just hoped he hadn’t ruined everything.

“It smells good,” he said, keeping his voice easy. “I’m starved.”

Her shoulders loosened a little.

The children plopped down in their chairs, still whispering about what day of the week it was, but quieter now, stealing glances at Jacob and Olivia. He could feel the whole room trying to settle into a new shape that would fit them all.

He watched Olivia move around the kitchen, the way she kept her eyes down as she set a plate in front of him, the way she avoided meeting his eyes. Last night had changed something between them, and she was trying to find her place again. He wanted to tell her she didn't need to tiptoe, that he felt nervous, too.

Instead, he stepped forward and took the stack of plates from her hands. "I've got it," he said.

She looked up, surprised, then gave him a small, grateful smile.

It wasn't much. But it eased the tightness in the room, just a little.

"You can stop bickering," Jacob told them. "You're staying home today."

John whooped, but Mabel looked at him and frowned. "Did you tell Miss Wilkes that we wouldn't be there?"

"Not yet," he said. "But we will."

"We have a spelling test," Mabel stated.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Olivia replied. "She'll understand."

"Understand what?" Mabel asked.

Olivia looked at Jacob, and he glanced at John before giving his head a little shake. Then, he looked at Mabel. "I just want y'all home today. Will you do that for me?"

Mabel searched his eyes, then nodded. “Yes, Pa.”

That was all the explanation they had to give. The children didn’t complain, especially with Olivia doting on them. And that was fine with him, too. He didn’t want any of them too far out of his sight. Not with the possibility of Victor showing up at the schoolhouse again.

Watching them gather around Olivia eased Jacob’s nerves more than anything else could have. And having them all under his roof felt like the only thing he could control. For now.

The four of them sat around the table eating breakfast. Mabel watched him over the rim of her cup. “Thanks for letting us stay home from school today, Pa,” she said, trying to sound casual. “Were you just missing us?”

Jacob chuckled as he cut into his eggs. “Yeah. That’s exactly why.”

Mabel grinned and rolled her eyes. “So, does that mean that you’re staying home with us today, too?”

“No,” he said, winking at her. “But I’ll be working close to the house. Thought we could all have lunch together.”

John and Mabel both brightened, and John asked excitedly, “Can we have a picnic out by the creek?”

“No,” Jacob said, keeping his tone even. “Not today. There are a lot of people in the woods hunting coyotes. I just want y’all safe in the house today and close to me.”

Olivia glanced at him, then at the children. “Well, that sounds good to me,” she said brightly. “We’ve got plenty we can do inside. I was thinking, Mabel, and I could finish the mending, maybe read a little, and

John and I can work on his numbers. And Mabel, you can help me sort the pantry if you want.”

John wilted in his chair. “I have to do numbers?”

Olivia bit back a grin. “I tell you what,” she said. “You work on your numbers for a while, and maybe we can bake a cake later?”

John sat up straight, a wide smile on his face. “Deal!”

“If you’re good,” Olivia said, smiling.

“Sounds like a good day to me,” Jacob said, looking at Mabel.

Mabel studied him closely. She was sharp as a tack, though she tried to hide it. Not much got past his girl. But she was giving Jacob the benefit of the doubt. “All right, Pa. We’ll make you a good dinner too.”

Jacob met her eyes, and he smiled warmly as he reached across the table and patted her hand. “Everything’s fine, sweetheart,” he said. “You just stay with Olivia today.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she let it go, nodding. Jacob felt a swell of pride for his daughter, now more than ever.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jacob and the men worked close to the house all day. No one wandered far. Graham and Mason stayed within sight of the windows, checking fence lines, hauling feed, repairing a loose board on the chicken coop—anything that kept them close. Thomas busied himself building a new water trough for the horses.

Occasionally, they heard gunshots from the woods.

“I’d say they’re making good progress out there,” Graham noted.

Mason nodded. “That sounds like Henry and his boys. They’re at the base of the ridge.”

“Yeah. We sent Ernest and his brothers over to the north edge of the property, on the other side of the bluffs.”

“Good,” Jacob sighed. “If each shot’s a kill, they made a good dent in the pack already.”

Mabel had made a delicious supper of crispy fried chicken, fluffy buttermilk biscuits, boiled potatoes, and creamy gravy. Jacob had eaten till he was full as a tick. Then, when they were all done eating, the men headed back out to the yard to finish up the day. Jacob and Thomas spent the afternoon setting coyote traps along the tree line. Mason and Graham did the same on the other side of the property.

“Do you think he’s really stupid enough to try anything?” Thomas asked him as they worked together on the last trap.

It was a fair question. Unfortunately, Jacob didn’t know the answer.

“I have no idea how stupid he is. I do know how big his ego is, though. And that alone might push him to show up and try something.”

Thomas shook his head. “I think he’ll be sneaky about it,” Thomas mused. “He’s going to come in the middle of the night and try to sneak in a window.”

Jacob grinned. “That’s why I stayed up all night last night with my rifle on my lap.”

“You can’t keep doing that, though,” Thomas told him. “Let me keep watch for you tonight. You get some sleep.”

“No, I need you to take the kids to Naomi’s tonight,” Jacob said. His voice came out rougher than he meant, scraped thin from being awake since yesterday. “After supper, I’ll drive them over and stay with them there.”

Thomas stared at him. “You look tired,” he muttered. “When’s the last time you slept?”

Jacob ignored the question. He didn’t have the strength to answer it honestly. His head throbbed behind his eyes, and the ground felt just a little unsteady under his boots. He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to push away the ache settling there. “Kids need to be somewhere safe,” he said. “That’s all that matters.”

“I’m not leaving you alone here with a madman on the loose,” Thomas scoffed. “Especially without any sleep.”

Jacob let out a slow breath. “I just need this done. One way or another. Tonight, if it comes to that.”

Thomas studied him, concern edging into his voice. “You’re worn to the bone, Jacob.”

Maybe he was. But he didn't have the luxury of stopping. Not now. Not until this was over.

"I won't be alone. Put Mason and Graham on point outside, and I'll be fine inside with Olivia." Jacob watched as Thomas shook his head, getting ready to argue. So, he headed it off, saying, "Thomas, I need to know the children are safe. And you're the only person I trust to look after them."

Thomas didn't speak for a long moment. "At the first sign of Victor, I want Graham to come get me."

Jacob sighed with relief. "Fair enough. Graham can come get you, and Mason can fetch the sheriff."

Thomas lay his head back between his shoulders. "All right. But I don't like it."

Graham and Mason left briefly after supper, but Thomas stayed. Olivia and the children were in good spirits, but he could tell that John was restless. The boy needed the outdoors like most people needed air. And he'd been made to stay in the house all day. If nothing else, Victor would pay for putting his kids through all this.

By the time supper ended and the sky had gone fully dark, Jacob and Thomas were ready to put their plan into action. Jacob waited until the dishes were stacked and the children were playing quietly in the front room before he turned to Thomas.

"Make sure Graham and Mason are back before you leave," he told Thomas. "Put Graham up by the storage shed. Mason can stay near the barn."

Thomas nodded. "Ready whenever you are."

Jacob smiled and leaned against the doorway, watching while Thomas lured the children into the living room with the promise of a story. “Tell the one about the night the horses saved the patrol,” John begged.

“No,” Mabel objected. “Tell the one about the lost pony soldier.”

Jacob smiled and left Thomas with the children. He took Olivia by the hand and led her to the back of the kitchen.

“What is it?” Olivia asked. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing.” Jacob shook his head, giving her hands a squeeze. “And I want to keep it that way. It’s time to move the kids,” he said.

She froze, her hand still on the towel she’d been using to dry a plate. “Tonight?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes searched his face, looking for something—hesitation, doubt? He wasn’t sure. Whatever it was, she must have found it because she nodded.

She swallowed, appearing on the verge of tears. “Where are you sending them?”

“To Naomi’s,” he said. “Thomas will take them.”

Her breath hitched. “Does Naomi know they’re coming?”

“No. She doesn’t need to. Not yet.”

Olivia set the towel down on the table, her fingers trembling. “Jacob, I don’t want them frightened. And I don’t want them thinking they’re being sent away, either.”

“They’re not being sent away,” he said, but the firmness in his voice didn’t quite cover the strain beneath it. He dragged a hand over his jaw, and his eyes fixed on the floor for a beat before he looked at her again. “I don’t want them gone, either. You know that. But keeping them here tonight... it’s not safe. Not with things the way they are.”

He stepped closer, lowering his voice as if the children might somehow hear from the other room. “I’d keep them with us if I thought I could protect everyone all at once. But I can’t be in two places. And I won’t risk them.”

“I know.” She looked down at the table, blinking hard. “I just don’t like this.”

“I don’t either,” he admitted. “But it’s what we have to do. For now.”

She nodded once, her face resigned. “All right.”

Jacob stepped into the front room and called the children over. “Go pack a few things,” he told them. “You’re going to spend the night at Naomi’s.”

Mabel’s eyes widened, but she didn’t argue. “Yes, sir,” she said, sensing the seriousness immediately and taking John’s hand. She guided him toward their room.

John didn’t say a word until they were halfway up the stairs. Then, he turned to Mabel and asked, “Are we in trouble?”

Jacob walked over to the stairs and called for them to stop. John turned around and looked at his pa.

“Buddy, you are not in trouble,” he said. His voice came out calm enough, but his hand hovered awkwardly at the back of his neck, rubbing

the same spot over and over. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I just wanted to spend the evening with Olivia. Alone,” he added, forcing a wink at Mabel.

Mabel sighed and reached for John’s hand. “Come on, John. They need time alone to talk.”

Jacob managed a smile for her sake, but it flickered at the edges. He kept his shoulders squared, trying to look relaxed, but there was a tightness in him, like he was bracing for something.

He wasn’t angry, not at them. His concern ran deeper than that, a low thrum beneath his ribs. He just wanted things to be back to normal, not to send his kids off under the cover of darkness and to pretend the evening ahead was nothing more than a quiet night with his wife. But the truth pressed hard against his composure.

He was afraid. He was afraid of what might come, afraid he might not be able to shield all of them at once, afraid he might let them down.

So, he kept smiling, kept his tone light, even as his jaw worked a few times before he caught himself. He rested a hand on John’s shoulder, steadying the boy and himself at the same time.

“Go on,” he said gently. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

But when the children turned away, the breath he let out was thin and shaky, the kind a man releases only when he’s holding too much inside.

John nodded and followed Mabel up the stairs. Briefly, he wondered if he should feel guilty about lying to them. Maybe he would have, except sharing some grown-up time with Olivia actually sounded pretty good. So, it wasn’t a total lie.

Thomas waited in the wagon outside, lanterns casting a soft glow on each side. Inside, Olivia knelt beside the children at the door.

“You’ll come get me tomorrow?” he asked.

“Of course, I will,” she promised. “And I’ll bake your favorite pie when we get home.”

John nodded, though his lip trembled. Olivia kissed his forehead, then stood quickly, blinking fast. Jacob could see she was close to breaking.

“All right. Let’s go,” he said.

He stepped in, lifting John into his arms and ushering Mabel toward the door. He settled them both in the wagon, tucking the blanket around their legs. Thomas gave him a short nod, letting him know he was ready.

