

DECISIONS OF THE HEART

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Journeys of the Heart

Book Three

J.L. Dawson



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Dedication



This book is dedicated to: The family Borrows - The descendants of Ken and Pat Borrows, whose granddaughter I am proud to be. I will always be grateful for their legacy of faith and love.

To the aunts, uncles and cousins I grew up with. You were all a huge part of shaping who I am.

You are all loved and appreciated more than you will ever know.

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*Some of the characters in
Journeys of the Heart Series*



Collins Family

Pastor Andrew and Abigail Collins

- The pastor married Abigail after she lost her first husband Rueben and adopted son Samuel in a tragic accident while she was expecting their baby.

Ruby Young Collins

- Abigail and Rueben's daughter, who was born after her father and adopted brother died. She was adopted by Pastor Collins when he married Abigail.

Thomas Collins (Tommy)

- Andrew and Abigail's first child.

Lucy Collins, Emily Collins and Sally Collins

- Andrew and Abigail's three daughters.

Reverend Luke and Lydia Anderson

- Abigail's brother and sister-in-law.

Abigail, (Abi) Samuel and Katherine Anderson

- their children.

Renee Henderson

-Abigail's niece who moved from Rivers Junction to stay with the Collins Family when they were living in Victory City. Renee married Martha's nephew Alexander Henderson and they live in Oceansview.

Reverend Matthew (Matty) and Susan Bourke

-Andrew's best friend from seminary, originally moved to Oceansview and married a young teacher, - joined the Collins and Anderson families in Olivers Grove.

Benjamin and Emma (twins) and Oliver Bourke
- their children.

Martha Flynn

- Abigail's best friend from Oceansview.

One



Happy Birthday

Abigail furrowed her brow and pursed her lips as she tried to get the last stubborn curl into its place. Managing at last to slide in the pin she prayed it'd stay put, taking a final glance in the mirror, she shrugged her shoulders and sighed.

“Are you ready, Abby?” called Andrew.

“Almost,” a chuckle came from the doorway and Abby turned quickly on her heels to see Andrew leaning against the doorpost. His smile wide, and eyes sparkling, he stepped towards his wife and looked her up and down, taking both her hands in his.

“Abigail Collins,” his voice was soft and gentle, his eyes shining with love, “You took my breath away just now! Here you are about to celebrate half a century of your life and you are just as beautiful as you were on our wedding day.”

Abigail received his kiss willingly and then stood back from him and sighed again, dropping her arms to her side, she shrugged and turned back to look at her reflection.

“I think you need your eyes checked, Husband, look at me,” she motioned to the woman in the mirror, “I’m getting old, greying hair, wrinkles and my body’s getting all saggy...” another soft chuckle stopped her.

She whipped her head around incredulously to look at him, “You laugh?”

“Oh no, Abby, ... I mean, yes I laughed, but not at you, just at the idea that you could think anyone sees you that way, it couldn't be further from the truth.” He reclaimed her hands and stood back and examined her with his eyes again. His wife squirmed unnervingly under his admiring gaze. “You know what I see, Wife?”

She shook her head a little sheepishly, knowing Andrew would tell her the truth, afraid to hear what he might say.

“I see the same bright eyes that looked at me with so much love and hope on our wedding day.” He tenderly stroked her cheek just below her eye. She gazed at him and drank in his words of love, willing herself to believe him. “I see the strong arms that have carried and nurtured our children and served me, and our community selflessly, without asking for anything in return.” He ran his hands down her arms. “I see your heart and soul, your strength and inner beauty that radiates from every pore of your skin. When I look at you, I don't see those things you worry about, I really don't, I've never noticed any of them. I see your heart and your love for me and for our children. I see the strongest, bravest.....stubbornest woman I have ever had the privilege to know,” A knowing smile crossed both of their faces, “And it amazes me every day that I was the one fortunate enough to be chosen by God to be there for you in your darkest moments and to get to love and awaken your slumbering heart again. I will ever be grateful to the Lord for sending me on ‘temporary assignment’ to Oceansview all those years ago. I never dreamed what would be waiting for me there.”

His words began to sink in, and waves of love washed over her, she cherished them, and her soul soared, bursting with happiness.

“I've never met anyone like you before,” he continued. Abigail fixed her eyes on Andrew and listened intently, as much with her heart as with her ears. “There were several ladies who wanted to be married to the preacher, but none ever interested me. Not one ever had the strength of character, the tenacity, the, the, the....” he paused and stroked his chin, searching for the right word. He flashed his slightly crooked smile when it came to him, “the... courage to pick up the pieces after such tragedy of losing your husband and son, and carry right on through the pain, clinging to your Lord, and then be

able to grow to love again and love so passionately. You carry no anger and no bitterness and such strength. I learn so much from you every day. Do you know, Mrs. Collins,” he paused again and fixed his deep brown eyes on hers, the intensity of his gaze making her tremble, “I could not do any of what I do without you, I’d be too afraid. This is why God decided man needed a helpmeet, He knew we were much too weak on our own and that it is our wives that give us the strength we need and the courage to do what we have to.”

He paused and looked her deeply in the eye, love radiating from his face. He kissed her tenderly and grinning again, he concluded, “That is what I see, ma’am, and it’s what your children see and all those who know you see.” Tears sprang to the corners of her eyes, and she smiled shyly, too moved by his words to speak. She swallowed the lump in her throat and one lone tear escaped down her cheek.

Andrew tenderly brushed it off with his thumb, his intense eyes never leaving hers. “Do you believe me, Wife?” he asked, his voice tender, his eyes searching her soul. She could do nothing but nod. “Good!” he said and kissed her on the forehead with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eye. “So, we’ll have no more talk about being old or any such nonsense. Today is a day to celebrate your wonderful half a century of life. Our children are waiting.”

Nodding, and full to the brim with love, Abigail took her husband’s offered arm and he led her from the room.

“Oh Mama.” Ruby’s voice cut through their thoughts as they walked down the hallway. She’d been sent on behalf of the impatient children to see what was taking their mother so long. “You look so beautiful in that pale blue satin. Isn’t that your wedding dress, Mama?” the pretty, golden-haired, fourteen-year-old asked, reaching out to caress the satin folds.

“Yes, I can’t believe it still fits me after all these years and five babies,” Abigail chuckled.

Andrew didn’t need words, the squeeze of his hand let her know he wasn’t at all surprised. Ruby turned her eyes to her father

then, “And Pa, you look so handsome in that navy suit! It’s strange not seeing you in your pastor’s collar.”

Andrew grinned, “Tonight I’m not the pastor, tonight I’m escorting the most beautiful lady in town to her party.” He gave Abigail a wink that made her heart leap and offered her his arm. Ruby cocked her head sideways and a funny quizzical look came over her face.

“What is it, Daughter?”

“It’s funny, Pa, you two, just kind of fit together, like you are two halves of a whole, does that make sense?”

Andrew’s eyes became misty, and he swallowed several times rapidly. He let go of his wife’s arm and reached to hug his lovely daughter. Standing back from her, he brushed her cheek slightly. He swallowed back the emotion and cleared his throat. “It sure does, darling, *‘And the two shall become one,’*” he quoted. “That is exactly how a godly marriage should be, it’s how God intended it. He designed us to be dependent on each other,” he turned back and took Abigail’s hand again, “and it is my belief that we are not fully complete without our ‘other half.’ I know I certainly wasn’t.”

“What’s taking so long?” The annoyed voice wafted in from the sitting room, cutting through the tender moment, causing all three to chuckle. Lucy hated to be kept waiting, they hastened to oblige her.

Stepping out into the warm July sunshine, Andrew reached for Abigail’s arm to escort her the half mile across to the chapel. Ruby held his other arm, it always delighted Andrew to escort his girls when he could, he often said it made him feel taller somehow.

Tommy reached his arm out to Lucy and Emily. “I don’t need an escort, Tommy Collins,” Lucy pouted and stormed off ahead of the group. Catching his father’s eye, the boy grinned, and Andrew chuckled and nodded to Sally instead. Tommy nodded.

“Miss Collins, will you allow me?” He reached both arms out to his younger sisters. Emily and Sally grinned, and the group turned to follow Lucy towards the chapel.

Andrew chuckled as he watched his children walk ahead of them. Leading his wife and daughter, he set off after the younger children at a much more leisurely pace.

“I can’t believe I’m fifty years old.” Abigail lamented, “That feels so old, half a century!”

“Oh Mama, you are not old,” laughed her daughter.

“Listen to her, Abby, you still have so many wonderful years to live,” Andrew added.

“I know, I was just thinking back to all we’ve been through, can you believe we’ve been in Olivers Grove for almost three years now?”

“Has it been that long?” Andrew asked, then he nodded, “I guess it has. It feels like just yesterday to me that we arrived here from Oceansview.”

“A lot has happened since we’ve been here, Pa, most good, some not so good.” Ruby curled one side of her mouth up.

Andrew nodded. “Yes, but I wouldn’t change any of it.” At Ruby’s raised eyebrows he continued, “Yes, even the tough times, even all that happened with Bonnie.”

“How can you be glad about that, Pa, she tried to ruin your marriage?”

“Oh, I’m not glad it all happened but look how God used it to bless us. Our college is thriving, your Uncle Luke and I have built the college from the ground up. We have full lecture loads now, new buildings and professors hired, and Bonnie’s large bequest means we can open the new wing of the dormitory block, finally complete the medical school and the teacher’s normal school.”

“That’s true.” Abigail added, “God really does work all things out for good, but not only for the seminary college, but for us as a family. It’s drawn us all so much closer, and we’ve learned to never take anything for granted.”

“I guess I never thought of it like that before, Pa. God really is in, around and through all the details, isn’t He?” Ruby quoted one of her father’s favorite phrases.

“Yes, darling. Sometimes we just don’t notice. Remember that God doesn’t always keep the pain from us, like when your Ma had to

take you and your siblings away to be safe from Bonnie. That's the worst pain I've ever felt, being separated from you all for more than a month." Andrew closed his eyes briefly and sighed, then he nodded and smiled. Without breaking his stride, he continued, "But God was with me and all of you even then. You were with your ma's family, safe and healthy in Rivers Junction. I had Uncle Luke, and the Lord never left me. As your ma says, He taught me to really depend on Him and to never take any of you for granted." He grinned and winked at Ruby, then his wife.

Lucy cut into their tender moment, running back towards them calling, "Come on you slowpokes." She stopped a few feet in front of them with her hands on her hips and head cocked to one side, looking extremely uncomfortable in ruffles and lace. Andrew chuckled and releasing the arms of his wife and oldest daughter he touched Lucy's cheek as he approached her.

"We are coming, my Wild Horse," he said. She rolled her eyes and, hoisting up her skirts, she turned and ran headlong back to her other siblings. Andrew chuckled at the rambunctious eleven-year-old. Wild Horse was his pet name for her, and it suited her completely, with her long limbs and wild auburn mane. Lucy did everything at top speed and was precocious and stubborn. Their tomboy was the exact opposite of lovely, graceful Ruby. Andrew chuckled and they resumed their walk.

"Oh Lucy." Ruby frowned, watching the young girl stopping and scooping up the Mather's Cat that had run up to her. "She'll get fur all over her dress. Why can't she be more graceful?"