Jacob returned to the doorway where Olivia stood, her arms wrapped around herself. He slid an arm around her waist, pulling her close as they watched the wagon roll down the road.

“Do you really think this is the best thing to do?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” Jacob said. “They’ll be fine with Thomas. I trust him to watch over them.”

She nodded, though her eyes stayed fixed on the dark road long after the wagon disappeared.

After he closed the door, the house felt wrong. Too quiet. Too still. The absence of the children left a hollow space that neither of them wanted to acknowledge.

“It’s so quiet now,” Olivia murmured. “We’re so... alone.”

Jacob guided her to the table. “Not really. Mason and Graham are outside,” he said. “If anything happens, Mason will ride straight for the sheriff. Graham will fetch Thomas.”

Olivia exhaled slowly. “That sounds good.”

“We’ll be all right,” he said. “This will all be over soon.”

She nodded again, but her hands remained tight in her lap.

They sat at the table, drinking coffee for hours and talking. The hours stretched. Jacob was on his second cup, turning it in his hand and remembering what Thomas said about him not really knowing Olivia. So, he boldly decided to change that, asking, “How old were you when your father left?”

Olivia blinked. “Three? Four? I’m not sure.”

Jacob nodded slowly, eyes dropping to the rim of his cup. He took a breath, then pressed on. “What did he do for a living?” Jacob pressed on.

“When he worked, he was a carpenter,” she replied. “But I got the feeling from the way ma used to talk about him, that he didn’t work a lot of the time.”

“Does that bother you?” he asked.

“A little,” she admitted. “But only because it meant my mother had to work that much harder to support us. She did whatever she needed to take care of me after he left. She sewed, she cleaned, she took in laundry. I never missed him.”

“You never missed not having a father?” he asked, surprised.

Olivia eyed him for a moment. “Well, you don’t miss what you never had. But now...” her eyes glistened. “I look back, and I can see exactly what it was that I missed.”

Jacob’s heart clenched in his chest. He reached out and pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Do you have any memories of him at all?”

“I think I do,” she said thoughtfully. “But, I’m not sure if they’re really memories or if they’re things I’ve dreamed over the years.”

“That’s understandable.”

She smiled. “I remember that he let me stack kindling once. I was little, but he lifted my arms and kept telling me what a good job I was doing. He was sitting on a log watching me, and then, Ma came out of the house. She hollered at me and told me not to fall for his tricks. That he was trying to get me to do his work for him.”

They laughed. “As memories go, that’s not a bad one,” he told her.

“Well, it’s all I’ve got,” she sighed. “I don’t even have a photo.”

Jacob smiled, now feeling as though he better understood why Olivia was the way she was—loyal, hardworking, and protective as a mama bear with the children. She felt responsible for making sure they were all safe and cared for.

He hated that she only had one memory of her father. At least it was a good one. He had so many good memories of Julie that he could have chosen to remember. But for years, he’d blocked them out, afraid it might let the bad ones in, too.

He stood up. “I’m going to take a quick walk through the house.”

He started in the kitchen, checking the windows. Then, he moved to the living room, turning the lamps down low and drawing the curtains closed. Olivia caught up with him, staying close as they checked upstairs. Her movements were small and careful, as though any sound might draw danger closer.

“Do you think he’ll try to break in?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“No,” Jacob said, smoothing her hair. “I’m just being careful, is all.”

He lied, of course. Truth was, he had no idea what Victor was capable of. And that worried him. The man could try to wriggle through the floorboards for all he knew. But there was no need to make Olivia even more nervous than she already was.

They came back downstairs, and Jacob checked the rifle by the door. Loaded. Ready for use. “I think the house is secure.”

Olivia stood near the hearth, her arms wrapped around herself. “Do you want another piece of cake?”

Jacob shook his head. “I don’t think I can hold another bite of cake or another cup of coffee.”

Jacob and Olivia went to the living room once he was satisfied the house was secure and that Victor had no way in except for one of the doors. Jacob dropped onto the sofa, feeling the last of his energy fade. Olivia sat beside him, close enough that he could feel her warmth.

After a moment, she said, “We talked about my parents... what were yours like?”

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Good people. Honest. God-fearing. They thought the world of me. And I never doubted it for a minute.” He let

out a small breath. “The ranch was always my pa’s dream. He used to talk about it all the time when I was little.”

Olivia smiled. “So, he finally bought one.”

“He did.” Jacob stared at the far wall, seeing none of it. “I think he could have made a real go of it, too. But when my ma died, the dream kind of died with her. He kept going for a while, but it wasn’t the same. I should have helped him more. But running a ranch was never my dream. Pa lost near everything that year.” He paused. “When he passed, Julie pushed me to step in. Make the place into what he wanted. And I thought maybe she was right. Maybe it would mean something if I finished what he started.”

“And then, Julie,” Olivia said softly.

He nodded. “And then Julie died. After that... nothing else mattered. I was stuck here with no Julie and a ranch I never really wanted.”

Olivia was quiet for a moment. “Do you still feel that way?” she asked.

Sighing, he looked thoughtful for a moment. “No. Not anymore,” he said. “Not since you came along.”

She smiled, obviously pleased. “Good.”

They sat with that for a moment, the quiet around them heavy but not painful.

Jacob finally said, “Now that we’re married, I’ve got a choice to make. Either keep the place small and scrape by, or grow it into something John might want to take over someday.”

Olivia turned toward him, her expression warm. “Whatever you decide, I’ll support you. Once all this is over and Victor is gone, we can

start over if we want. Start our real life.”

Jacob reached out and brushed his fingers against her cheek. “If he does show up,” he said, voice low and certain, “all this ends tonight.”

Outside, a hard gust of wind hit the window, making the glass rattle. Jacob’s hand stopped in midair. The quiet that followed made him feel uneasy. Then, he heard it—hoofbeats, faint at first, then louder. Hard and heavy. And coming their way.

He looked at Olivia. She was already looking at him, her eyes wide with fear. But he could see something stronger beneath the fear.

“You ready?” he asked.

She nodded shakily. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

That was good because the night wasn’t waiting anymore.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Olivia heard the knock at the same time Jacob did. She knew immediately who it was. The sound was casual and deliberate, as if he knew the door would be opened for him regardless of who waited behind it. There was an arrogance to it, each rap seeming to declare that he was in complete control, and that any choices had already been made for everyone inside.

She knew it was Victor even before Jacob moved to the door.

Her stomach dropped. She didn't need to look at Jacob to know he felt the same thing she did.

Victor had come.

It was time.

Jacob's jaw tightened. "Go upstairs," he said quietly.

She shook her head before he even finished. "No. I'm not running, and I'm not hiding." Her voice came out firmer than she felt, surprising even herself. "I'm done with all that."

He looked like he might argue. His mouth opened, then closed again. He pressed his lips together and gave a short nod. She could tell he didn't like it, but he respected it.

"Stay behind me, then." Jacob scowled, drawing in a deep breath and moving toward the door.

Olivia prayed that Graham and Mason were already halfway to town, and that Thomas and the sheriff would be heading their way soon. They needed help. But help felt much too far away, so they had to handle this themselves.

Jacob reached behind the door and lifted the shotgun, making sure it was within arm's reach. His other hand rested on the pistol at his hip. He gave her one last look, checking she was sure.

She was terrified. But she nodded anyway.

Then, Jacob opened the door.

Victor stood on the porch like he'd been waiting for an invitation. He was taller than Jacob and looked older than she remembered. There were lines around his mouth and gray at his temples. But he was still polished, and still handsome in that cold, arrogant way.

His coat was clean, his boots shined, his hair combed back. But there was something hollow in his face, something new and dangerous that hadn't been there when she last saw him. He looked like a man eaten up with anger and hatred.

And still, his calm expression made Olivia's skin crawl.

Victor's eyes slid past Jacob and landed on Olivia. His smile was soft, almost polite, like he was greeting an old friend instead of the woman he'd spent years hunting down.

"Olivia," he crooned, voice smooth as ever. "You look well."

Her stomach twisted. He always did this, pretended nothing had happened, like he hadn't tried to kidnap, hurt, or torture her.

She allowed Jacob to shift in front of her, blocking Victor's view. Unfortunately, it blocked her view, too. "State your business," Jacob said.

Peeking around Jacob's side, she watched as Victor straightened his coat, as if this were a social call. "Yes, hello. I'm Victor Kellan, Olivia's fiancé. I'm here to collect her." He nodded toward her, still smiling.

Jacob's bark of laughter made her blink. "Sorry. Fiancé?" Jacob chuckled again. "I hate to break the news to you, friend, but I think your engagement's off."

"Is that what she told you?" Victor said, his smile faltering.

"Yeah. She did." Jacob stepped forward, his voice rumbling. "Right before I married her. You see, Olivia is my wife."

Victor smirked, unimpressed. "Your wife, huh?"

"That's right." She watched as Jacob's hands balled into fists at his side. "And she's not going anywhere with you."

Victor's jaw tightened. "I think, son, that you'll find it's not a valid marriage," he said, sneering behind Jacob at Olivia. Then, he looked back at Jacob. "I have a contract, bound by law, stating she belongs to me."

Jacob shook his head once. "Not anymore," he growled. "I can see you feel like your agreement was broken. We can both sit down with the sheriff tomorrow and discuss it, if you want."

Olivia felt the air shift—Victor's anger rising, Jacob's stance hardening, and the whole moment teetering on the edge of something dangerous.

Finally, Victor's smile returned, colder than before.

"That works just fine for me," Victor said. "Just so long as Olivia comes home with me tonight."

Jacob stepped in front of her without thinking. "I think you'd best clear out now."

“One way or another,” Victor said, his eyes squinting, “Olivia is coming with me. Tonight.”

She pressed her hands against the small of Jacob’s back. He was like an unmovable mountain. “She won’t be going anywhere with you. Not tonight. Not ever,” he told Victor.

Victor sighed, as if Jacob were being unreasonable. “I was trying to do this nicely. But I can have my men here in a matter of minutes. This doesn’t need to get ugly.”

When Jacob didn’t answer, Olivia’s mind jumped to Graham and Mason. How close were they now?

Victor waited a beat, then shifted tactics. “Look, you don’t know her the way I do,” he said, voice smooth as oil. “You see, Olivia’s a runner. That’s all she knows how to do. It’s just a matter of time before she does it to you, too.”

Olivia felt the words like a hand closing around her throat.

After trying to run away last night, would Jacob believe him? He’d seen it firsthand. He’d caught her trying to slink out the back door while everyone was asleep. She couldn’t pretend she was someone stronger than she was. She couldn’t pretend she hadn’t tried to bolt the moment Victor’s name hit her ears.

She hated that Victor knew that about her. Hated that he used it like a weapon. Hated that he could make her doubt herself with a single sentence.

Jacob shook his head. “You’re wrong. She just never had a reason to stay before. But she had every reason in the world to run from you. But she’s given up running now that she’s home.”

Olivia swallowed hard, forcing herself to breathe. Jacob was standing in front of her now, steady as a rock. He had faith in her.

She wished she could be as sure as he was.

Victor's smile widened. "You'll see. She'll come back to me. She always does. And then you'll understand soon enough."

Jacob didn't flinch. She could tell that Victor didn't like that.

"You're just her latest savior," Victor went on, his voice dripping with contempt. "This is just a temporary shelter for her. Another *decent* man who thinks he can keep her safe from me—the big, bad wolf." He leaned forward slightly. "But I'll tell you a secret. She likes to hear me howl."

"Leave," Jacob snarled.

"Just wait," Victor said with a grin. "You'll learn soon enough. Women like Olivia always run. And when she does, you'll see you never had a chance of keeping her."

Victor looked at her again, eyes bright with triumph. "I give her a week," he said softly. "She'll run again."

Something in her snapped.

"No," she said.

Victor blinked, like he was surprised she'd spoken.

"You're a liar," she said, louder this time. Her voice shook, but she didn't back down. "Just a common liar. You don't own my fear anymore. I'm done running."

Victor's face changed. The calm slipped. His jaw twitched. His eyes darkened.

Then, his restraint snapped.

"You're coming with me," he roared, reaching out to grab her.

Jacob stepped in front of him, shoving him back. "Don't touch her."

"Touch her?" Victor snarled as he regained his footing. "I own her."

Jacob went for his pistol, but Victor was faster. He reached inside his coat and pulled a knife, slashing out in a wild arc.

Jacob shoved Olivia back onto the sofa, heaving himself fully between her and the blade. The knife caught his arm. He felt a sting, saw the spray of blood on his shirtsleeve. It wasn't enough to keep him down, but it was enough to make him grunt and stumble.

Olivia's heart stuttered in her chest. "Jacob!"

Victor lunged toward her. "This is what happens when you run away from me," he snarled as he grabbed her arm, jerking her to her feet. He held the knife to his side, as if gesturing toward Jacob. "It's your fault he's hurt."

"Stop!" she screamed, the word ripping out of her as she blindly swung.

The punch landed on the bridge of his nose. It didn't knock him out, but it did make him stagger back a couple of steps.

Jacob used that moment.

He surged forward, grabbing Victor's arm and yanking him back another few steps. Victor spun around and lunged at him. Jacob caught him

around his midsection as they crashed into the wall. He still held the knife, Jacob pinning it against the wall with his forearm. The blade scraped fabric this time, and not skin.

Victor fought like a man who'd been waiting years for this moment. Wild, angry, desperate.

Jacob, on the other hand, fought like a man with something to protect. Vicious. Focused. Every move meant to keep Victor away from Olivia.

They slammed into the table, knocking it sideways. Then, they grappled their way back into the living room. Olivia screamed, crawling over the back of the sofa for safety. Victor tried to bring the knife down again, but Jacob caught his wrist, muscles straining. Victor was older, but he was still strong, rage making him reckless.

Jacob drove his shoulder into Victor's chest, forcing him back. Victor staggered but didn't fall. He straightened and swung again, but Jacob ducked, grabbed his coat, and shoved him hard. They hit the floor together, rolling.

Olivia pressed herself against the wall, her hands shaking and heart pounding so hard she could barely hear anything else. She wanted to help, but she knew she'd only get in the way. Her eyes slid to the rifle in the corner. Then, back to the men. There was no way to get a shot off without possibly hitting Jacob. Suddenly, her gaze landed on the fireplace tools.

Victor rolled over on top for a moment, knife raised. Jacob twisted, grabbing Victor's wrist with both hands. The knife hovered inches from his face.

"Jacob!" Olivia cried.

She rushed toward them before she even knew she was moving. Her hand dove into her pocket, fingers closing around the wooden soldier John

had given her—the one with the tiny carved bayonet. The point nearly pricked her fingertip as she pulled it free.

She didn't think. She just acted.

She raised it over her head and leapt onto Victor's back, driving the little soldier hard into the side of his neck. Victor let out a raw, startled howl, dropping the knife as his hand flew up to the spot she'd struck.

The blade clattered to the floor.

Olivia lunged for it, but Victor kicked out blindly, sending the knife skittering across the floor toward the doorway. She scrambled after it, her breath loud in her ears, her skirts tangling around her legs. She scooped the knife up in both hands and spun around, heart hammering, bracing for him to be right behind her.

He wasn't.

Jacob gritted his teeth and shoved upward like he'd found a well of extra strength, and rolled them again. This time, he landed on top. He slammed Victor's head against the floor, but Victor managed to grab hold of Jacob's wounded arm, digging his fingertips into the wound.

Jacob made a guttural noise before letting go. Victor wasted no time wriggling free. Jacob climbed to his feet, holding his wounded arm. Victor swung at him, catching Jacob's jaw. But Jacob barely reacted. He grabbed Victor's coat, hauled him up, and drove his fist into Victor's stomach. Victor doubled over with a choked sound.

Jacob didn't give him time to recover. He shoved him back, hard. Victor's head hit the floor with a jarring thud. And his body went slack.

The room went quiet.

Jacob stayed crouched for a moment, breathing hard, staring at Victor as if making sure he wouldn't get up again. When he was certain, he pushed himself to his feet and turned to Olivia.

She was shaking, hands wrapped around Victor's knife, and her eyes wide.

Jacob crossed the room in three long strides. He caught Olivia around the waist and pulled her to him in one swift motion, holding her tight against his chest as he stroked her hair. "It's all right," he said, his voice rough but caring. "It's over, sweetheart. It's done."

She dropped the knife and grabbed his wrists, holding on to stay upright. Jacob flinched, gritting his teeth.

"Oh! Your arm—" she gasped.

She pulled up his sleeve, staring at the wound. Silent tears ran down her cheeks as she studied the long, deep gash. "I'm sorry, Jacob," she half whispered, half sobbed. "I am so sorry."

"It's nothing," he said, gently breaking her grip and placing his hands on her shoulders. "You're safe. That's what matters."

Her breath hitched, and a sob caught in her throat. She leaned into him, her forehead against his chest, and he slid his arms around her, holding her tight.

Victor lay unconscious on the floor.

Jacob held her like he'd never let her go. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, trying not to fall to pieces. She just needed a moment of peace to recover her nerves.

Suddenly, the door burst open, slamming against the wall. Thomas barreled inside, Graham following close behind. They froze when they saw Victor sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Thomas huffed, shaking his head as he turned around. “I thought I told you to wait for me.”

Jacob chuckled. “You’re late. As usual.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Olivia steered Jacob toward the table, her hand firm on his back. He tried to brush her off, muttering that he was fine, but she wasn't having it. His sleeve was soaked through with blood, and she needed a closer look to see how bad the cut was.

"Sit," she said.

Jacob opened his mouth to argue, then shut it again when he saw the look on her face. He lowered himself into the chair with a quiet grunt.

"Roll up your sleeve," she ordered. He did as he was told.

Thomas wandered over, leaning down to inspect the wound like he was examining a horse he was thinking of buying. "That's just a little scratch," he said, winking at Olivia.

Jacob laughed under his breath. "That's what I said, too."

Graham wasn't amused. He crossed his arms, eyes narrowed. "Might need a stitch or two," he told Olivia. "There are a few deep spots in there."

Jacob shrugged. "Feels fine."

"It might feel fine now," Graham said. "But it won't later, after it gets infected."

Thomas clapped Jacob on the shoulder. "You're lucky she's the one patching you up. If it were me, I'd pour whiskey on it and call it a day."

"That's why no one lets you near their injuries," Graham muttered.

Olivia chuckled but didn't stay to listen to their banter. She hurried into the kitchen, her mind already running through what she needed. She filled the kettle and set it on the stove, then grabbed the tin of salve that she'd set aside for emergencies—comfrey, beeswax, and a little pine resin.

She took clean clothes from the drawer, a roll of muslin bandages she'd torn from an old sheet, and the bottle of whiskey Jacob kept tucked behind the flour sack in the pantry.

When she'd gathered most of what she needed, she poured a cup of whiskey and set it on the tray. The kettle was steaming when she poured the water into the basin and carried everything back to the table.

Jacob was still sitting where she'd left him, Graham and Thomas standing nearby, talking about what had happened and arguing over which one of them needed to check to see if Victor was still alive. She wondered briefly if maybe she should check. But the thought made her stomach twist.

She set the tray down. "Drink this," she told Jacob, placing the cup of whiskey in front of him.

Thomas raised his eyebrows. "I could use a drink myself."

"It's in the kitchen," she said without looking at him.

Thomas grinned and looked at Graham. "You want some?"

Graham nodded and headed toward the kitchen with Thomas. They were already arguing over who would pour.

Olivia dipped a cloth into the warm water and wrung it out, watching the steam curl around her fingers. Her hands weren't as steady as she would have liked them to be. But they were steady enough. She took Jacob's arm gently and pushed his sleeve higher. The fabric stuck to the dried blood, and she had to peel it back carefully.

“It’s already drying,” she explained when he grimaced. “I’ll be easy.”

The cut wasn’t deep from beginning to end, but it was long and jagged in places, the kind of wound that looked innocent enough until it festered. Graham might’ve been right about stitches, though. Olivia leaned closer, checking the edges. A couple of spots gaped more than others, but not enough to justify a needle—at least, she didn’t think so.

She pressed the warm cloth to the wound.

Jacob sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth.

“You know, you saved my life tonight,” Jacob told her.

Olivia went still.

“And the way you punched him in the nose,” he chuckled. “That was good. But if you hadn’t—”

“I’m not sure we need any stitches,” she interrupted, changing the subject. “It doesn’t look that deep to me, and I’d rather not hurt you if I don’t have to. I have some comfrey, and I think that’ll do the trick. But if you think we need them, I’ll put a couple of them in.”

He smiled softly when he realized she was blushing. She looked embarrassed, though he couldn’t imagine why. His wife had a mean right hook.

When he didn’t tease her or say anything more, she lifted her chin a little and said, “Ladies don’t fight. Not unless they’re protecting their family.”

Jacob smiled, trying to reassure her. “Well, John would have been proud.”

She scoffed, dabbing more salve on his cut.

He flinched again, but said, “It was just a little sting. No stitches. I think it’ll heal fine with just the comfrey.”

She nodded but felt the way his arm tensed under her hand. He was trying to downplay it, trying to make it easier on her. That only made her fret more. She hated that he’d gotten hurt because of her. Hated that Victor had put his hands on him at all.

She cleaned slowly, wiping away the blood that had already begun to dry and cake along the outside edges. The cloth came away pink, then red, then finally clean. Jacob watched her hands the whole time, his eyes following every movement, mesmerized.

When she opened the tin of salve, the smell of pine, comfrey, and beeswax filled the air. Jacob wrinkled his nose.

“I know it doesn’t smell good,” she said with a soft chuckle, trying to lighten the moment. “But it shouldn’t sting.” He huffed a laugh. “That’s what you said the last time.”

“Baby,” she said with a teasing smile.

She dipped two fingers into the salve and spread a thin layer over the entire cut. The mixture was cool and thick, and she worked it in carefully, smoothing it along the edges so it would seal. Jacob flinched once but didn’t pull away.

“I’m almost done,” she said.

She reached for the bandage—a strip of muslin she’d torn from an old bed sheet. The fabric was soft from washing but sturdy enough to hold. She wrapped it around his arm, snug but not too tight, circling it several times until the salve was covered and the bandage held firm. She tied it off

with a small knot and smoothed the muslin with her fingers, making sure it lay flat.

Only then did she step back to study her work.

Jacob flexed his fingers experimentally. “Feels good,” he said.

She gave him a look that said she didn’t believe him for a second.