Andrew chuckled. "Ruby my darling, I don't want your sister to be more graceful. I've got three lovely, graceful daughters, what I only have one of is my Wild Horse. I don't want Lucy to be anything other than what she is, she's exactly who the Lord wants her to be."

"I expect as she grows up, she'll soften some and come to terms with her womanhood, but she'll never be like you other girls, Ruby, and that's just fine by your father and I. We love you all just the way you are, darling." Abigail leaned her head forward to look across at Ruby. "Just as I wouldn't want you to change to be more like her, I

wouldn't want her to change to be more like you. But I expect you'll all grow and change as you get older."

Ruby nodded, her parents had always believed in them and loved them unconditionally. She looked at her sisters and brother and grinned. They were all so different. Tommy was so much like their pa, in looks and personality. He loved his sisters and was delighted to be the only son, he always felt it was such an honor, one he took very seriously. Ruby's eyes turned to Emily then, the pretty ten-year-old was helping young Sally pick some flowers to add to her bouquet. Emily was delicate with refined features; she was very hung up in her appearance. She wasn't an unkind girl, but she did take extra time to make sure she was always looking her best.

Andrew chuckled as Sally ran back to her brother and gave him a flower. Tommy smiled his thanks and slipped the yellow bloom behind his ear with a grin and spun around with his arms out. Sally roared with laughter and reached for his arm again.

Abigail squeezed her husband's arm and nodded towards Tommy. "He's so much like his father," she said with a wide grin.

"Do you think so, Wife?"

"Yes, Pa," Ruby added, "there is sure no mistaking whose son Tommy is."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Of course, he's a wonderful young man, and he has learned from you. I just love how he adores his sisters, just like you adore your girls," Abigail smiled at him.

Andrew squeezed her hand. "I can't help it; you all just fill my heart to bursting."

The younger children had reached the chapel by now and Lucy reluctantly put the cat back on the ground and the grey tabby dashed home at lightning speed. The slower three soon caught up with the younger ones waiting outside the gateway to the chapel courtyard.

Sally skipped up to them, "Look Mama, we decorated it for you, do you like it?"

Andrew let go of their arms to scoop up Sally as they looked around the wonderous scene. Colorful bunting hung from the trees, and lanterns lined the path, flower garlands and ribbons hung on the stair railings up to the chapel door.

“Very much, child!” Abigail exclaimed noticing the joy it brought their party-loving girl.

“Did you organize all this, Poppet?”

“Mmhmmm,” she nodded with a massive grin on her face, “me and the Sunday school girls, Ruby helped us!”

“It’s beautiful thank you!” Abigail grinned at Ruby.

“You are welcome, Ma, but I really didn’t do much, it was the second-grade girls led by Sally. They just needed me to reach the high boughs of the trees.”

This brought a chuckle from her father. Ruby continued praising her sister’s efforts, “The little girls made the bows and picked the flowers to make the garlands. All I did was do what I was told and try to stay out of the way,” she chuckled.

“Just wait till you see the inside, Ma,” said Sally leaping down from her pa’s arms and skipping ahead to tell the others her family had arrived.

Luke’s oldest daughter, Abi, named for her aunt, poked her head out the door. “Just a minute, Aunty Abigail.”

Climbing the stairs, they could hear shuffling inside and Lydia organizing people. Cries of “she’s here,” were heard and hurrying footsteps and the sliding of chairs. At last, the door swung open, and Lydia stood there with her husband, Abigail’s brother Luke. She reached for her sister-in-law and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

“Happy Birthday, Abby.” Lydia’s voice held much emotion.

Luke then claimed his sister, embracing her and kissing her on the temple. “Happy birthday, big sister,” his eyes twinkled in mischief. “You sure don’t look half a century old, maybe forty-nine but certainly not fifty.” He grinned widely. Abigail swatted at him, and he laughed heartily before adding, “Seriously Abby, you look great.” He reached for her arm and lead her inside. Andrew and the children followed.

A loud cry of “Happy Birthday,” rang out causing Abigail to blush deeply.

“Thank you everyone,” she replied, her eyes shining joyously. Her husband stood with his arm around her and kissed her on the cheek and they both looked around to admire more of Sally’s handiwork. It was a vibrant array of flowers and bunting. Bright paper chains looped around the walls and more lanterns and candles adorned the tables. Abigail gulped and swallowed, Sally stood before her, biting her lip and looking to her mother anxiously. Abigail smiled at her, “Thank you, darling, this is so beautiful.”

Sally beamed widely, her eyes sparkled in joy, “You’re welcome, Mama, we wanted to make it beautiful for you.”

“It is darling, it really is, I love it.”

Being the center of attention was not Abigail’s way, she’d usually much prefer to be behind the scenes helping, but she knew this meant a lot to her family, and especially to Sally, so she chose to enjoy the moment. She walked over to the food table where Mrs. Watkins and Mrs. Fraser were serving out coffee and cake.

“Happy Birthday, Mrs. Collins,” Mrs. Fraser smiled.

“Thank you, Melinda, please you must call me Abigail,” she asked the younger woman.

“Certainly Abigail, would you care for some coffee?”

“Thank you, that’s most kind.”

“I thought you preferred tea?” A familiar voice said from behind her shoulder.

Abigail gasped and spun around, her face lit up and tears immediately sprung to her eyes, “Oh mercy me, Martha! What are you doing here?” She wrapped her arms around her best friend. Through the years they’d been apart they’d written frequently but Abigail had so longed to see her friend again and share their lives and laughter over tea and warm cake, as they once did.

“I’ve missed you so, Abby,” Martha’s voice quivered with deep emotion. They clung to each other for some time.

“What brings you to Olivers Grove?” Abigail asked when they released each other, she reached for the coffee Mrs. Fraser held out to her.

“Since Martin died, I’ve been at a loose end.”

Abigail’s face creased in sympathy, “I’m so sorry Martha, I wish you’d let me come to you, I know full well what the pain is like.”

“No Abby, your place is here, with your family.” Martha’s jaw set stubbornly as always. The older woman, now in her sixties, wore a wide smile but a knowing eye could just make out the slight squint of pain that crossed her face.

“When did you arrive?” Andrew and Luke approached them then and the look of satisfaction on both of their faces gave Abigail the realization they were both in on this game. They each hugged Martha and then Luke spoke for them.

“She arrived on Thursday; we’ve had her cooped up in the boarding house for a few nights.”

“Luke Anderson,” Abigail grinned at her brother and swatted him again. “You’ll keep.”

“Hey, you know I love surprises,” he beamed. “Andrew knew too.”

Abigail’s face wore a wide grin. “It was a lovely surprise.” Turning back to Martha she asked, “How long do we have you for?” and she clung to her friend’s arm.

“Well, I sold the store, I couldn’t bear to live in Oceansview anymore, not without Martin. So, I thought I’d come out and visit my best friend. I’m on my way to the west coast to visit my son and then after that, I’m uncertain, I guess I’ll find my way.” Martha chuckled slightly and her face lit up with joy, but they all noticed a slight quiver in her voice as though she was trying to sound more confident than she felt. She sighed and changed the subject, her eyes twinkling, “I’ve brought you parcels from Matty and Susan and from Renee. They all send their heartfelt greetings.”

“Ohhhh,” Abigail gushed, “I can’t wait to see what they have to say. Has Renee had her baby yet?”

Martha winked, “I’ll let her letter do the telling!”

“Okay, just you keep the secret!” Abigail chuckled, her eyes wide with joy, “Oh, Martha it’s wonderful to see you, thank you for making my birthday so special. When do you think you will leave?”

She paused and then began slowly, “I really don’t have anywhere to be, I have the money from the store so I can stay just as long as I’m useful. I told Matthew I’d be out there early next month so about a week I suppose.”

“Great, just think of the good long catch-ups we can have!” Abigail grinned and closed her eyes soaking in the joy of this occasion. Ruby arrived with a tray in her hands, placing it down on the table, she grinned.

“Hi again, Mrs. Flynn, I hope you and Ma are having a good catch-up,” she beamed gathering the used glasses and plates and adding them to her tray. Both women nodded to her.

“Oh, we sure are, Ruby,” Martha gripped Abigail’s hand and winked at her. “Just like old times.”

“I’m so glad,” Ruby said kindly, her eyes shining in merriment while she worked. Picking up her full tray, she turned on her heels and, with a swish of skirts, she was gone.

Martha raised her eyebrows and shook her head nostalgically at Ruby’s retreating figure. “My god-daughter is virtually a woman.” She chuckled, “I couldn’t believe it when she met me from the train, she is so mature and grown up and so like her father.”

Abigail nodded knowingly, the thought of her first husband no longer brought aching sadness, just blissful memories of a far-off love. “Yes, she is like Rueben, but surprisingly she is so much like Andrew too!”

“Nature vs nurture, you know I’ve often believed that nurture has as much to do with shaping a child as nature.” Abigail nodded; they’d spoken of that many times before. The two women continued watching as Ruby glided towards the refreshment stand, graceful as ever even when serving others. They weren’t the only ones who noticed she was growing up, Martha nudged Abigail and motioned across the room. A young man was also watching Ruby, he fidgeted with his coffee cup, his eyes glistened, and his cheeks reddened.

Abigail smiled a crooked smile at Martha and the older woman nodded slowly and chuckled slightly.

“I think you’ll be losing that girl soon,” Martha said rather wistfully. Ruby was chatting animatedly to Moira Kelly, her friend from school, and the two women could hear their happy laughter and noticed the young man’s smile widen and swallow nervously.

“Don’t say that to Andrew.” They both smiled and looked towards the pastor who was also watching Ruby, his eyes sparkling with love and pride as they always did. He too noticed the young man watching his golden-haired daughter shyly and he knitted his eyebrows together and sighed, one side of his lip curled up wryly and he shook his head ever so slightly.

“He loves that girl something fierce, doesn’t he?” Martha observed.

“Oh yes! I often forget she’s not his flesh and blood, you’d never know it. He loves all his girls, but Ruby is so special to him. She had him hooked around her fingers from the moment she was born. I think she will be the hardest one for him to let go of.” Martha nodded and then they were interrupted by more well-wishers.



“That was a wonderful evening, Husband.” Abigail sighed contently as she removed the last pins from her hair and reached for her brush, she yawned widely. “I’m so tired though.”

Andrew walked up behind her and took the brush from her hand, leaning down to kiss her cheek he stood back and began gently brushing Abigail’s greying tresses. He looked at her in the mirror and grinned. “Still so very beautiful, my darling.”

“Thank you, Andrew. You know you’re not so bad looking yourself.”

“Thank you, darling.” He kissed her cheek again, and then resumed his task, continuing to admire her with his eyes. “Are you going to read your letter?” He motioned with his head to the envelope on the dresser.

Abigail smiled and reached for it, tearing it open and reading aloud while Andrew continued the long strokes with the brush. They laughed together over the antics of Matty's twins and all the updates on the town and all its inhabitants. Abigail turned to Renee's letter then and forgetting to read aloud she quickly ran her tired eyes down the missive. Andrew watched her animated face in the mirror with a wide grin on his face. Abigail gasped and her eyes misted over.

"What is it? Has Renee had her baby?"