But she didn’t argue. Not yet.

“There. That should hold,” she said.

Jacob nodded, but his eyes weren’t on her anymore. They were fixed on Victor’s unconscious body on the floor.

Olivia followed his gaze. Victor lay still, his coat rumpled, his face pale. He looked smaller now, less like the monster who had chased her for years and more like a sad old man who’d come to the end of his line with no hope and no friends.

It brought to mind the first time she saw the real him, the first time he’d shown her who he really was. The slammed door, the way his hand had closed around her wrist, hard enough to leave an imprint of his fingers long after he’d gone. And the cold warning in his voice when he told her what would happen if she ever tried to leave him.

“I will find you,” he’d said. “You can run, and you can hide. But wherever you go, I’ll find you.”

She’d packed a bag that night anyway, hands shaking so bad she could barely tie the strings on her bonnet. Then, with her mother in tow, she’d run. After that, she’d pretty much slept with her shoes on. She kept her coat near the door, learned to wake at the slightest noise, and

memorized exits in every room she entered. Running had become the only way she knew to stay alive.

And now here she was, standing firm, not running. Not hiding and not planning her escape. There were people between her and her greatest fear now. Jacob, Graham, Thomas, and more. A whole house full of warmth, noise, and people who cared for her.

Already, the past felt like something behind her instead of something that was chasing her.

“I should check him,” Jacob sighed. “Make sure he’s still alive.”

“Jacob, I can hear him breathing from here,” she said quietly. “You’re just feeling bad about hurting him. But you had no choice. He was trying to kill you. And then, he probably would’ve killed me, too.”

Jacob let out a slow breath. “I know.”

But she could tell he didn’t like it. Jacob wasn’t a man who enjoyed hurting anyone, even someone who’d earned it.

Thomas and Graham came back in with the whiskey bottle, each carrying a cup. Thomas poured himself a generous amount and handed the bottle to Graham.

Before they could take a drink, the sound of hooves and a creaking wagon broke the stillness outside. A moment later, Mason walked in with Sheriff Ames and his deputy, Wes, right behind him. The sheriff took one look at Victor on the floor and let out a long breath.

“Well,” he said, “looks like you boys got things handled.”

Jacob stood, wincing slightly as his arm pulled. “He came at Olivia with a knife.”

Sheriff Ames nodded, already kneeling beside Victor to check his breathing. “We’ll take him in. I’ll have the surgeon come by and check on him. I reckon he’ll live. But either way, he won’t be coming back here.” The sheriff looked at Deputy Wes and gestured for him to pick Victor up.

Wes and Mason bound Victor’s hands while the sheriff asked Jacob for a quick account of what happened. Jacob kept it simple and recounted the story to the sheriff.

Sheriff Ames nodded along, then dipped his chin toward the floor. “Where’s the knife now?”

Jacob pointed to where it had fallen under the table. Ames crouched, picked it up, and wrapped it before tucking it into his coat. “Anyone else hurt? Olivia? Either of you boys?” He looked up at Graham and Thomas.

Thomas shook his head. Graham did the same.

“Did he say anything when he came in?” the sheriff asked

Jacob hesitated. “He just said Olivia was coming with him.”

Sheriff Ames nodded. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Just one thing,” Olivia replied. “Over the past five years, I’ve had to run nineteen times to get away from him. I’m tired of running, Sheriff.”

Sheriff Ames smiled. “I’ll make sure you don’t have to do that anymore.”

Behind them, Wes and Mason hauled Victor upright. His body sagged between them like dead weight. Even unconscious, the thought of him in her house made Olivia’s stomach twist.

The men maneuvered him through the doorway, grunting as they hoisted his weight onto the wagon outside.

“He’s loaded up and ready to go,” Mason said as he came back inside.

Sheriff Ames tipped his hat toward Jacob. “We’ll get him locked up. He won’t be coming back here to bother you, folks. No need to worry about it anymore.”

Olivia let out a long, slow breath and closed her eyes with relief. She actually felt lighter now, as if she could finally put the last five years to bed.

Jacob nodded. “Thank you.”

Sheriff Ames left, and Thomas poured another round of whiskey. Jacob took his with his good hand. But Olivia stared at the cup that was offered to her.

“Go ahead,” Thomas said. “For your nerves.”

She sighed heavily but took the glass. “You might be right.”

A few minutes later, the door opened again, and Naomi stepped inside with the children. They all stopped and stared.

“I ran into Sheriff Ames,” Naomi said. “He told me it was safe to come back.”

Olivia’s breath caught. John was half-asleep on his feet, and Mabel was looking tired and confused. Both were unaware of the danger that had been in this room not long ago.

Olivia rushed to them, thanking Naomi as she dropped to her knees and gathered them into her arms. Mabel pressed her face into Olivia's shoulder, and John leaned against her, warm and cuddly.

"What's going on?" John asked.

"Nothing. You're all right," Olivia whispered, kissing their hair. "You're home."

She didn't realize she was crying until she felt Jacob's hand on her back.

When she looked up, he was kneeling beside her. Without a word, he wrapped his arms around all of them—her and the children—pulling them close. His embrace was warm and sure, his chin resting lightly on her head.

Naomi watched from the doorway, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief that Thomas handed to her. "Come on," he said. "Let's leave them to it. I'll see you home and catch you up on the way."

"I'm heading home, too," Mason said. "I'd like to catch a few hours before daylight."

"I'll ride with you," Graham said.

Olivia heard the shuffling of feet and the door close, but she wasn't paying attention to any of that.

She was basking in the glow of her family.

The children clung to her as if she were the safest place in the world. Jacob held her like he wasn't letting go. And that was all she ever wanted.

In that moment, she knew with absolute certainty that she wasn't a runner. She wasn't going anywhere.

Not anymore.

She was done letting fear decide her life and done letting Victor control her actions. She was done believing she didn't deserve a place to call home.

She was free.

Not free to leave. Free to stay.

And she wasn't leaving her family. Not now. Not ever.

This house felt whole. Not because Victor was gone, but because everyone she loved was right here under this roof. And because Jacob had chosen her. Because the children needed her. And because she had chosen to stay.

She took a deep breath and leaned into Jacob, letting the warmth of his body anchor her while the children pressed close.

She was home.

And she wasn't running ever again.

Epilogue

Three Years Later

“Stop wiggling,” Olivia told Eli.

Jacob smiled as he watched them. At two years old, Eli was made of nothing *but* wiggles. His legs were constantly kicking, fingers grabbing, and head turning toward every sound that reached his little ears. He never stopped from the time he woke up until the time he passed out at bedtime.

He was a handsome boy, though. He had Olivia’s dark hair and Jacob’s stubborn chin, and the restless energy of a young colt. Last night, he threw a fit to sleep with his sister. But when he woke up in the middle of the night, he came down the hall and climbed into bed beside Olivia. When he was awake, it was his mission in life to follow John everywhere he went.

But there was no place in the world his boy would rather be than on Jacob’s shoulders. The boy loved his family.

Olivia shifted him on her lap, trying to keep him from sliding to the floor. Eli squealed, delighted with himself, and reached for the ribbon in her hair again. She caught his hand before he could yank it loose.

“Not that,” she murmured, though her eyes were soft. “Now, be good.”

Jacob felt his heart warm. Three years ago, he couldn’t have imagined this. He never dreamed that he’d be sitting shoulder to shoulder with his wife in a crowded schoolhouse, their son squirming on her lap while he waited for a play their older children were in to start. Back then, he’d been a man trying to hold his life together with both hands, hoping he could fool everyone into thinking he was all right.

He hadn't been all right. Not by a long shot.

But he was now. Now he had a family that filled every corner of his world.

He scooted back on the bench, letting the noise of the room wash over him. The chatter of parents, the rustle of programs, Naomi's piano warming up at the front of the room. Thomas was onstage pretending to help with decorations, though from the look of it, he was too busy watching Naomi and offering commentary to be of any real use.

Jacob watched Olivia tuck a loose curl behind her ear, Eli still wriggling in her lap, and felt that familiar tug of gratitude. She belonged here by his side. She belonged with him. And after everything, he belonged with her, too.

It seemed like the town had been buzzing all day, the kind of excitement that made even the older ranchers lean on fence posts and gossip like boys. Word traveled fast in this area, and nothing stirred folks up quite like a children's play. Every family either had someone in it or knew someone who was. They had someone to clap for, to tease afterward, or to brag about for weeks.

"I'm going to go give Thomas a hard time," Jacob said, grinning at his wife.

"Don't be gone long," Olivia told him. "The play's about to start."

Jacob walked to the other side of the schoolhouse and stood near the back, taking in the scene. Thomas was hanging a lantern over the edge of the play while Naomi fussed with a stack of sheet music on the piano. Her hair was pinned up in a way that made her look both important and slightly frazzled. He didn't care. She made his best friend very happy.

Thomas turned to her and called, "Is this right?"

“Yes, but that’s crooked now,” Naomi said, pointing toward the backdrop.

Thomas squinted. “It’s straight.”

“It’s not.”

“It is.”

Naomi gave him a look that ended the argument. Thomas sighed and lifted the backdrop another inch.

Jacob hid a smile. Marriage suited them. He’d never seen Thomas so content—or so willing to be bossed around.

“Are you done yet?” he asked Thomas.

Thomas sighed and shook his head. “Man, I am so done.”

He jumped down from the ladder and tugged up his pants. “Let’s get outta here while we still have a chance.”

“Sorry. Not a chance.” Jacob chuckled. “But y’all can over for supper after, if you want.”

“That sounds good to me,” Thomas said as they walked around the curtain to the other side of the schoolroom. Thomas looked out and blinked. “My stars. Look at all those people.”

Inside, the benches had filled quickly. Children whispered and giggled behind the curtain. Parents sat on the benches, fanning themselves with programs. The air smelled like sawdust, chalk, and excitement, if the last thing could actually be a scent.

The lanterns dimmed, and the room quieted, signaling that the play was about to begin.

“Come sit with us,” Jacob said.

“Can’t do it, brother,” Thomas replied. “I promised I’d sit up front and help Naomi if she needs me. Jacob looked up and saw Graham, sitting beside the new seamstress in town and giving them a little wave.

Jacob chuckled, knowing that he was going to get an earful tomorrow. He gave Graham a two-fingered wave and told Thomas he’d see him after the show. Olivia smiled when he got back to his seat and settled in beside him. Eli was still trying to grab the ribbon in her hair. His small fingers were sticky and determined.

“Leave Mama’s hair alone,” Jacob murmured, gently redirecting Eli’s hand.

Olivia laughed softly. “He’s excited.”

Jacob looked at her. Really looked. Three years, and he still felt that small jolt of lightning in his veins whenever she smiled at him. Looking at her now with their son, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. It was hard to remember that she was the same woman who’d once stood in his kitchen, unsure if she’d be allowed to stay.

The curtain drew back a bit, and Eli squealed when he spotted Naomi on the stage. Her eyes tracked him immediately, and she smiled before taking her place at the piano. She played the opening notes, and the curtain jerked open the rest of the way.

There stood Mabel, tall and straight-backed, her braids tied with blue ribbons. The same ribbon that Olivia wore in hers. Mabel wore a simple dress that Olivia had sewn, and she looked older than her years—confident, sure of herself. John stood beside her, fidgeting with the hem of

his vest, shifting from foot to foot. He caught Jacob's eye and gave a nervous grin.

"May-bah!" Eli shouted. "Jah!"

Several folks chuckled at Eli's excitement to see his brother and sister on stage. John grinned and placed his finger over his lips.

"Shh," Olivia said in Eli's ear, chuckling at the same time.

Jacob looked back at Mabel and John and felt that familiar ache of pride, the one that always surprised him with its strength. How had they grown up so fast? How had the small, scared children he'd once carried through an all-consuming grief become these bright, brave people? Both were as beautiful as their mother.

The play began, and the children recited stories of the town's founding—wagon trains, homesteads, the first schoolhouse. Mabel spoke clearly, her voice carrying across the room. John stumbled over a line, flushed red, then found his place again when Mabel gently helped him with a few words.

Jacob's throat tightened. They were good kids. Strong, happy kids. Kids who'd been through so much and still found ways to shine.

Eli clapped at random moments, loving the noise and seeing May-bah and Jah playing on stage. He obviously couldn't understand why he wasn't up there with them, though. Olivia bounced him gently, whispering encouragement to the older children even though they couldn't hear her.

When the play ended, the crowd erupted in applause. Naomi stood from the piano, wiping her eyes before giving the audience a bow. Thomas strode onto the stage, grabbed his wife around the waist, and kissed her so enthusiastically that half the audience laughed.

The other half—mostly the older women—gasped.

That's when his neighbor, Agnes, marched forward, swatting Thomas on the arm with her purse. "You behave yourself," she scolded. "This is a respectable event."

Thomas only grinned. Naomi blushed and hid her face in his shoulder.

Olivia laughed, and Jacob found himself laughing with her. The sound felt easy and natural now, like something he'd been doing his whole life.

Agnes meandered off the stage and walked toward Jacob and Olivia next.

"Oh, no," Olivia whispered. "She's coming over here."

Agnes' expression softened when she looked at Olivia holding Eli. "Jacob Hale! It's good to see you two so happy and settled," she said. "I knew it from the start, you know. I'm never wrong about these things."

Jacob raised an eyebrow. "Never?"

"Not once," she said proudly. "Ask anyone."

"Not necessary," Olivia chimed in. "We believe you."

"Of course, you do." Agnes sniffed and poked Jacob in the shoulder. "Just look how well I did for you. You're the happiest you've ever been in your life."

She bustled off before Olivia could respond.

Jacob glanced at Olivia and laughed. “Is that true?” he asked. “Are you the happiest you’ve ever been?”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate. “Definitely.”

That warm feeling crept through his chest again. She leaned closer, lowering her voice. “And just so you know, I fully believe in Agnes’s love-matching abilities.”

He chuckled. “That so?”

“Oh yes. She’s never wrong.”

They shared a smile—one of those small, private ones that said more than words ever could.

They stood and made their way toward the stage. Mabel spotted them first and ran into Olivia’s arms, hugging her and Eli at the same time. John followed, trying to act older but unable to hide his grin.

“You were wonderful,” Olivia said, kissing Mabel’s cheek.

“You both were,” Jacob added, ruffling John’s hair.

“Yes. And John, you looked so handsome,” Olivia gushed.

John ducked away, embarrassed but pleased by the praise.

Outside, lanterns hung from posts, casting warm light across the yard. Families gathered in clusters, laughing and talking while children chased each other through the grass. Olivia waved to several of the women, but Jacob just focused on herding the children to the wagon.

Jacob helped Mabel up first, then watched as John climbed up himself.

“I’ll take him,” Mabel told Olivia. “He can sit with me and Jah.”

Olivia chuckled as she passed the boy to Mabel, his arms and legs flailing. “Mah-bah!”

A minute later, he was in the driver’s seat, and Olivia was cuddled up beside him. The wagon rolled forward, wheels creaking softly, and the road home stretched ahead.

Jacob glanced over his shoulder. Mabel held Eli close, whispering something that made him giggle. John leaned in, listening, his face lit by the lantern hanging from the wagon’s side.

They looked like a picture he never would’ve believed would belong to him.

For years after Julie died, he’d thought his life was finished. Not in the sense of dying. He still had two kids to raise. But just... done. Like the part of him that could hope for anything more had been buried with her.

He’d expected to raise the children alone, work the ranch until he couldn’t anymore, and fade into the quiet kind of life men lived when they’d already lost the best part of themselves.

Now, he was so grateful that Olivia had walked into his home. He had John and Mabel to thank for that. And Agnes, too, in no small part.

Looking at her now, her hair coming loose from its pins, and a few strands brushing her cheek, her expression was soft and full of something he still didn’t have a name for, even after all this time.

Love, maybe. Or peace. Or both.

“You’re quiet,” she said, turning toward him.

“Just thinking.”

“About what?”

He hesitated, then answered honestly. “That look on your face. Trying to figure out what you’re thinking about.”

Olivia’s eyes warmed. She reached over and took his hand, her fingers slipping easily into his. “I was thinking about freedom.”

Her comment almost alarmed him. It must have shown on his face because she smiled and said, “How I’m free to love my husband, free to build a home, and free to enjoy my family. For a while, I never thought I’d have that kind of freedom.”

The horses plodded on while he thought about that. He wondered if she ever still thought about that time in her life. She hadn’t mentioned Victor’s name since the day they heard he went off to prison for killing a man over a land deal. Now he knew.

He looked up at the sky above them, wide and full of stars. It was the kind of night that made a man feel small in the best possible way.

“I invited Thomas and Naomi over for supper,” he said.

Her smile grew. “Good.”

After a few minutes, the road home curved gently, leading them toward the warm glow of their house in the distance. Smoke curled from the chimney, and light spilled from the windows. It was a welcome sight.

Jacob reached over and grasped Olivia’s hand.

And as the wagon rolled closer to home, Jacob knew with absolute certainty that this—this simple, ordinary, beautiful life—was the greatest

gift he'd ever been given.

He wasn't just surviving anymore.

He was alive.

And he was home.

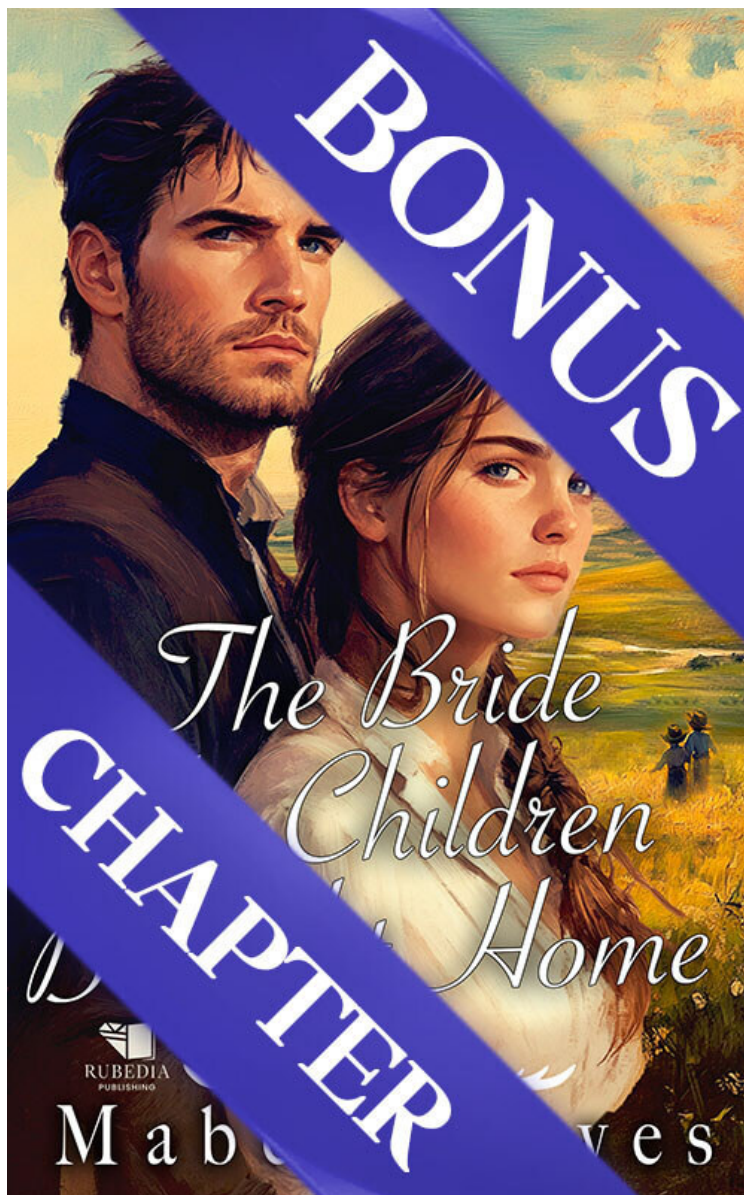
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There's more love to savor, more heart to hold close, and even more
soft moments of their journey still ahead!

Then wander back my way, because I've got one more sweet
surprise waiting just for you!

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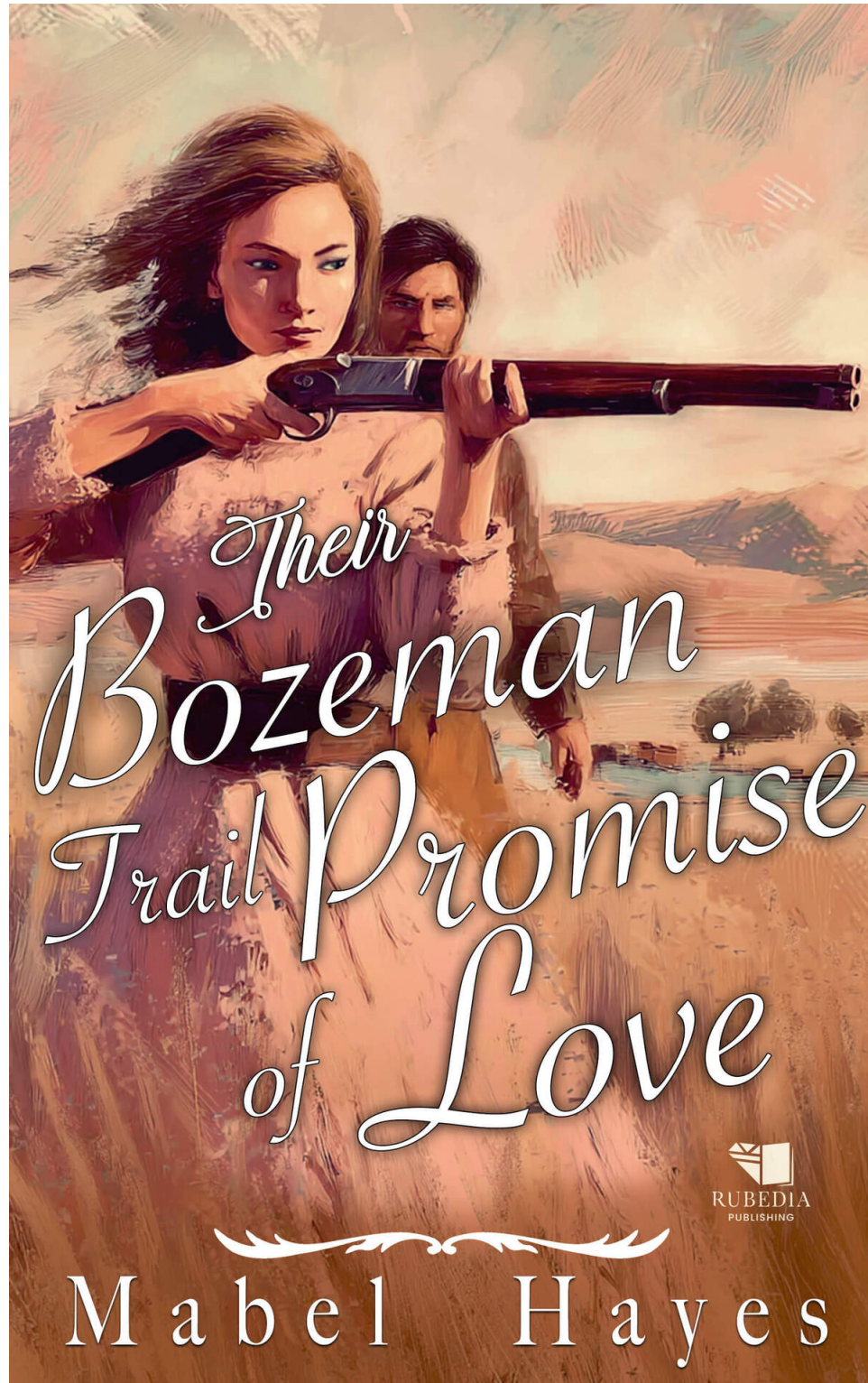
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Their Bozeman Trail Promise of Love