"Oh yes, she had a little boy, he's healthy and perfect. They named him Alexander Joseph for his pa, and Renee's, pa. Renee says Alex is so proud of his little man." Andrew grinned and put down the hairbrush.

"Well, my darling, on that note it's time for bed, those parcels can wait till the morning."

"It'll be so hard to wait." Abigail yawned, "but I can barely keep my eyes open."

Andrew nodded and they climbed into bed. Forgoing their usual devotion time, Andrew prayed a quick prayer of gratefulness, and they extinguished their lamps and snuggled down.

"Good night, my darling. Happy birthday."

"Thank you, Husband, it was a wonderful day. You were right, turning fifty wasn't nearly as scary as I expected."

"Of course not. I love you, Abigail."

"I love you too, Andrew." Before long they were both sound asleep.

Two



A Family Wedding

“I’m not sure I can let you go now, Martha,” Abigail exclaimed, holding her friend tightly on the stagecoach platform.

“I’ll be back, Abby. You’ll see me again.”

“I know.” Abigail pulled away from her, and smiled a rather lop-sided grin, “I just didn’t realize how much I’d missed you until I saw you again, thank you for my wonderful birthday surprise.” Tears washed uninhibited down both women’s cheeks and they embraced again.

The stagecoach driver called for them to board and the two women reluctantly released each other, Andrew embraced Martha and helped her up into the stage. He wrapped his arm around Abigail’s waist, and she leaned her head against his chest as they waved the coach away. He leaned down and kissed her head. “She’ll be back.”

“I know,” Abigail said in a small voice. “I just miss having my friend around to chat to.”

“I know you do.” Andrew squeezed her arm as they walked away back towards their home. “But you have me, remember.”

“Yes, of course I do, you can give me advice on sewing patterns and help me with the canning, can’t you?” She grinned and her eyes twinkled in mischief.

Andrew grimaced, “I could try!” he laughed. “I see what you’re saying, Wife, a husband is a poor substitute for a close girlfriend huh?” He seemed contrite.

Abigail stopped and put her hand on his stubbly cheek. “Oh no Andrew, you mustn’t say that! Being here with you is the right decision absolutely and I’d make it again and again. It just is so nice to have a special friend like Martha, but if I had to choose, I’d always choose you.”

Andrew looked up to see if anyone was watching, leaned down and kissed her gently, stroked her cheek and looked into her eyes for just a moment. He swallowed, “Thank you, Abigail, that means the world to me, you are my very best friend and I love to spend time with you, but I also understand, of course you are lonesome for Martha. She was the first friend you made when you first moved east, she supported you through the years of struggling to have a child. She helped you learn to love baby Samuel and she was your rock when you lost Rueben; she birthed Ruby and she supported us when we began to court, through our marriage, our children. You’ve been friends with her nearly thirty years, so I get it, I know how much she matters to you.”

Abigail sniffed back her tears. “Thank you for understanding, Andrew. I’m so grateful for you and for Lydia too. I’ve never regretted coming here with you, not for one moment, but, oh it was just so good to see my best friend again.”

Andrew chuckled. “Of course, now let’s go home.”



The following Monday morning Andrew and Luke spent their morning together in prayer and Bible study. The two faithful ministers always begun their working week giving honor and praise to God, praying for the college and, as Andrew always said, ‘putting first things first.’

Luke closed his Bible, “Well it’s in God’s hands now, He’ll provide the staff we need.”

“Yes, He will,” Andrew grinned. “Now I’d best get to preparing my syllabus for the two new courses. The students will be here in six weeks, I have much study to do.”

“I’m sorry to put that on you, Andrew.”

“Don’t be, I’m quite excited to be studying the reformers myself, I’ve really enjoyed teaching church history and it’ll be great to sink my teeth into the Acts of the Apostles again, too.” Andrew grinned widely, studying and teaching God’s Word was a delight to him. “Besides, you’ve got your hands full with upgrading the Pentateuch Syllabus.”

Luke grinned, “Yeah, but I’m just rehashing your old one.” He flicked through the pages of the notebook in front of him, “You did a good job on this, Andrew; I won’t have to do too much to it.”

“Thank you, but it helps when you have such good material to start with.” He smiled holding up his Bible gratefully.

Luke smiled and motioned to respond when a young man poked his head in the doorway. Luke grinned and Andrew nodded.

“Charlie.” Luke welcomed him in. “What brings you by today?”

Charlie swallowed nervously, swiped his hat off his head and gulped. He licked his dry lips and stammered. “Uhhhh, Reverend. Uhhhh, I uhhh...”

Andrew and Luke looked at each other knowingly. Charlie had been courting Luke’s daughter Abi for more than a semester now. He’d recently got a job as a caretaker on the campus for the summer so he could stay around and keep up his studies. Abi had just graduated from the very first teachers training course their college had offered.

“Charlie, take a breath and come in.” Andrew chuckled motioning the boy to Luke’s spare chair before his desk. Andrew turned to his brother-in-law, “I’ll leave you men to it.” He slapped Luke on the back and chuckled at the look of despair on the man’s face. Andrew promptly left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Charlie still hadn’t said anything further. He sat shuffling nervously, wringing his hands. Luke reached for the box of cookies

Lydia had sent him with and sat opposite the young man. “Charlie, take a deep breath and say what you have to say.” Luke said taking a large bite of the sugar cookie.

Charlie nodded, reached for a cookie, and took a deep breath. “Reverend,” he said in his deep southern accent, “Ya know I’ve worked hard this year’n, you know how I feel about your Abi, Sir.” Luke nodded; Charlie took a bite of the cookie for courage.

“Yes, I’m well aware, Charlie.” Luke grimaced. This sure was painful, he hoped the young man would just get to the point.

“Well, Sir, I was hoping you might find me worthy and do me the great pleasure of giving me your daughter’s hand in marriage.” He stumbled over the words he’d practiced many times before. Quickly devouring the rest of the cookie, he sat for what felt like an age to wait for Luke’s response. The reverend pondered for a time. He already knew his answer, he and Lydia loved Charlie and knew the two were deeply in love and very well suited. He smiled his slow, wide grin and leaned back against his chair.

“Yes of course,” Luke nodded.

Charlie’s face lit up and he grinned, he’d been expecting a bit more pushback, given that he planned to take Abi far away from them.

“Really Sir?”

“Really Charlie.” Luke leaned forward; a bemused look crossed his face. “I know your plan.” He sighed and looked wistfully out the window across the courtyard. “I know you plan to take my daughter to some remote town in the south, and while the idea of her not being close by will take some getting used to, I want you to know Lydia and I so admire you and your heart for the southern churches.”

“Thank ya, Sir, if it weren’t for som’n comin’ to visit my village I might’nt never’ve known Jesus m’self. They need churches there, more people needa’ hear.” He closed his eyes then. “The cruelty my people are inflictin’ on others is so wrong. Slavery is utterly evil, and I plan to fight it where I see it. To open my church doors to anyone who seeks the Lord no matter what color ‘is skin.” He gritted his teeth, it had never sat right with him how his father ran their plantations with such cruelty and malice, he vowed to do

all he could to change that.

Luke nodded, and his eyes shone in admiration. "It's not an easy path you're choosing, Charlie, unfortunately this evil practice is deeply entrenched in the south, even in the church." He shook his head. "What you're asking of my daughter is a difficult life."

"And you're still lettin' me marry 'er, knowin' all that?"

Luke sighed. "Yes, because I know I couldn't do what I do without Lydia by my side, I know how she gives me strength. My position isn't nearly as risky as yours will be, you'll be challenging many people's deeply entrenched values and that will attract hate. But it's always right to stand up against evil, and I respect you for that. I know I can't protect my daughter from all the hardships of life, I even fear that letting her go with you may mean she'll live in poverty and danger at times and come up against tyranny and contention. The reason I can let her go is I know whom you serve, and God will have you both in His hands, no matter what the outcome. I also know the two of you need each other."

Charlie grinned. "That's for sure 'n all, Sir, I always wanted to go and do this, but she gives me the courage to follow through. I'm aware of what I'm askin' o' 'er, and I won't blame 'er if she says no to me, but I believe God brought me here to learn 'is word and to meet 'er. She's a strong woman and a fine teacher, Sir."

Luke came around to the front of the desk and Charlie stood up. Luke wrapped the young man in his arms, "God be with you both, Son."

Charlie smiled. "You know we won't go for a year or so, I gotta finish my second year first and Abi's gonna teach."

"I know that" Luke said, one hand on the young man's shoulder. "But I want you to know, when the time comes, you'll have our blessing, Lydia's and mine."



"Oh Abi, it's such a beautiful day for your wedding." Katherine smiled as she looked out the window of her older sister's room.

“I know Katie, it’s like God painted it just for me.” Abi grinned. Lydia fussed around her dress and put finishing touches to her hair.

Her Aunt Abigail tightened the laces of Ruby’s pale green dress, that matched the one her cousin Katherine wore. The two young ladies were beautiful bridesmaids and were excited to be a part of the day. The room was a swirl of lace and flowers, nervous laughter and joy as they prepared Miss Anderson for her groom.

The older Abigail swallowed and sighed deeply as she brushed at the folds of Ruby’s dress, she stood up and looked at her fifteen-year-old daughter in the mirror, her eyes moist with tears.

“Ma, I know what you are thinking, and you are getting very ahead of yourself.” Ruby tilted her head and put her hands on her hips, her lip curled up in amusement.

“I know my love,” her mother grimaced and handed her daughter the small bunch of wildflowers, tied with a pale green ribbon. “I just can’t help but think of the woman you are becoming and how it won’t be long before some young man sees just how special you are!”

“Oh Ma!” Ruby rolled her eyes.

Ruby led the procession down the aisle, Andrew’s face shone, his lips trembled, and his eyes misted over. From his place behind the alter he caught his wife’s eye and smiled sadly, shaking his head ever so slightly. ‘*She’s so very beautiful,*’ he thought as he watched his lovely daughter take her place before him. He turned to watch Katherine and then Abi walk down the aisle. The quiver of emotion never left his voice as he led the service, the first wedding he’d performed for a family member, it was a struggle for him.

It was a beautiful and emotional day, Luke and Lydia experienced a full range of emotions and both shed more than a few tears. After walking his daughter down the aisle Luke slipped into the spot between Lydia and his sister gripping the hands of both women. He sighed as he gazed at his beautiful daughter. When she said, “I do” a tear ran down his cheek and he shook his head, squeezed Lydia’s

hand and leaned his head to lay it against hers. A sad smile slowly crossed his lips and he whispered, "My Abi."

Lydia chuckled, "Yes Luke, she's so happy."

He sat back up and smiled, nodding slowly.

Charlie and Abigail McKay didn't have a honeymoon, that was an expense they couldn't manage right now as they were saving for their new life, and both wanted to spend time preparing for the coming semester. They set up their little house on campus, and they took to married life as naturally as if it had always been that way.



Abi had been married eight months when she came bursting into her aunt's home one morning bubbling over in excitement.

"Aunty Abigail, I'm going to have a baby," she gushed before she'd even finished closing the door behind her.

Abigail placed down the dishcloth and gasped, discarding her apron she ran to hug her beautiful glowing niece. She clung tightly to the younger woman who bore her name. "Oh Abi, what wonderful news." The children and Andrew gathered around and added their congratulations.