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

A Western Historical Romance Novel

by

Mabel Hayes



RUBEDIA
PUBLISHING

Blurb

“We should keep our distance,” she murmured.

He took a step closer. “Say it again.”

The Bozeman Trail is meant to offer a fresh start, but for Eve Harper, it is a desperate escape. Fleeing a ruthless gang leader, she and her baby brother join the wagon train, knowing that if he finds her, freedom will be the first thing she loses.

Cole Whitaker walks the same trail for a darker reason. Hardened by loss and fueled by vengeance, he’s hunting that very man, the gang leader who destroyed his family and left him with nothing but a promise of revenge. Cole has no intention of letting the past go, even if it costs him everything.

When Cole vouches for Eve and takes responsibility for her safety, their paths become dangerously entangled. Shared danger turns into shared nights on watch, unspoken glances, and a growing attachment neither planned nor trusts.

But the Bozeman Trail does not hide the truth forever. When the man they are both running from draws closer, Eve and Cole must decide what matters more: vengeance or love?

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Prologue

Rapid City, South Dakota

1866

Eve Harper's fingers found the edge of her father's desk. She gripped it, needing something solid to hold onto.

"I cannot marry him, Papa."

The study reeked of tobacco and stale whiskey. Smoke hung in the lamplight, thick enough to taste. Her father's glass was half empty in his hand, amber liquid catching the flame.

Edward Harper went still. His face darkened, that red, blotchy flush creeping up from his collar. The flush she'd learned to recognize over the past year. Too much drink. Too little sleep. Too many debts coming due.

He slammed the glass down. The heavy base struck wood with enough force to rattle the inkwell.

"You ungrateful girl." His voice came low, controlled. Dangerous. "You stand there, in your fine dress, in this house I've kept over your head, and tell me no?"

Eve's breath grew shallow. She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Marshal Duvall frightens me. I will not be traded like livestock."

The word hung between them.

Traded.

Her father shoved back from the desk. The chair legs scraped against the floor, a shriek of wood that made Eve flinch. He stood, and the lamplight threw his shadow across the wall, huge and distorted.

"Traded?" He moved toward her. "You think this is about trade? This is survival, Evelyn. Do you have any notion what this family owes? What I've sacrificed to keep you fed and clothed while the world burns around us?"

His jacket hung loose on his frame. The fine linen was stained down the front—wine, perhaps, or gravy from last night's dinner. His shirt cuffs were frayed. The man who'd once been particular about his appearance, who'd worn tailored suits and kept his boots polished, now looked like he'd slept in his clothes.

"Then let me help another way." Eve's voice came out steadier than she felt. "I can work. I can—"

"You'll obey."

He stepped closer, the bourbon on his breath sharp and sour, the sweat beneath his collar rank, the tobacco ground into his vest.

"Marshal Duvall is offering us a future. A clean slate. And you will marry him with grace and gratitude."

Eve searched his face for some trace of the father she remembered. The man who'd once called her his little songbird. Who'd taught her to read from his own books, his finger following the lines while she sounded out the words. Who'd lifted her onto his shoulders and carried her through the garden, naming every flower they passed.

That man was gone.

In his place stood a stranger with bloodshot eyes and trembling hands.

"Papa, please—"

Pain exploded across her cheek. Sharp. Burning. Her head snapped to the side. The room tilted. She stumbled backward, her hip catching the corner of the side table. The impact sent a crystal decanter rocking. It toppled, crashed to the floor, and the glass shattered. The smell of brandy rose, cloying and sweet.

Her ears rang. Her cheek throbbed, hot and tight. She pressed her palm against it, felt the heat radiating through her skin. She couldn't believe her father had slapped her. This was not like him.

From somewhere in the house, Sammy began to cry.

The sound cut through everything else. Her three-year-old brother was wailing in fear or confusion or both.

Edward Harper straightened his waistcoat. Brushed imaginary dust from his sleeves. When he spoke again, his voice was calm. Measured. As if nothing had happened.

"This marriage is happening, Evelyn. You will not humiliate me further."

Eve tasted copper. She'd bitten the inside of her cheek. Blood pooled in her mouth. She swallowed it down.

In that moment, she understood.

He didn't see her anymore. Not as a daughter. Not even as a person.

She was a payment. A means to settle a debt he'd accumulated at card tables and in the back rooms of saloons.

"Yes, Papa," she whispered.

She turned and left the room. Her legs felt disconnected from her body, moving without her conscious direction. The hallway stretched before her, darker than it should be. Shadows pressed in from the corners.

Sammy's cries grew louder as she climbed the stairs. Each step sent a jolt of pain through her hip. Her cheek throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

She refused to cry. Not yet. Not where he could hear.

Upstairs, Clara stood in the hallway outside the nursery, rocking a sobbing Sammy against her shoulder. The housemaid's face paled when she saw Eve.

"Miss Eve—"

"I need your help." Eve kept her voice low, steady, though everything inside her was screaming. "Please, Clara. I can't stay here."

Clara's gaze dropped to Eve's cheek. She glanced toward the stairwell, then gently set Sammy down. The boy immediately wrapped his arms around Eve's skirts, his face buried in the fabric. His small body shook with hiccupping sobs.

Clara ushered them both into the nursery and closed the door. She turned the key, and the latch clicked softly.

"What do you need?"

Eve stared at Clara for a moment, the person she trusted more than anyone. "I need some help, Clara. A way out. Anything."

Eve knelt and gathered Sammy into her arms. He was warm, solid, real. She pressed her face against his hair, breathing in the sweet scent of him: soap and milk and childhood innocence. "I can't stay here. I'll take Sammy and go. I don't know where, but I can't let him give me to that man. I won't."

Clara was quiet for a long moment. Her work-roughened hands twisted in her apron. Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, creased and worn as if she'd been carrying it for days.

"I saw this posted at the mercantile last week." She unfolded it carefully, her movements deliberate. "Wagon train heading west. Bound for Montana Territory."

Eve took the notice with trembling hands. The words blurred, then focused.

Bozeman Trail. Seeking families and able-bodied travelers. Departure: April 18th from Glenrock, Wyoming.

Three and a half weeks away.

Clara put her hand on Eve's arm and pulled her close with a look of concern written on her face. "It's dangerous, Eve, and you'd be alone with a child. But it's a way out."

Sammy had stopped crying. He clung to Eve's skirts, his little face streaked with tears, his eyes red and swollen. She looked down at him. At the trust in his gaze. The absolute faith that she would keep him safe.

She studied the paper again. Montana Territory. From her father's books, she knew of the area. Miles of wilderness, bandits, and hardship.

But it was far from Rapid City. Far from her father. Far from Marshal Duvall and whatever plans he had for her.

"I'm certain."

Clara nodded once. "Then I'll help you. Tonight, after your father's asleep, I'll leave the wagon hitched in the barn. Two horses. The bay mare and the roan. They're gentle enough, and they won't be missed till morning."

"Clara, if he finds out you helped me—"

"He won't." The housemaid's voice turned fierce. "You've been good to me, Miss Eve. You and your mama before she died. This is the least I can do."

Eve stood and pulled Clara into an embrace. Brief. Fierce. The older woman's arms came around her, strong and steady. When they separated, Clara's eyes were bright with unshed tears.

Eve folded the notice carefully and tucked it into her bodice, against her heart. Then she knelt again and gathered Sammy into her arms, pressing a kiss to his soft hair.

"We're going on an adventure, sweetheart," she whispered. "Just you and me."

Sammy peered up at her with wide, trusting eyes. His small hand came up to touch her injured cheek, gentle as a butterfly landing. "Hurt?"

"I'm all right." She caught his hand and kissed his palm. "Everything's going to be all right."

She held him close, feeling the beat of his heart against her chest. Fast. Frightened. But trusting.

She would not stay to watch her father sell her future.

She would take her brother and never look back.

Chapter One

Rapid City, South Dakota

1866

The grandfather clock in the hall struck midnight as Eve eased her bedroom door open. Sammy lay bundled in a wool blanket, his head tucked against her shoulder, his breath warm and even. She'd dressed him in his warmest clothes while he slept, layer upon layer, praying he wouldn't wake and cry.

He stirred now, mumbling something soft and wordless.

"Hush, sweetheart," she whispered. "We're going on that adventure I told you about."

The hallway stretched dark before her. She'd memorized every creaking board, every turn, during the endless hours she'd waited for her father to retire finally. Now she moved carefully, placing each step with deliberate care.

The locket at her throat felt cool against her skin. Her mother's locket. She'd taken almost nothing else, just the clothes on her back and what little she could carry, but this she would not leave behind.

Forgive me, Mama. But I can't stay.

She descended the stairs one at a time, grateful for the thick runner that muffled her footsteps. The front door loomed ahead. Beyond it lay the yard, the barn, and the horses Clara had promised.

Beyond it lay freedom.

Clara waited in the shadows near the door, a small satchel clutched in both hands. "Miss Eve." Her voice was barely audible. "Everything's ready. The wagon's at the back of the barn, hitched to the bay and the roan. I put what I could inside, but there wasn't time for much. Your father had men in the yard until an hour ago."

Eve took the satchel. "What's inside?"

"Bread, dried meat, a jar of preserves. Two canteens of water. It's not much, but it'll get you to Glenrock if you're careful." Clara paused. "There are other things, too. Important things. You'll find them when you need them."

"Clara—"

"They'll start preparing for the wedding at dawn." Clara's words were quick and urgent. "You need to be long gone by then. Miles away. Don't stop until you have to."

Eve wanted to say a hundred things. Thank you. Sorry. I'll never forget this. But Sammy was growing heavier in her arms, and time was slipping away.

She set the satchel down and pulled Clara into a fierce, brief embrace.