"I wanted to wait until this evening when Charlie got home to tell you, but I was much too excited, I just couldn't wait any longer." She spoke quickly and waved her hands animatedly. Her eyes sparkled and her face shone her joy out for all to see. "The doctor confirmed it yesterday and I told my parents this morning." She threw herself back in her aunt's arms again. "Oh, Aunty, I'm so excited!" She gushed.

"So are we, and your parents must be thrilled," her Aunt Abigail said leading her to the settee, Ruby placed cups of tea before both women.

"They are. Although I'm sure my Pa almost fainted!"

Andrew choked out a laugh, "I can't wait to call him Gramps when I see him this afternoon."

“I’m sure he’ll love that,” said Abi with a grin. They chatted excitedly while they finished their tea. Then with one last hug each, and another round of hearty congratulations, she left.

Lots of good-natured teasing was pointed at ‘Grandpa Luke’ that day and despite the ribbing he beamed with happiness, he couldn’t wait to be a grandpa. “That is the advantage of your girl getting married, you get grandbabies.” He declared, with a wide grin.

Because of the coming baby the young couple decided to wait another year before moving South and Luke and Lydia would relish the extra time with their first grandchild. The two families began in earnest to prepare for the new arrival, Abigail, Lydia and even Ruby knitted and sewed when they got the chance, and the pile of baby clothes and diapers slowly began to grow.

Three



Sweet Sixteen

“Mama.” Ruby exclaimed frustratingly, “I can’t get this sleeve right.”

“I’ll help you, darling,” Abigail said leaving her spot by her husband and walking over to sit with her daughter on the settee. Soon the two were engrossed in shaping the sleeve in the tiny yellow sweater she was making for her cousin’s coming baby.

The three younger girls were in bed, Tommy lay on the rug, head propped up on his arms reading. Andrew was taking a rare moment to catch up on the current news. Lowering his newspaper, he peered over the top of it at the two women and sighed. For the last week or so he’d become rather wistful, often glancing at Ruby, unshed tears brimming his eyes, as he considered that in a few days’ time his daughter would be coming of age, sixteen, truly a woman, no longer a child needing his care. It was happening all too rapidly for the tender-hearted pastor. He longed to halt time, but it continued on around him nonetheless and he was powerless to stop it.

Ruby caught his eye and chuckled, “What is it, Pa?”

“I just can’t believe you’re going to be sixteen in a few days’ time.”

Ruby shook her head and frowned a little, but her face wore a sideways smile. “Oh Pa, you are much too sentimental sometimes.”

“I can’t help it, darling; you are just so special to me,” Andrew said standing up to add a log to the fire. Ruby placed aside her knitting and went to him.

“Thanks Pa,” she put one hand on his arm. He reached for her then and held her as he had so many times before, he never tired of holding his girls. He leaned down and kissed her head.

“I love you, Pa,” she said in a small voice.

“Oh darling, I love you too.” They pulled away from each other and Andrew stroked her cheek. “Are you sure you don’t want to have a party to celebrate your birthday?”

“No Pa, I like your idea so much better.”

“Supper with your old pa?”

“You’re not so old, Pa, and I’d love to.”

“I can’t wait darling, it will be my pleasure to escort the most beautiful girl in town to supper. I’ll have to keep my eyes on the young men though, I’m not quite ready to give you up yet.”

“Oh Pa!” she exclaimed again, leaning against the hearth, enjoying the warmth from the fire.

“I have an idea, darling.” He turned to look at his wife. “Abigail, why don’t you take Ruby out and get her a whole new outfit, hat, gloves, boots the whole works.” He turned back and stroked Ruby on the cheek. “I’ll take you out and show you how a gentleman should treat a lady.”

“Really Pa, a whole new outfit?”

“Yes darling, we’ll dip into our savings, it will be worth it. This will be my sweet sixteen tradition for my girls,” he beamed.

“Oh Pa.” Ruby said again throwing herself into his arms. He held her tightly enjoying her arms around his neck and drinking deeply of the privilege of fatherhood.



Abigail took her daughter to scour the dress shops in their town. The selection was hardly high city fashion but there were some very beautiful, stylish options for a young lady. Ruby tried on several gowns but struggled to find one that really suited her. Several hours

and stores later they turned the corner towards the last of the dress shops and Ruby gasped and ran to the window.

“Mama, look at this.” She placed her hand up against the window and her eyes sparkled. Abigail followed her pointing finger to the beautiful dark green gown hanging in the window, a small, stylish light lemon-colored hat hung over it and matching gloves with green satin buttons.

“Oh Ruby, you have to try it on, it looks like it would be ideal. You look so beautiful in green.”

They raced excitedly inside, and the seamstress led them to a changing area and soon returned with the dress from the window, she entered behind the curtain to help Ruby into the gown. Abigail sat down to wait in the nearby chair for Ruby’s ‘grand reveal.’

After about fifteen minutes, Miss Wilkins, the seamstress poked her head around the curtain. She grinned widely and chuckled slightly. “Are you ready, Mrs. Collins?”

Abigail nodded and stood in eager anticipation.

Ruby walked out shyly. “What do you think, Mama?”

Tears flooded Abigail’s eyes and she gasped placing one hand over her heart. Ruby had entered the changeroom her young daughter and had come out a beautiful woman. The crepe and lace gown seemed to have been made especially for her, its lemon accents complementing her features perfectly. The dress was very becoming and several women in the store stopped to admire the beautiful girl as she twirled her skirts in the long mirror.

“Oh Ma, this is truly the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen.” Joy shone from her delicate face, she stroked the beadwork on the bodice and ran a hand over the lace on the collar.

Miss Wilkins smoothed out the skirts, “We can take the hem up for you miss, with a few tucks here and there it’ll fit you snugly.” The woman grinned and slipped in a few pins. “It’s quite lovely, it’ll be more beautiful with ya golden hair done up all nice,” she stated, adjusting the hat slightly.

“Do you have any boots that would go with it?” Abigail asked.

“Yes’m, I’ll fetch some, ya be needing a shawl too?”

Ruby looked to her mother and Abigail smiled and nodded. "I think in lemon would be best."

Miss Wilkins nodded and was promptly back with a pair of delicate ivory boots with small heels and a pale lemon shawl. Ruby donned both and Miss Wilkins pinned up the hem. Ruby stood to full height and grinned at herself in the mirror. Abigail put her arm around her daughter's waist. "Darling, you are a beautiful young woman, your father is going to want to lock you in a tower guarded by a dragon when he sees you like this."

"Oh Mama, it's so expensive. We don't have to get it; I can wear the red one I tried on at the first shop. It was fine."

"Oh no Ruby, fine won't do. We need exquisite. Your pa has ordered me to spare no expense and actually this still comes in under the amount he suggested."

"Oh Ma, I've never had a gown like this before. I feel like a phony."

"Phony?" Abigail knitted her brows together.

"I feel like a country girl pretending to be something I'm not."

"Ruby, you are still the same lovely woman you were before you put the dress on. Don't you agree Mrs. Martin?" Abigail asked a neighbor who was standing nearby watching Ruby.

"Yes'm' Miss Ruby you make the dress, it don't make you, it were lovely in the window that's for sure but now it's, it's.... oh dear I don't have a word."

"Magnificent," exclaimed Mrs. Martin's daughter Esther who was in Lucy's class at school.

"That's it girl, Magnificent."

Ruby blushed, "Thank you Mrs. Martin," she smiled her thanks to Esther. Abigail nodded to Miss Wilkins, and she walked Ruby back in to help her carefully out of the gown.

"You gonna have that girl married off in no time if she keeps that up," Mrs. Martin declared.

Abigail grimaced, "Better not tell my husband that." Both women chuckled.



Lucy sat on her bed and chatted animatedly while Ruby dressed, with the help of Emily who would make sure nothing was forgotten, Sally danced around exclaiming over every piece.

In their bedroom Andrew fumbled with his tie. His hands shook and he swallowed over and over, he couldn't get the knot to sit straight, so he called on his wife to help. He'd opted not to wear his pastor's collar that evening, choosing a very handsome dark grey suit and emerald green tie and waistcoat instead. He'd only been permitted to glance at the color of the fabric, but Ruby wanted the gown to be a surprise. Andrew took a deep breath in a futile attempt to try to calm his nerves.

Abigail finished his tie and chuckled placing both hands on his shoulders, "If you are this bad on her sixteenth birthday how will you cope on her wedding day?"

"Ugggh," he groaned rolling his eyes, "don't even joke, Wife."

"What makes you so nervous? You've taken your daughter to supper many times on her birthday."

"This is very different, Abigail," he said sitting on the bed and patting the covers next to him, enticing her to sit down.

"How so?" Abigail asked, taking the offered seat.

"Well," he turned and looked at his wife, his eyes softened, and he smiled, processing his thoughts carefully. "I feel very deeply the transition of my daughter, from little girl who needs her pa to guide her, to independent woman on the precipice of beginning her own life. I just know she'll no longer need me in the same way and I'm not sure I'm ready to let her go. That girl is so special to me you know. She's the first girl I truly fell in love with, even before my feelings for you developed, that little girl, so vulnerable and delicate, dug her fingers deep inside my heart and there they remain.

"It's never occurred to me to love her less than my birth daughters. In fact, in some ways I love her even more fiercely as I feel so strongly the responsibility of being her father, since she lost her own. I don't want to let Rueben down. I know this should be him taking his daughter out instead of me, and I feel that privilege deeply. The fact she has loved me so fiercely as her pa, I've never taken it for

granted. I don't know why I feel this way about her, but I do. I am so proud of her my chest could burst out through my buttons if I'm not careful."

Abigail reached out to touch his cheek, too overcome with emotion herself to answer just yet. She had always known that his love for Ruby was special, but he'd never articulated it quite like that before. He had taken his role of father very seriously. At last, she found her voice, "I'm proud of you, Andrew. I'm proud of how you have loved Ruby and stepped up into the role of being her pa. I know that Rueben would be proud too. He wanted and loved Ruby so much, and I know he'd love to have been here to see his beautiful daughter become a woman. But I also know that he couldn't have picked a better man to be Ruby's pa if he couldn't be. He loved you, I know he did. He told me many times he'd never met a finer man, and neither have I. Ruby has been so blessed to have two wonderful fathers, one here and one in heaven."

Tears congregated in the corners of Andrew's shining eyes, his lips trembled a little, the emotion threatening to overwhelm him, one rogue tear escaped down his face and Abigail reached up to brush it off. They shared a kiss and held each other with their heads together for a time. At last Andrew sat back, took a deep breath and grinned. "Well, she'll be waiting." A rather unconvinced smile crossed his face.

"Do you have your gift?"

He patted his chest, "Yes, here in my top pocket. I have something special just from me also."

"You do?" Abigail asked incredulously. "What is it?"

"You will have to wait and see, my love," he grinned and brushed his wife's cheek gently with his finger, seemingly much calmer now. "I'm sure Ruby will show it to you in due course."

"Fine, keep your secret." She kissed him on the cheek, and they left the room to wait in the lounge for Ruby.

Abigail headed to the kitchen to put the coffeepot on and heard Andrew and Tommy gasp, she spun around as Ruby entered the room. Andrew stood back, examining the beautiful girl with shining eyes and a shake of the head, his grin stretched to its limit. Tommy sat in the armchair and shook his head. Andrew raised his

eyebrows and finally managed to say in a very raspy voice “Oh Ruby!” With Emily’s help she’d turned up her golden hair and adorned the lemon-colored hat with lace. Andrew gulped and reached out to his daughter, his eyes full of tears.

“What is it, Pa?”

“I just can’t believe what a fine young woman you have become, Ruby.” He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. “I can’t believe I’m the one who gets to be your pa, you don’t know how much that means to me!” Ruby beamed at his praise and took his outstretched arm. He managed to compose himself at last. “Shall we go, m’lady?”

“Oh Pa!” she said with a happy smile. Abigail and the other children farewelled the two. Andrew clucked to the horses, and they chatted as they drove the nearly half a mile to the restaurant for dinner.

“Good evening, Sir,” greeted the waiter in the restaurant who had known the family for some time, “And who is this beautiful lady you are escorting tonight?” He winked at Andrew.

“Good evening, Henry, you know my oldest daughter, Ruby? Today is her sixteenth birthday.”

Henry feigned surprise, “Miss Ruby? Is that you? I could have sworn you were escorting a princess, Pastor Collins.”

Ruby blushed and Andrew beamed, “I am!” he pulled out Ruby’s chair for her to sit on.

“Oh Pa, all this fuss really isn’t necessary...”

Andrew stopped her. “No Ruby it isn’t nearly enough.” He reached into his breast pocket as he sat down and pulled out a velvet box. “This is from your mother and I,” he slid it across the table to her.

Ruby gasped, “Pa, it’s so beautiful.” She fingered the ivory and ruby cameo and pinned in on her dress. “It’s so expensive looking Pa, how could you afford it?”

“Yes, it is very beautiful and very old. It was my mother’s. She sent it to me some time ago and I’ve been keeping it for you for your sixteenth birthday.”

“Shouldn’t you have kept it for Lucy, Pa? After all she’s your mother’s true granddaughter. Your real daughter.” Ruby lowered her eyes and traced the pattern on the tablecloth with one finger.

Andrew took her hand then, “Look at me, Daughter,” she obliged him, shyly looking up at her father. “I have loved you from the first day you were born. Even before I loved your mother, I loved the tiny wee girl who was so helpless, who’d survived the biggest tragedy a person could face even before you were born. Your strength and passion right from a young age have impressed me. You ARE my real daughter, Ruby, the daughter of my heart if not my body,” he paused and squeezed her hand. “One of the most treasured moments of my life was on the train to our honeymoon when you called me Pa for the first time. From that moment on I knew I had a great treasure that I had to look after and it was more precious to me than all the jewels, in all the vaults, in all the world.

“Ruby, I love all of my children very deeply as you know, but I feel a responsibility for you that I never felt for the others. Like your pa is trusting me with your care and it’s a responsibility I take very seriously. You are so much like him, and he would be so proud of you. I know I can never take his place in your heart, but the fact that you choose to love me and call me Pa is something I’ll never take for granted. Getting to call you Daughter is such a delight to me. Thank you, Ruby.”

A tear rolled down Ruby’s cheek, she was so touched by his words. She came around and hugged him. “Oh Pa! I love you so much. I will always love my pa in heaven even though I never met him. But I know if he could have picked anyone in the world besides him to raise me it would have been you. Ma told me he loved you like a brother and thought you were the best man he knew. He was right and I’m so proud to be your daughter. Thank you for loving me all these years, I know you didn’t have to, but you chose to, and that means more to me than you’ll ever know. Thank you, Pa, for teaching me what love is, for teaching me the Word of God and for being my best friend. I love you so much!”

She kissed him on the cheek, and they held each other for a few moments oblivious to any watchful eyes in the restaurant. After

a time, Ruby hastened back to her side of the table, and they enjoyed their meal.

They chatted happily while they ate, “So, darling, how is your last semester going for you? I feel like we’ve all been so focused on your cousin’s baby, and I haven’t had a chance to speak to you about school lately.”

Ruby happily explained all she’d been studying, and she and Andrew shared a lively conversation about her learning and her hopes as the semester wound down.

“I’m looking forward to you being on campus next year with us.”

“I can’t wait, I’m most anxious to be a teacher.”

“I know, darling, and you’ll be a wonderful one, I so admire your love for children and how caring and compassionate you are. The time you’ve put into helping Lucy with her algebra, has been very impressive.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, “It’s not easy, she’s hard work sometimes.”

Andrew chuckled, “You have the patience of a saint, darling, you’ll be well equipped to teach your own ‘Lucys’ when the time comes.”

“I hope they are much easier to teach than she is, she’s so stubborn.” Ruby frowned.

“And I wouldn’t have her any other way! Or you, darling.” Andrew grinned.

Ruby laughed, but nodded, Lucy sure was challenging at times but she was loved fiercely by her family just the way she was.

Just as they finished their dessert and began to drink their coffee Andrew presented Ruby with his final gift.

“This is just from me. I want to give each of my daughters something very meaningful so they know their pa will always be with them, no matter how old they get. You’ll always be my ‘first born,’ Ruby, and so utterly precious, but I also want you to remember your pa in heaven who I also thought was the very best of men.” He opened another small box and took out a signet ring and gave it to Ruby. It

was gold with a heart on top and a tiny red stone in the corner. On it in very small letters was engraved, *'I will always be watching over you.'*

“Turn it over.” He said and Ruby looked underneath the heart and there were the words, *'love your earthly pa and your heavenly pa.'*

“Oh Pa,” said Ruby, too overcome with emotion to say anything else. She swallowed and responded. “Thank you, it’s so beautiful and special, I’ll wear it always and keep you near to me no matter where I go and thank you for always helping me remember my other pa. It’s wonderful to have the love of both of you.” Andrew just nodded but he felt the words embed deep in his soul.

It was a very emotional night for Andrew, he forever treasured the memory of it in his heart. It was a special tradition he’d repeat with each of his girls, a moment of sentimentality for the usually jovial man. He showed his girls how they deserved to be loved, it would take very special men to win their hearts after his example.

Four



Luke

Andrew and Luke didn't get much of a vacation that summer as they prepared for the new school year. There was to be two hundred and fifty students the coming fall semester, the biggest class they'd ever had. Ruby would be among the sixty-five students taking their teacher training. There would be a hundred and ten trainee pastors, fifty-five medical students and nurses, and twenty men in the brand-new law school.

"It's looking good, Murph," Andrew said to the head carpenter building the new large dining hall.

"Yep, we're on schedule to finish on time," he took a long slurp from his canteen. "Two 'ouses left to build and the office block, yep, well on schedule," the proud man said.

Luke nodded his approval; he hadn't said much as they observed the building sites. His furrowed brow, tired looking eyes and stooped shoulders gave away the level of stress he was feeling. "Very good Murph, we'll leave you to it," he said flatly, and with a nod the carpenter donned his hat again and headed back to his workers.

"Luke, I think it's time we hired some more help for the administrative tasks, it's getting to be too much for just the two of us."

"It'll be fine once the semesther beginth..." The rest of Luke's words were little more than gibberish and he clutched the nearby post for support, his body went weak, and his knees gave out. Andrew

reached for him and knelt clinging tightly to his brother-in-law's limp body.

"Help!" he called out to the carpenters. "I need help over here." He turned to Luke, removed his collar and undid his top button, trying to revive him.

"Olsen, get a doctor!" Yelled Murph. The man leapt on a waiting horse and galloped across to the campus clinic. Murph and another man helped Luke up onto a plank of wood and as carefully as they could they carried the Reverend across to the clinic, on the makeshift stretcher.

Abigail and Lydia were summoned, and the two women clung to each other and wept in the corner of the room while two summer medical students tended to Luke, they moved aside as the doctor from the town clinic approached. "What's the status, doctors?" he asked the young trainees giving them the respect and trust as colleagues.

"We believe he's had a stroke, Doctor," said one of young men, the other man's nod confirmed his agreement with the diagnosis. Doctor Price merely nodded and went right to work. He poked and prodded at Luke, but the pale face didn't move. Andrew and Abigail stood each side of Lydia in support as she watched her lifeless husband undergo the examination. Finally, the doctor finished and cleared his throat to address everyone in the room. All held their breath and stood to attention to await the news.

"I believe the young doctors are correct, he appears to have had a stroke. I cannot tell how severe it is until he wakes up. The longer he is out the more severe it's likely to be..." He stopped midsentence as he heard a groan come from Luke, who fought to open his eyes.

"Thank the Lord," said Lydia moving to rush to her husband's bedside, but the Doc stopped her.

"Mrs. Anderson, the reverend is still very weak, he could have a great deal of damage from the stroke, so we don't want to go rushing around or rushing him until we know the severity." Lydia gulped and nodded, her knees buckled beneath her, and Andrew lifted her into the nearby chair. The doctor tried to speak to Luke, there was no

response, he was awake but stared blindly into space as though he saw and heard nothing.

Andrew, with one hand on Lydia's shoulder, quietly prayed and Abigail sat next to her holding her hand. At last, she mustered her strength. "What is the worst-case scenario, Doctor?"

He looked at her, his furrowed brow and sad eyes betrayed his reluctance to give her the news.

"Please, Doctor, I want to know so I can be prepared!"

The doctor nodded, "Mrs. Anderson worst case scenario is your husband has severe brain damage and may be in this state for the rest of his life." His kind eyes showed that he felt deeply for her and the situation, tears ran down Lydia's face and she nodded and swallowed.

"And the best case?" she said in a small voice

"If your husband comes out of this state soon, he may suffer only minor damage."

"And what would that look like?" Lydia asked determinedly, her chin set stubbornly.

"Well," the doctor stroked his short beard slowly, choosing his words very carefully, "I can't say for sure as it's different for every person, but it may mean he walks with a limp, loses the full use of the right side of his body, slurs his speech and suffers from weakness forever, it really is hard to say. Whatever the case there are treatment options that can help but there is no cure and I'm afraid most of those ailments will be permanent."

Lydia listened carefully and squeezed Abigail's hand tightly and choking back the lump in her throat said resolutely, "Whatever happens I'll be right here beside him, with the Lord's help."

"We will be here for you, too." Andrew squeezed both of Lydia's shoulders.

Abigail nodded her agreement, "Absolutely," she said. Watching her beloved brother lying helpless on the bed was heartbreaking.

Later that day Luke woke out of his trancelike state and the doctor was able to begin to assess the damage the stroke had done.

“It was not a major stroke,” he said at last. Lydia exhaled loudly and Andrew squeezed her arm, his deep relief etched into the lines on his face. “However, it appears that there has been significant permanent damage to the right side of his body and, while I’m confident he will retain some use of his arm and relearn to speak, it will take some time and therapy and perhaps even specialist help. I’m afraid it will be a long road to recovery, Mrs. Anderson and could be quite costly. Don’t expect a full recovery, I’m afraid he’ll live with some of the effects for the rest of his life.”

Lydia, stroking Luke’s forehead, nodded. “I understand, Doctor,” his words began to sink in.

Doctor Price left the room. Luke still could not speak and when he tried, muffled noises was all he could manage. He seemed distressed, but Lydia’s quiet reassurance calmed him.