"You've saved us," she whispered. "Both of us."

Clara pulled back, her eyes bright. "Go. Hurry."

Sammy lifted his head, suddenly awake. He reached for Clara, his little arms stretching toward the only other person besides Eve who'd ever shown him genuine kindness.

"Clara." His voice was thick with sleep and confusion. "Don't go."

The housemaid's expression crumpled. She touched his cheek gently. "Be good for your sister, sweet boy."

Eve gathered him closer. "Everything will be all right, Sammy. I promise."

She picked up the satchel, pushed open the door, and stepped into the night.

The cold hit her like a slap. April in South Dakota could be bitter after dark, and she'd forgotten how the wind came sharp and merciless across the open yard. She pulled Sammy's blanket tighter around him and kept moving.

The barn stood dark and silent. She could just make out the shape of the wagon, smaller than she'd hoped, its canvas cover sagging in places. The bay mare and the roan stood hitched and waiting, their breath misting in the cold air.

Eve climbed onto the seat and settled Sammy beside her, tucking the blanket around him until only his face showed. He was already drifting back to sleep.

She took up the reins. The horses started forward at her tentative command, and the wagon lurched into motion.

Every sound felt magnified in the silence. The creak of wood. The jangle of harness. The soft thud of hooves on packed dirt. She guided the horses toward the road, her entire body tense, waiting for a shout, for her father to come roaring out of the house.

Behind her, dogs began to bark.

Light bloomed in an upstairs window—her father's room.

Panic flooded through Eve. She snapped the reins harder, urging the horses faster. The wagon rattled and bounced over the uneven ground. Sammy whimpered.

"It's all right." Her voice sounded strangled even to her own ears. "We're all right."

The road opened before her, pale in the moonlight. She turned the horses onto it and kept going, refusing to look back. If her father was awake and coming after her, there was nothing she could do, save keep moving.

The barking faded. The light disappeared behind a rise in the land.

Still, she drove on, the reins cutting into her palms, the cold seeping through her cloak.

An hour passed. Then two. The adrenaline that had carried her through the escape began to ebb, leaving exhaustion in its wake. Beside her, Sammy slept on, his small body warm against her side.

She hummed softly, an old lullaby her mother used to sing. The tune was all she remembered, the words lost to time, but the melody soothed her as much as it did Sammy.

The road stretched endlessly ahead. Glenrock lay over two hundred miles west. Eight or nine days of open road, small towns, river crossings, and strangers who might recognize her if her father sent word ahead.

It would take over a week before she could disappear into a wagon train bound for Montana and leave this life behind forever.

The sky began to pale in the east. Dawn was coming, and with it the risk of being seen. Eve guided the horses off the main road and into a grove of trees near a stream. The wagon jolted over rough ground, but she managed to bring it to a stop hidden from view.

Sammy woke as she lowered him. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere safe." She set him on his feet and stretched, her body stiff and sore. "We're going to rest here for a little while. Are you hungry?"

He nodded, rubbing his eyes.

She opened the satchel Clara had given her and found the food packed on top. She broke off a piece of bread and handed it to Sammy, along with a few strips of dried meat. He ate slowly, watching her with solemn eyes.

"Are we going home soon?"

The question pierced her. *Home*. The word meant nothing now. The house she'd grown up in, the rooms she'd known all her life, those belonged to someone else. Someone who'd been foolish enough to believe her father still loved her.

"No, sweetheart. We're going somewhere new. Somewhere better."

"Will Papa come?"

"No."

Sammy considered this while he chewed. "Good," he said finally. "Papa's mean."

Eve knelt beside him and smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "He wasn't always. Once, a long time ago, he was kind. But people change sometimes. And we have to take care of ourselves now."

"And Clara?"

"Clara has to stay. But she helped us get away, and we'll always remember that."

Sammy finished his bread and leaned against her. "I'm still sleepy."

"Then sleep. We'll rest here until the sun's higher, and then we'll keep going."

She carried him back to the wagon and made a nest of blankets in the bed. He curled up immediately, his eyes already closing. She covered him carefully, then climbed down and tended to the horses, giving them water from the stream and feeding them the grain Clara had packed.

Everything Clara had managed to pack sat jumbled in the wagon bed. A few blankets. A cooking pot. A small sack of cornmeal. A tinderbox. It was pitifully little for a journey of weeks, but it would have to be enough.

Eve sat on the wagon seat and examined the satchel more carefully. The leather was worn but well-made, the kind her mother had used for keeping important documents. Beneath the food, Eve found several folded papers.

Her fingers touched something else. A small cloth purse, heavy with coins.

Eve opened it and counted. Forty-three dollars in various denominations. More money than she'd ever held at once.

A note was tucked inside the purse, written in Clara's careful hand:

Miss Eve, this is everything I've saved in twelve years of service. It's not much, but you'll need money in Glenrock for supplies and to join the wagon train. Please take it. You and your mama, before she died, gave me more kindness than I ever deserved. This is the least I can do. The Bozeman

Trail is dangerous country. Trust your instincts. Watch for anything unusual. Be safe. Be brave.

– C

Tears blurred Eve's vision. Twelve years of wages. Everything Clara had. And she'd given it all away to help them escape.

She clutched the purse for a long moment, overcome. Then she carefully tucked it back into the satchel and pulled out the other paper Clara had included—a hand-drawn map.

The map was simple but clear. A line traced westward from Rapid City across the territory into Wyoming, following what was marked as the main road. The line ended at a star labeled *Glenrock, Wyoming*.

From there, another line headed north, marked *Bozeman Trail to Virginia City, Montana Territory*.

Eve traced the route with her finger. So many miles. So many rivers to cross and plains to traverse.

She folded the papers and tucked them back into the satchel, along with Clara's precious gift. Forty-three dollars would have to be enough for whatever lay ahead.

Glenrock was still days away. Miles of hoping her father hadn't sent riders ahead, hoping she could stay hidden long enough to disappear into a wagon train heading north.

The enormity of it threatened to crush her.

But what choice did she have? At least moving forward offered hope. And thanks to Clara's sacrifice, she had the means to take the first steps.

Eve climbed down from the seat and checked on Sammy again. Still sleeping, his face soft and untroubled.

She pulled out the map one more time, studying it in the growing light. The road to Glenrock wound through several small towns. She'd have to avoid the larger ones, places where word might have spread. Better to keep to the smaller settlements, buy supplies quickly, and move on before anyone grew curious about a woman traveling alone with a child.

The sun climbed higher, burning off the morning mist. Birds called from the trees. The stream burred over stones. It was peaceful here, almost beautiful, and for a moment, Eve let herself imagine this was all there was—just her and Sammy, hidden away from the world, safe and free.

But safety was an illusion. Freedom was something she'd have to fight for every single day.

By midmorning, she woke Sammy, and they set out again. The road was busy with farmers heading to market and freight wagons rumbling past. She kept her bonnet pulled low and her eyes on the road, returning greetings with only a nod.

No one stopped her. No one asked questions. Surely someone was looking for her, or was her plan to disappear working?

By the second day, her initial terror had settled into a grim determination. She ached from sleeping in the wagon and driving for hours on end. Sammy grew restless and fussy, asking every few miles when they'd get there, when he could play, and why they couldn't go home.

She sang to him. Told him stories. Let him hold the reins under her guidance when the road was clear. Anything to keep him from crying, from drawing attention.

At night, she pulled the wagon into hidden spots and slept with one ear constantly listening for hoofbeats, for voices, for any sign they'd been

found.

But the nights passed quietly and the days rolled on.

Then, on the morning of the twentieth day, she saw the town rising in the distance.

Glenrock, Wyoming. The “jumping-off point” for every wagon train heading down the Bozeman Trail to Montana. The place where her old life would end, and her new one would begin, if she were brave enough to see it through.

Eve straightened on the seat and urged the horses forward. Sammy sat beside her, peering ahead with wide, curious eyes.

"Is that where we're going?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "For now."

And for the first time in days, she allowed herself to hope.

The town grew larger on the horizon, and with it, the promise of a new beginning.

Chapter Two

Harrodsburg, Kentucky

1866

The farm looked worse every time Cole Whitaker came back to it.

He dismounted and let the reins trail. Charred timbers jutted from ash-choked ground where the front steps had been. When he kicked at one, the wood crumbled, black dust rising in the still air. The chimney stood alone, red brick darkened by smoke, pointing at nothing.

The barn leaned to one side, its roof caved in. Daylight showed through gaps in the walls.

Cole walked to what had been the wheat field. Ragweed stood waist-high where golden stalks should have grown. Thistles choked the furrows his father had plowed straight as a ruler every spring for thirty years. A groundhog watched him from a mound of dirt, then disappeared.

At the property line, fence posts stuck up at odd angles, gaps between them where rails had been stolen. Boot prints in the mud near one post. Axe marks on another, fresh enough that pale wood showed beneath the bark.

The farm had become a scavenging ground for travelers who never knew a family had lived there.

Six months had passed since he'd returned from the war, and the sight still cut as deeply as that first day.

At the far edge of the property, beneath the oak tree, a grave lay marked with a simple wooden cross and a name carved deep into the wood.

Abigail Whitaker

Beloved Wife

1841-1863

The neighbors had buried her while Cole was still fighting in Virginia, still believing he had something to come home to. They'd done their best. He couldn't fault them for that.

He knelt and pulled a small object from his pocket. A ring, gold and tarnished, the band scratched and dented. He'd found it in the rubble of the house, half-buried in ash. Her wedding ring. The one he'd placed on her finger five years ago, back when the future had seemed bright and full of promise.

Cole dug a shallow hole at the base of the cross with his hands, the earth cold and damp. He placed the ring inside and covered it with dirt, then set a smooth stone on top to mark the spot.

"I should have been here."

The words rang hollow. He'd said them a hundred times in the months since his return. They never changed anything. Abigail was still dead. The farm was still ashes.

And the man responsible, Marshal Duvall, was still breathing.

That last part, at least, Cole intended to fix.

The rattle of wheels on the rutted road made him turn. Harlan Pierce came into view, driving a flatbed loaded with empty barrels.

Harlan was a good man, steady and practical. He'd helped Cole bury what little remained after the fire and had made the offer to buy the land within a week. Cole had put him off then, not ready to let go. But that was months ago, and holding onto this place served no purpose now.

The wagon stopped, and Harlan climbed down. He was a big man, broad across the shoulders, with a face weathered by years of hard work.

"Didn't expect to see you out here so early, Cole."

"Ready to settle things."

Harlan glanced at the grave, then back at Cole. "You sure about this? Selling, I mean. The price I offered is fair, but it's not generous. You could wait, see if someone else comes along willing to pay more."

"The price is fine."

"Cole, this land's been in your family for two generations. Your father—"

"My father's dead. So's my brother. So's my wife." Cole's voice came out flat, stripped of everything but fact. "There's nothing here worth keeping."

Harlan was quiet for a moment, studying him. "Where will you go?"

"West."

"That's a long way to go with no destination."

"I'll find one."

It wasn't exactly a lie. Cole had a destination, just not one he cared to share. Somewhere along the Bozeman Trail, Marshal Duvall and his gang were operating, preying on settlers and wagon trains the way they'd preyed on homesteads during the war. Cole had heard the rumors from a freight driver passing through last month, and he'd been making plans ever since. Killing Duvall was something he couldn't get out of his head, no matter how hard he tried.