Lydia kissed Luke’s cheek, “Excuse me for a moment, my love,” she motioned to the other couple to leave the room with her, leaving Luke in the hands of the nurse.

She led them across campus into Luke’s office and asked them to sit down. Her practical nature took over then, she was aware Luke had a long road ahead of him and she didn’t want his life’s work to be brought to a screeching halt.

“We need to talk and make some plans,” she said, “but first things first, I’d like to pray.” The trio bowed their heads and Lydia thanked the Lord that He was with them, that He had spared Luke’s life and that Luke had friends and family to support his progress.

She asked the Lord to heal her husband if that was His will or to give them the strength and wisdom and means to know the next steps and how to help him. In the meantime, she knew and prayed the college, and the ministry would continue unhindered, and the Lord would guide them.

After saying ‘Amen’ she turned to Andrew, relying on the Lord to give her the words and wisdom, she spoke. “Andrew, I don’t know how long Luke will be unable to carry out his role here, but I know for absolute certain that he would want you to take over as principal of the college. Would you do that?”

Andrew nodded. "With the Lord's help I will," he said without a moment's hesitation.

"Good." Lydia continued, "Next, we'll need to get some more help around here, to take over your role and support you. Did you and Luke have anyone in mind? Have many applications come through?"

"Some," Andrew said, "most have little experience, or we just didn't feel right about them. We weren't worried as we thought we had plenty of time, but it's rather urgent now I'm afraid. I'll need help to get through the summer and get everything done in time for the semester. It was already a big ask for Luke and I and the small staff we have on here."

Lydia nodded. "We will all pitch in wherever we can, but we really need to get an experienced pastor in here to help out with running the place."

"I'll send some letters tomorrow, and an urgent telegram to the seminary in Victory. The Lord will provide the right people, He always does!" Andrew nodded gratefully, squeezing Abigail's hand.

Abigail silently prayed that the Lord would do just that, that He would lead them to the ideal person. Suddenly, her eyes lit up and she leapt out of her chair. "What about Matty?" she exclaimed.

"Matty?" Andrew frowned deeply and he stroked his chin. Then a shine appeared in his eyes, and he curled his mouth up into a wide smile, leapt from his own chair and embraced his wife. "Yes of course Matty is the ideal man. I'm sure he'll come, even temporarily I'll write him straight away." Abigail smiled at her husband's exuberance, Andrew turned to leave to get to the task but caught himself stopped and added, "If the Lord wills it of course." The two women grinned to his retreating figure.

Five



A Difficult Road

“Oh Ma, I hate seeing Pa like this.” Luke’s eldest daughter commented, looking up from her knitting while her mother exercised her husband’s muscles the way Dr Price had instructed her too. “He was always so strong and brave.”

“He’s still that man, Abi, that’s never going to change.”

“Do you think he’ll ever recover?” Katherine asked from the corner, where she sat reading.

Lydia stood up and stretched her back, pulling the covers back up over Luke’s body. He mumbled at her in an attempt to communicate and she bent over and kissed his forehead. “Rest my love.” She said, then turned to lead her daughters from the room. “I believe he will,” she said as they closed the door.

“How do you know, Ma?” Abi asked. “How are you so positive?”

“Because I know your pa, he’s strong and determined and he will do whatever it takes to come back to us.”

“But Ma, he’s not improving, it’s been weeks,” added Katherine.

“I know, darling, but Doctor Price said it would be a long difficult road, it may take some time.”

“What if he never recovers?” The younger girl looked at her as they turned to start making supper.

“Then I won’t stop loving him or caring for him, no matter what happens, whether that be weeks, months, years or decades. I married your father, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part and I intend to do just that. I know he’s in there, I see it in his eyes. You just have to keep having faith, keep praying.”

Abi nodded. “I hope so Ma, this little one needs his grandpa!” she placed her hand on her very round abdomen. “Now I better get home and get Charlie his supper.”

Lydia kissed her oldest daughter on the cheek. “Okay darling, try not to overdo it, Charlie will be happy with leftovers, your baby’s health is important too.”

Abi smiled and embraced her younger sister. “I know, Ma, I’ve got the soup ready to reheat and some bread I made this morning.”

“Perfect darling, that will be just fine. You need to rest more.”

“Ma, I’m fine.”

“You’ve been here every day helping me with your father, you barely get off your feet these days, Dr Price insisted you rest more remember, there is no shame in that.”

“Okay Ma. I’ll try.”

“Good girl, Katherine can help me from now on, you stay home and get ready for your baby, he or she will be here any day now.”

Abi grinned and stroked her abdomen, “I know, Charlie is so excited.”

“They are all that way, darling.” They chuckled as she left the house.

Despite their diligent care Luke’s progress was slow. Doctor Price visited regularly and tried to give the ladies as much advice as he could, but Luke needed specialist care, the kind he could only get in a hospital and that was well beyond what Lydia or anyone in the family could afford, especially seeing as how Luke was now not drawing an income.

Everyday Andrew and Abigail met with Lydia and her family around Luke's bedside, and they prayed and read scripture together. God was their rock, and they sought their comfort from Him.

Lydia regularly spoke to Luke about all that was happening and while he was unable to speak Lydia knew he could understand her. He tried hard to communicate with her but couldn't do much more than grunt, although ever so slowly he became more coherent and after a few weeks he was able to whisper a few words. They would prop him up into a sitting position and he enjoyed being read to, his eyes would sparkle as his children read to him from the scriptures.



"I'm so thankful to have your help, Ruby, I'm sorry you aren't getting much of a summer vacation." Andrew smiled wryly, looking up from the paperwork he was doing. Ruby had spent weeks helping him sort and file and transcribe letters and handle enrolments. She was bright and capable, and he was grateful for the hours she'd put in. "I still wish you'd let me pay you, darling."

"Pa, I don't need to be paid, I'm happy to help you. We are all helping."

"I know that, but you've taken on the lions share."

"Pa, I want to help you, you know I like being busy."

Andrew stood and walked to her, "Well I appreciate it more than you know, darling." He stroked her cheek. "Now let's take a break, shall we see if your ma has any fresh coffee on?"

"Sure Pa." She took her father's offered arm, and they walked the short distance home together.

Andrew and Ruby sat with Abigail chatting over their coffee and cookies when the door burst open and Lucy stormed in, the door slammed shut loudly behind her but not before a gust of wind blew several items around the room.

"Lucy." Ruby scolded.

"Ooops. Sorry," Lucy grimaced.

Andrew shook his head and smiled wryly, Lucy couldn't be accused of being delicate and graceful. "What brings you home at such a pace, Luce? I thought you were going fishing?"

"Oh, I am Pa, I left my rod and bucket with Timothy Rider, but I went by the post office, and I thought you'd want this." She placed an envelope on the table before them. "Well, gotta go, I'm hoping to get enough catfish for supper." The girl grinned widely and stomped out the door in the same manor she had entered.

Abigail laughed, "That girl," she exclaimed, rescuing the two dish clothes that had blown off the counter.

Andrew reached for the envelope, "It's from Matty," he smiled, standing up and walking over to Abigail. "Oh, I hope this is the answer to our prayers."

"Open it Pa," Sally said from her spot in the corner, where she was reading.

"Okay." Andrew opened the envelope and began to read aloud.

Dear Andrew

It is so good to hear from you again and I thank you for your letter and your job offer. It really came as an answer to our prayers. For some time, I've been feeling like my job here is no longer justified. The seven pastors I now oversee really don't need me anymore and I wrote the college in Victory recently to ask them my next step, they replied saying they would give it some thought. Susan and I have been praying for months that God would lead us to a new opportunity, and I believe this is ideal. I know she'd be most anxious to spend time with Abigail and Lydia again. So, we are delighted to accept. I'll write a formal letter to the college board too, but I wanted to write to you personally. It will a pleasure to work alongside you once more, my friend. We will arrive the 8th of August and be ready to begin work right away, I understand your need for urgent help.

Luke remains in our thoughts and prayers daily, please pass on our love and support to Lydia and the family.

Yours in Christ

Matty.

“They’re coming,” Andrew grinned, and the couple embraced tightly. “I’m so looking forward to working with Matty again, I can’t think of a better person for this role, he’ll be a competent lecturer. He has a relaxed teaching style and the mentoring work he’s being doing will have been excellent training.”

Abigail grinned and gripped his hand tightly, her eyes sparkling. “I’m so grateful that God works all things out for us. I could never even imagine all the ways He plans our lives. I’m glad He’s in control.”

Andrew nodded and swallowed, he too was so thankful for God’s guidance and provision so evident in their lives on many occasions. “The college board have already allocated the house next door for the new Deputy Principal’s use.”

Abigail and Ruby both grinned and clapped. “Susan will be right next door. What an extra blessing.”

Lydia was delighted at the news and Andrew read Matty’s letter to Luke and the man’s eyes lit up, he was unable to speak any legible words, but he rose his hand in a motion that suggested he was pointing to the heavens. “Yes Luke, we’ll give thanks to the Lord for His answers to our prayers.” Andrew did just that. Placing one hand on his brother-in-law’s shoulder he prayed a prayer of deep thankfulness that the college would continue to run, that Matty and Susan would be coming to help, and that Luke could just focus on his recovery and his work would continue without him. Luke’s eye shone and he tried to nod his head. He smiled from the left side of his face and was able to painfully murmur what sounded like ‘Matty.’ Luke’s approval meant a lot to Andrew.



Abigail’s baby boy arrived four weeks before the semester was due to start. Timothy Charles was the delight of their lives. He brought much sunshine and happiness to a dark time. Luke lit up when he met his grandson for the first time when the baby was a few

days old. Lydia climbed up on the bed next to Luke and Abi placed the baby in her arms.

“His name is Timothy, Pa, just like Pastor Timothy from the Bible, and Charles after his pa.”

“Ti... fy” Luke managed to squeeze past his stiff lips and his eyes shone his delight in the boy. A tear ran down the man’s weathered cheek.

Abi brought Timothy to visit her father regularly and he always brightened when she placed the small boy in his arms. That little boy was instrumental in his grandfather’s recovery, but it was bittersweet for Lydia. She so wanted to spend time just loving her new grandson and desperately longed to have shared it with Luke, but so much of her time was taken up in caring for her husband, so she relished the small moments she could get with Timmy.



Timothy was five days old when the Bourkes arrived on the stagecoach. They’d been travelling for the better part of a week and were extremely wary, so Andrew didn’t linger with his greetings, he simply embraced his friends and helped them put their baggage on the borrowed wagon

Abigail and Ruby had cleaned up the house for the Bourke family and added new curtains and rugs throughout. The college paid Luke’s son Samuel and Tommy Collins to clean the property around the house and fill the small lean to with firewood.

The Collins family were out front ready to greet their friends. They didn’t linger, instead after a round of hugs and welcomes, they left the family to settle into their new home.

Matty stepped into the job of Deputy Principal almost seamlessly and Andrew was delighted to have him. He was also to be the head lecturer at the seminary college and was eagerly developing his syllabus for the coming semester. A huge burden lifted off Andrew’s shoulders. Matty was more than just competent and after a few days of training on the specifics of running the college he

needed little help. As a result, Andrew felt confident that he really could do his job. By the time the semester started Matty had firmly established himself in the role, it was hard to believe he was new at it, he seemed to be made for the job.