Harlan sighed and pulled a folded paper from his coat. "I brought the deed. Sign here, and the land's mine. Money's in the wagon, same amount we agreed on."

Cole took the paper and scanned it briefly. The legal language meant little to him, but the essentials were clear enough. He was selling forty acres and whatever remained of the structures for three hundred dollars. A pittance compared to what the farm had been worth before the war.

He signed his name at the bottom and handed the paper back.

Harlan folded it carefully and tucked it away, then retrieved a small leather pouch from the wagon bed. "Three hundred, like we agreed. I'll take good care of the place, Cole. I promise you that."

"Do what you want with it." Cole took the pouch and tucked it into his saddlebag. "It's yours now."

He mounted his horse and looked back one last time at the grave beneath the oak tree. Abigail deserved better than this. Better than a husband who'd been off fighting someone else's war while she died alone and afraid. Better than a scorched patch of earth in the middle of nowhere.

She deserved justice.

And Cole would see that she got it, even if it killed him.

He turned his horse toward the road and rode west without another glance back.

Glenrock, Wyoming

1866

Glenrock was chaos.

The town had always been a busy stopping place for anyone heading west, but Cole hadn't been prepared for the sheer volume of people and wagons crowding the streets. Families camped in every available space, their belongings piled high on prairie schooners. Oxen lowed in makeshift pens. Traders hawked supplies at inflated prices, their voices rising above the din.

Cole guided his horse through the press, ignoring the men trying to sell him everything from flour to firearms. He'd stocked up on essentials before leaving Kentucky and had no interest in wasting his money on overpriced goods.

What he needed was information. And, if he was lucky, work that would get him onto the Bozeman Trail without raising questions.

He found both outside a squat building that served as the local freight office.

Hunk Haskins stood near a wagon, inspecting a wheel with the practiced eye of a man who'd seen a thousand things go wrong on the trail. He was older than Cole remembered, grayer, with lines etched deep around his eyes and mouth. But the set of his shoulders was the same, and the way he moved, efficient and deliberate, hadn't changed.

Cole hadn't seen him since the war. They'd served in the same regiment early on, before everything went to hell. Hunk had been a sergeant then, the kind of man soldiers trusted because he didn't waste their lives on fools' errands.

"Hunk."

The older man turned, and for a moment his expression went blank. Then recognition dawned. "Cole Whitaker. Hell, I thought you were dead."

"Not yet."

Hunk crossed the distance between them and gripped Cole's hand, his shake firm. "Heard you got discharged. Didn't hear much after that."

"Not much to tell."

That wasn't true, but Cole had no intention of spilling the details of the past year to a man he hadn't seen in over two. Hunk seemed to sense as much. He released Cole's hand and stepped back, his gaze assessing.

"You look worse than most of the wounded I saw come through. When's the last time you slept?"

"I sleep."

"Sure you do." Hunk gestured toward the wagon. "I'm guiding a train up the Bozeman Trail. Leaving in three days. Could use another scout if you're looking for work."

Cole kept his expression neutral. This was precisely what he'd hoped for, but he couldn't afford to seem too eager. "What's the pay?"

"Fifty dollars if we make it to Montana without losing more than a quarter of the train. Less if things go badly. It's a dangerous country, Cole. You know that. The redskins don't much care for us crossing their territory."

"I know. Do you blame them?"

Hunk studied him for a long moment. "You planning to settle out there? Find some land, start over?"

"Maybe."

Another lie, but a necessary one. Hunk was sharp enough to put the pieces together if Cole gave him too much.

"All right. You're hired. Meet me here tomorrow morning, and I'll introduce you to the other scouts. We'll go over the route, talk supplies, all the rest."

"Appreciate it."

Hunk hesitated. "I heard about Daniel."

The name landed like a blow. Cole had been braced for questions about the war, about where he'd been, but not this. Not his brother.

"It was a long time ago."

The lie sat bitter on his tongue.

"Time doesn't fix some things." Hunk's voice was quiet, almost gentle. "I lost good men, too. The kind that stays with you."

Daniel had been more than good. He'd been the better half of the Whitaker brothers, the one with the easy laugh and the quick smile, the one people liked without him having to try. Cole had been the serious one, the responsible one, the one their father trusted to keep the farm running.

And then the war came, and Daniel followed Cole into it like he'd followed him everywhere else. Right up until the moment a Confederate bullet found him instead of Cole.

"He threw himself in front of me." The words escaped before he could stop them. "I told him to stay back, but Daniel never listened when it mattered."

"Brothers don't." Hunk's expression was somber. "They stand with you even when standing means dying."

Cole said nothing. There was nothing to say. Daniel was gone, and no amount of talk would bring him back or ease the weight of surviving when he shouldn't have.

Hunk seemed to understand. He clapped Cole on the shoulder once, briefly, then stepped back. "Tomorrow morning. Don't be late."

"I won't."

Hunk returned to the wagon, already moving on to the next task. The man was relentless, always had been. It was part of what made him a good leader. He didn't dwell on the past.

Cole envied him for that.

He led his horse down the street, looking for a place to stable it for the night. Glenrock had grown since the last time he'd passed through, new buildings rising where empty lots had been. The war had been hard on everyone, but the West still promised opportunity for those willing to risk the journey.

Cole had no interest in opportunity. What he wanted was simpler and far darker.

Revenge.

The freight driver who'd told him about Duvall's gang had been vague on details, but the essentials were clear. During the spring and summer, Duvall operated along the Bozeman Trail, targeting isolated homesteads and poorly defended wagon trains. He was ruthless, efficient, and careful never to leave witnesses.

Back home in Kentucky, Duvall and one of his gangs had attacked the widow across the way from Cole and Abigail's farm.

Duvall killed her.

Cole's hand drifted to his side, to the place where a jagged scar cut across his ribs. Another souvenir from the war, a reminder that he'd survived when better men hadn't. The wound ached sometimes, especially when the weather turned cold, but Cole had learned to ignore it.

Pain was useful. It kept him focused. It reminded him why he was still alive when everyone he cared about was dead.

At a stable at the edge of town, Cole paid for three nights. The stable hand, a boy no more than fifteen, took the reins and led the horse inside without comment. Cole shouldered his saddlebag and walked back toward the main street.

A hotel stood at the corner, two stories tall, with a painted sign that read "Frontier Rest." It looked clean enough. He paid for a room, then climbed the stairs and locked the door behind him.

The room was small but adequate. A bed, a chair, a washstand. Cole dropped his saddlebag on the floor and sat on the edge of the bed.

Cole stood and moved to the window. Below, families moved through the fading light, loading wagons, checking supplies, preparing for the journey ahead. Children ran between the wagons, laughing and shouting. A woman hung laundry on a line stretched between two trees.

Ordinary life. The kind Cole used to have before the war.

The kind he'd never have again.

He turned away from the window and lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Three days until the wagon train left. Three days to prepare, to make sure he had everything he needed for the journey.

And then, finally, he'd be on his way to finding Marshal Duvall.

On his way to making the man pay for what he'd done.

Cole closed his eyes and waited for morning.

Chapter Three

Glenrock, Wyoming

1866

Eve had underestimated everything.

The journey from Rapid City to Glenrock took twenty days. She'd pushed too hard the first week, stopping only when necessary, and nearly lamed the bay mare. After that, she'd learned to pace herself, to rest the horses properly, to conserve her dwindling supplies.

By the time she finally saw Glenrock rising in the distance, she was half-starved and hollow with fatigue.

The town was in chaos. Wagons lined every available space, oxen bellowing in makeshift pens, traders shouting over one another to hawk their wares. Families camped in clusters, their belongings piled high on prairie schooners. The air smelled of wood smoke, livestock, and unwashed bodies pressed too close together.

Eve guided her wagon through the crowded streets with Sammy tucked against her side. He'd grown quieter over the past weeks, his usual chatter replaced by wary silence. She hated that. Hated what this journey was doing to him, how fear had stolen his childhood joy.

But there was no other choice. Not for either of them.

She asked a passing woman where she might find the wagon train bound for Montana. The woman pointed toward the far edge of town. "Follow the noise. You can't miss it."

She was right.

A quarter mile out, Eve heard voices. The bang of a hammer on metal. A woman's call, sharp and clear: "Jacob! Get down from there!" A child's delighted squeal. The lowing of oxen.

As she crested the rise, the noise doubled. Tripled. Shouting from every direction. A dog barking. More hammering. The creak and rattle of wagon wheels.

Dozens of prairie schooners stood in rough circles, their white canvas covers bright against the mud. A man knelt beside a wheel, tapping a hub with steady strikes. Another led a team of oxen between the wagons, clicking his tongue and guiding them with gentle tugs on the lead rope.

Children darted past her wagon, three boys chasing a fourth, all of them shrieking. A girl sat on a tailgate braiding her sister's hair.

Smoke rose from cookfires scattered throughout the camp. The smell of bacon reached her. Women worked over the fires, stirring pots, shaking out blankets, hanging them over wagon bows to air.

A man passed carrying an armload of harness leather. Two women walked by with water buckets, their conversation bright and animated. An older man sat on a crate, sharpening an axe, the rhythmic scrape of stone on metal cutting through the other sounds.

Eve was in awe. She'd never imagined anything like this, living in her organized life back in Rapid City. This organized chaos would somehow transform into a train and march west.

Eve brought her wagon to a stop at the edge of the camp and climbed down, lifting Sammy into her arms. He was getting too big to carry for long, but she needed him close right now.

"Everything will be fine," she whispered into his hair. "These people will help us."

She wasn't sure she believed it, but saying the words aloud made them feel more possible.

She spotted a man near the lead wagon, giving orders to some of the wagon owners, so she figured he must be the trail guide. Broad-shouldered with graying hair. His voice carried authority. Eve took a breath and walked toward him, Sammy's arms tight around her neck.

The guide noticed her approach and turned, his expression neutral. "Help you with something, ma'am?"

"I'm looking for a passage to Montana." Her voice came out steadier than she'd expected. "I can work. I won't be a burden. I can cook, mend, and help with the sick. Whatever you need."

His gaze flicked from her face to Sammy, then back again. "Where's your husband?"

The question landed like a stone. "I don't have one."

His expression hardened. "Then I can't take you."

The man's coldness shocked Eve. She'd never considered that having a man along with her was a requirement to travel West. "Please. I have a wagon and two horses. I can manage them myself. I won't ask for special treatment."

"You'll need it whether you ask or not." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. A woman alone with a baby will slow us down. We've got a hard journey ahead, and I can't take responsibility for someone who can't pull their weight."

"I can pull my weight. I promise—"

"Ma'am, the rules are the same for everyone."

Others had begun to watch. Eve felt their eyes on her, curious and pitying. The rejection burned through her. She'd come so far, risked so much, and now this man was going to turn her away because she didn't have a husband to vouch for her.

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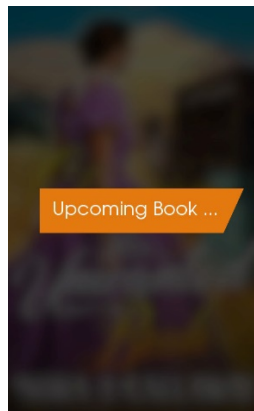
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