Thanksgiving weekend issued in the first real snow of the year. A few skiffs here and there had blown through, but the Collins family awoke on the Saturday of that weekend to a blanket of white. After their chores were done, they all piled out with many of the other children that lived on campus and enjoyed the fresh powdery snow. Emily helped the small children build a snowman and Tommy and Lucy led the others in a wild snowball fight. The two pastors took time out to join in the fun even managing to entice Lydia, Susan and Abigail out to cheer them on briefly. Soon red-cheeked and sparkly-eyed children piled into the Collins home along with all their parents for their thanksgiving feast.

The joyful day was brought to an abrupt end when Lydia ran over to tell them Luke had taken a turn for the worst. Thanksgiving festivities immediately forgotten for the sake of family; they began to pray.

A week later Lydia called the family to a meeting with the doctor in the large meeting room on campus. Doctor Price explained the situation to them all. Lydia toyed with her coffee cup and swallowed repeatedly, struggling to come to terms with the doctor's words.

"Thanks to the round the clock, dedicated care of you womenfolk the reverend has beaten the fever he contracted but I'm sorry to say he is very weak. I'm afraid it's hindered the progress he was making, albeit slow.

"What are you saying, Doctor?" Andrew asked on Lydia's behalf. He reached over and gripped her hand supportively.

Doctor Price sighed loudly, and his kind eyes expressed his deep sadness. "It means there is nothing more I can do for him in a

small-town clinic. He needs specialist treatment that no one here is equipped to provide.”

Lydia gasped. There was no they would be able to find the money needed for specialist care.

“What do you suggest?” Andrew asked, not so easily put off.

“There is a new program, still rather experimental, at the hospital at Springdale. It seems to be showing great progress for patients in the reverend’s condition.”

Lydia prayerfully considered the doctor’s words. “What would that involve, Doctor?” she asked, finding her voice at last

“Well,” the doctor scratched at one of his bushy sideburns and raised his eyebrows, “he would be admitted to the ward there with a dozen or so other patients who’d also suffered strokes. The doctors have a series of treatments and therapies that they administer to these people. It would require many months of treatment, perhaps up to a year, but most of the patients are showing significant recovery with the ongoing treatment. I’m confident that the reverend is an excellent candidate for the program.”

Lydia nodded. “And how much does this program cost?” she hesitantly asked, fearing the answer.

“Well, being an experimental program, it is not cheap I’m afraid,” said the kind doctor, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. “I’m not totally sure how much it would cost but I’m expecting it would be in the vicinity of eighty dollars per month, by the time you factor in round the clock care and food, and treatment etc.”

Lydia nearly collapsed. “Where would I find that kind of money? Why, I’d need a thousand dollars to complete the whole years therapy, and to pay for a hotel for myself.” Her determination crumbled then, and tears rolled freely down her cheeks. “There is just no way we can get that kind of money, Doctor.” Abigail put her arm around her sister-in-law and rubbed her back.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Anderson, truly I am,” the doctor said gripping her arm.

Lydia wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, tucked it back inside her sleeve and took a deep breath. Her brown eyes still rimmed

with tears, she looked up at the doctor, “What if we don’t get him this treatment.” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Then I don’t expect there would be any change,” he said matter-of-factly. Lydia hung her head and began to weep again, burying her face in her hands, her usual stubborn resolve shattered by the overwhelming circumstances. Abigail clung to her, and Andrew showed the doctor out.

Lydia poured her heart out to them that evening. “It’s Luke’s only hope of recovery and there is nothing I can do!” she wept. “Even if I asked my brothers for help, we couldn’t scrape together that much money from my parent’s estate.”

“Could we use some money from Bonnie’s bequest?” Abigail asked.

“No!” said Lydia determinedly, “that wouldn’t be right. That money is for the college and Luke would not want us using it for anything else. Besides, there isn’t very much left now, not nearly enough, and we need to use it wisely.”

Andrew nodded, “We will just have to pray about it, in my experience God answers prayers in the most extraordinary ways. If He wants Luke to get this experimental treatment, then He will provide the money. We must pray, Lydia.” And they did. Sitting in a circle, Lydia, Andrew, Abigail and the Bourkes held hands and spent time petitioning God on Luke’s behalf.

Six



Miners Plain

Two weeks after Thanksgiving Lucy came skipping in from school with the mail.

“Pa!” she called, absentmindedly forgetting he was at the college until supper time most nights, “Ma, where’s Pa?”

“Where he normally is, Lucy,” Abigail laughed at her exuberant daughter. Her sisters entered the house at a much more leisurely pace, removing coats and hanging them on their hooks.

Lucy thought for a bit then grinned. “Oh right,” and she skipped back out the door as excitedly as she came in, “Just gonna take him some mail,” she threw back over her shoulder.

Abigail smiled and shook her head, feeling as though a wild tempest had just blown in and back out again. She chuckled and poured glasses of milk for her two less wild daughters. Tommy had not yet returned from his job at a nearby ranch.

Andrew came home arm in arm with his daughter. He had a very bemused look on his face.

“What is it, Husband?” Abigail queried.

“Lucy brought me a letter,” he said, helping the girl off with her coat as a gentleman does. He hung her coat on the hook.

“Oh, who is it from?” Letters did not normally cause Andrew to leave work early in the afternoon.

“Henry.”

“Henry?” Abigail tilted her head to the side and raised her eyebrows sharply. “Your brother?”

Andrew embraced and kissed his wife and still holding her around the waist, he nodded, “Yes.”

“Well, what does it say?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t opened it yet.”

“What are you waiting for, Pa?” asked Sally, walking over to look at the envelope in her father’s hands. “Open it.”

Andrew frowned. “I’m not sure I want to!” In all the years they had been married Andrew had received regular letters from his mother, but he had never once had a letter from his brother. They hadn’t parted well; Henry had never understood how Andrew would give up a prosperous life to run off chasing some fairytale.

Andrew’s mother had brought them up with her faith, but Henry wanted no part of it. He didn’t believe in God and was a cruel and heartless man. He’d had three wives and was vindictive and unfaithful to all of them. He was now on his own and had never had any children.

Henry’s manner was part of the reason that Andrew was happy to walk away from everything he’d known, there was little there that could be called love. Thus, he feared what could be in that letter. He really wasn’t sure he wanted to know. It could only possibly be bad news.

“Open it, Andrew, you have to sooner or later, so you might as well do it now.” Abigail encouraged him putting a hand on his arm.

He nodded. “Girls, can you go to your rooms and do your homework, your Ma and I need some time alone!” The three girls obliged; they had been raised to know there were things they just didn’t need to be a part of. Lucy led them away to do their father’s bidding.

Andrew took a deep breath and slipped open the envelope and began to read Henry’s brief note.

Andrew,

Mother is gravely ill. Her last wish is for you to come home for Christmas with your family. Doc says she's only got a few months.

Henry.

Andrew fell to his knees, dropping the note on the floor he buried his head in his hands and wept. Abigail knelt beside him, wrapping her arms around him and held him as he cried. She knew how much Andrew loved his mother. It had hurt him greatly to leave her, but she'd insisted he follow God's call. She often told him just how very proud of him she was that he had given up everything to follow God. He knew her prayers covered him daily, and even though he had not seen her in many years he always felt a close bond with his beloved mother, and now she was dying, and she was asking to see him.

Finally, he stopped weeping and, standing up, he took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Abby, we must go to her, I cannot let Mother die without having a chance to say goodbye and tell her how much I love her. She has always longed to meet our children and I want to give her that wish," he said through trembling lips.

"Do you think we can?" Abigail asked.

"We'll make it work; we need only be gone a few weeks. I'm confident now that Matty and the other faculty members can run the place over the Christmas break."

"Okay, make the arrangements," Abigail agreed.



Ruby had been excused for a week of school, so she could accompany her family on the proviso that she complete a paper while she was gone and post it back to her professor and keep up with her reading

Tommy accompanied them too leaving with the news that his job was coming to an end. The ranch owner and his family had decided to sell up and move further west where they could purchase

a large ranch at a smaller cost. The new owner of the land in Olivers Grove planned to sow the farm in crops and had four sons of his own. Unfortunately, Tommy would no longer be required. He remained hopeful and prayed diligently that the Lord would provide another option on their return.

A week before Christmas they boarded the train and headed south to Springsdale. It would take two whole days by train to get there and then a trip by carriage to Miners Plain, providing the weather didn't hinder their progress.

After traveling for two days the train arrived in Springsdale, the Collins family gathered their possessions and headed for the rather elaborate carriage that was waiting for them. Drawn by two stunning white horses, the carriage was black and trimmed with gold tassels, the seats covered in fine red velvet and the footmen dressed in stiff black uniforms. A crest on the door of the carriage said 'Collins House' in fine golden calligraphy and featured the silhouette of a wild horse, with its front feet in the air.

Abigail gulped, acutely aware of her clothing, feeling for the first time rather shabby and under dressed. Andrew arranged for the footman to drop them at a nearby hotel so they could freshen up after the trip. The footmen merely nodded; it wasn't an uncommon request for those of the upper class. They took the family promptly to the hotel and Andrew got a room so they could have a bath, clean up and arrive in style.

The hotel was something to behold. Springsdale, while not as big as Victory, nor as old, was an extremely affluent city. Most people there had struck it rich in silver mines and the buildings boasted their opulence. There was no time to explore their surroundings much to the children's disgust. Their wide eyes betrayed their wonder as they climbed back into the waiting wagon and headed towards Andrew's childhood home. Abigail trembled and squirmed on the velvet seat, a bundle of nerves.

Andrew sensed her feelings and squeezed her hand, whispering in her ear, “Relax, Mother’s gonna love you, how could she not?” Abigail tried to relax but her nerves just would not settle.

Four miles out of Springsdale they pulled off the main road and entered through a large ornate archway onto a neat cobblestone road. The peeling paint and faded words on the sign hanging from the arch belied its age. Abigail gasped and the children looked at their father with wide-eyed wonder, Andrew blushed deeply and looked at his feet, swallowing several times. The sign bore the same crest that was painted on the carriage and below was written:

*Miners Plain,
NH Collins Esq.*

But the ‘NH Collins’ was crossed out with a single paint stroke and below it in an obviously different hand had been hastily painted ‘HM Collins Esq.’

“Andrew,” Abigail said, her eyes as big as saucers. “What does that mean?”

Andrew swallowed, closed his eyes and sighed; trying to get hold of his feelings. Finally, he opened them and in a rather resigned voice he explained, “Miners Plain isn’t a town Abigail.... well, it is a town, but it’s built on my father’s estate.”

Abigail grasped for words; her head swirled. She took a deep breath, “Your family owns this entire town?”

Andrew just nodded. He looked sad, ashamed of the extravagant wealth.

“I told you my father made it rich mining the area and so he did. He purchased a very small struggling town which then began to grow on his property and many people came to live here and farm here, all of course, after a time, paying exorbitant taxes to my family,” he said through gritted teeth.

The children sat in stunned silence as they travelled the cobblestoned streets looking out the window, passing homesteads

and men milking cows in weathered barns and feeding pigs in muddy fields. Each person courteously tipped their hats as they passed.

Tommy was the first to find his voice, his eyes as big as saucers, he turned to his father. "So, are you saying, that these people work for you?"

"Not me, Son!" Andrew replied quickly and rather tersely. "For my brother, I want nothing to do with this life."

At last, the carriage pulled to a stop in the well-groomed front yard of an enormous homestead. While Andrew referred to it as a homestead, it could more rightly have been called a palace. Worthington Estate where Rueben's sister lived was a mere shack compared to this grand home.

Andrew sighed as they pulled up. "Well, here we are." His cheeks were red hot with burning embarrassment. The children's eyes traveled over the high windows and little balconies, the detailed trim and the gabled windows. Beautifully sculpted hedges ran around the wide courtyard and right in the middle sat a large fountain. Water streamed from the mouths of two cheeky cherubs carved in granite. Golden trim ran around the wide bowl where the water pooled in a large artificial pond below.

"You grew up here, Pa?" Emily exclaimed, drinking in all the sights of this exquisite house. Of all the girls she was the most impressed, Emily believed she could quite happily live this kind of lifestyle. Andrew just nodded, shuffling uncomfortably. He made no eye-contact with his family, embarrassed by all the luxury, especially having traveled past many earthen-floored and thatched-roofed houses.

Abigail marveled at all her husband had sacrificed for the ministry, standing outside his childhood home she finally understood why he had so often despaired about being able to provide for his family. After all the riches he'd once possessed poverty was a hard pill to swallow, but he'd never complained, just faithfully continued on serving the Lord.

They were met at the door by Shelly, the house girl and she showed them into the wide parlor. Bidding them to wait she wandered off up a long hallway. Andrew looked down at his boots, but his children explored the room with their eyes. Deep green brocade curtains hung in perfectly sculpted folds from the windows, golden cords hung down at their sides, ready to be tied around them when opened. The walls were covered in detailed wallpaper featuring flowers and leaves running right up to meet the high ceilings. At least ten lamps hung on the walls decorated in highly polished brass and the flickering of the flames gave the room a rather moody and gothic feel. The sparsely furnished room featured a large square marble table in the middle adorned with a large bouquet of imported flowers.

A rather gangly looking man walked towards them, sloppily dressed in evening coat and mismatched trousers. The buttons opened exposing the pale purple waistcoat, woven with lemon-colored stripes.

Abigail eyed the man carefully and concluded this must be Henry, their resemblance was obvious despite the difference in stature. Both men had strong jaws and dark eyes, stubbornly unruly cropped hair and both had the same aristocratic nose. As soon as the man opened his mouth Abigail realized that looks was where their similarities stopped. He paused before them, one hand in his pocket the other holding a cigarette still smoking between two fingers. He stood with one leg askew and leaned heavily on the other one. "Oh, you came," he spat, pursing his lips. "Well, you know where your room is, and your children can sleep in the orchid suite. Get the maid to make up the room." He put the cigarette to his lips and inhaled deeply, coughing twice he turned to walk away, breathing a large plume of smoke from his mouth and nostrils.

"Henry," Andrew called to his back. "Don't you want to meet my family? Even you have better manners than that."

Henry shrugged and walked back to them, extinguished his cigarette by rubbing it onto the table and threw the remainder into the flower bouquet. Abigail frowned at the soot and ash that fell from the table and rested on Henry's shoe. He crossed his arms across his chest and raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips indifferently while

Andrew introduced first Abigail and then his children, they stood back shyly, stunned by the reception. This was not how one was usually received by family.

Sally clung to Abigail's skirt, burying her face in the folds of fabric. Only Tommy reached out to shake Henry's hand with a "Howd'youdo Uncle Henry, a pleasure to meet you," he had a wide smile on his face.

Henry stepped forward and received Tommy's manly handshake, "That boy is a credit to you Andrew," said Henry gruffly. "You must be proud of your son."

"Yes, I am of course," grinned Andrew, "I'm very proud of all of my children."

"Shame so many of 'ems girls," Henry scoffed gesturing at Ruby, Lucy and Emily who stood supportively close to each other. "Girls ain't much use, just end up costing you money."

The girls hung their head in shame.

"I am not ashamed to have four daughters, Henry, they are beautiful, confident, intelligent girls who could run circles around you or I, and I'll thank you to keep your opinions of my children to yourself." Fire flashed in his dark eyes, and he clenched his jaw tightly. Lucy observed him curl his hand up tightly and then release it quickly.

"I see you still have the same old temper, Andrew, being a minister hasn't changed that! And to be truly correct, you only have three daughters, that one's not yours." Henry said smirking and gesturing towards Ruby. Abigail glanced at her, she stood her ground proudly and didn't even flinch. "Though I see she's wearing mother's cameo." Ruby subconsciously reached her hand up to the cameo and gasped quietly. "I bet she feels all her Christmases have come at once, well I can assure you she's not getting any of Mother's money!" She hung her head then and Abigail noticed her close her eyes and heard her sharp inhale. Lucy uncharacteristically reached a hand out to grip her sister's in support.

Andrew seethed. "That's enough!" he shouted slamming his hand down on the table, causing more ash to fall on the floor and the vase to jump wildly and teeter for a moment before crashing down

and pouring murky water and flowers all over the parlor floor with a loud ‘thud.’

Abigail and the girls jumped in fright at this uncharacteristic display of aggression from their usually mildly mannered father. He stepped forward to eyeball his brother who stood half a foot taller than him. Andrew glared at Henry and screwed up his face, the anger burning in his eyes and both hands tightly clenched. “I did not come here to have my family and my daughter, insulted.” He took a deep breath and began to calm himself. “Now, if you could kindly tell Mother we are here, I shall get my wife and children settled and we shall be in to see her presently.”

Henry shrugged, coughed twice and turned on his heels and left.

Andrew was visibly shaken, he turned to his family, his lips trembled, and his eyes softened, “I’m... I’m sorry,” he stuttered contritely. He looked at Ruby and reached out to cup her chin. He smiled at her kindly, he looked into her blue eyes and saw the pain glistening back at him. “Pay him no mind, darling. You know you are my daughter in every sense of the word.” Ruby nodded and gave him a wobbly, unconvincing smile.

Andrew led his family up the wide staircase and down the hallway to their suite. The children walked in silence, trying desperately to drink in all the sights. Every detail of the house was lavishly decorated, almost as though each piece was chosen because it looked expensive. There was something very brash and vain about it. They entered their suite, called the orchid suite because the wallpaper was decorated with bright blue orchids. The suite had three bedrooms and its own bathroom and sitting room. Ruby and Sally took the room with two beds and Lucy and Emily the large double bed in the next-door room. A third small bedroom sat across from theirs off the sitting room which was just big enough for Tommy. Leaving the children to look around, Andrew led his wife into his old suite, the daisy suite, next door. While not as large, it was expensively furnished and not too much smaller than their entire home back on campus.

Andrew stormed inside and dropped their bags on the floor, falling into the small settee before the fireplace. Abigail tried to drink in the elaborate furnishings, wondering what it would be like to grow up in such a lavish impersonal bedroom, but his words cut through her musings. He sat forward and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“I’m so sorry, Abigail, I should never have brought you all here, I really thought things would have improved after all these years, but I see my brother is just as hard and bitter as ever.”

His wife walked over and sat beside him and took his hand. “It’s okay. It does not change the man that you are, you left remember, you don’t live this life anymore.”

He nodded and stared into the flames, his thoughts far away. “I never really did. I hated living here, I hated everything about it. I hated knowing that my schooling and all the possessions I had, this ridiculous suite, the food I ate, was gained through cruelty and malice. I hated how my father and brother treated the tenants living on the land, they forced them to pay huge taxes and give a large percentage of the produce to us. We did absolutely no work on the property yet gleaned handsomely. Father spent his days sitting in his study smoking, ordering around the staff and trying to work out how to make more money. Pa’s father was an English baron and he wanted to live that life here.” Andrew smirked at his own exaggeration. “Then he’d drive us into the city church at Springsdale every week. There we were taught to love our neighbor but apparently in my father’s eyes unless you were wealthy you were not worth knowing. I don’t believe he even knew the names of those hard-working men and their families. He never even knew the name of our gardener or groundskeeper.

“My mother never liked what was happening here, she loved my father very much and he loved her, but she never approved of his treatment of those less fortunate. It wasn’t that my father was deliberately cruel, he just came to value wealth above all things. Here we lived in this giant house, just the four of us with enough room for thirty, yet just a stone’s throw from our front door people live in absolute poverty. I sometimes wish there was a way I could change

that, do good, use this place for serving others, like Lydia's family did, remember? But the estate passed to Henry, and I left."

It was a long speech and Abigail hung on his every word. "Andrew," She touched his arm, not sure how to begin or what to say. She breathed a silent prayer for strength. "You do not have to bear this burden, my love. You are not responsible for this. God has taken you away from all this and you have built a wonderful life for us. I know you feel guilty about what is going on here and I now understand why you have despaired over the years about being able to provide. I even understand Bonnie a little better now. I also know you, Husband, and I know you feel you have let us down somehow. You need to stop those thoughts right now. The only thing you are responsible for is to honor and obey your God and do as He asks, and you have done that and continue to do that. He will sort out the details."

Andrew smiled at her, but the shame never really left his eyes, he nodded slightly, "You are quite right, my love," he kissed her and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. Then there was knock at the door. It was Henry.

"Mother will see you now, and the children. She's in the front drawing room with her nurse and Shelly."

"Thank you, Henry."

Andrew and Abigail exited after him and knocked on the door to the children's suite to bid them to come. Wordlessly Andrew linked arms with Ruby and Abigail, Tommy held Sally's hand and Lucy and Emily linked arms behind them and they walked together down the stairs at the other end of the hallway and into the drawing room. The apprehensive children trusted their father to lead them into the unfamiliar, somewhat intimidating situation.

The formal drawing room was even more elaborately decorated with strains of gold and crimson, cherubs and a large floor to ceiling bookcase, completely full of books. Sally's eyes widened as she admired the extensive collection.

In the corner near a small table sat a frail looking woman in a wheelchair. Andrew gasped and ran to kneel before her. "Mother!" he exclaimed, placing his hands on her shoulders. The old woman had

a crocheted blanket over her knee, she smiled weakly and opened her arms to him.

“Oh, my son.” She smiled, “I’m so glad you’ve come. I’ve long desired to lay my eyes on you one more time.”

Andrew reached out to hold his mother’s hand. “Mother, I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.” His voice choked and he brushed away a tear.

“Hush Andrew, you were doing God’s work, your mother isn’t more important than that, even Jesus did not regard His mother before His mission, and you are here now, that is all that matters.”

Andrew kissed her wrinkly cheek and gripped her arm, smiling widely, his eyes sparkling his delight to see the blessed face again, his raised eyebrows expressing his concern to see her so frail.

“And have you brought your lovely family?” the woman squinted out into the room.

“Yes,” he nodded gesturing to them.

“Bring them near, Son, my eyes are failing.”

Andrew summoned Abigail. “Mother, this is my beautiful wife, Abigail.”

“Hello Mrs. Collins, I’m so glad to meet you.” Abigail knelt before her.

The elderly woman squinted and leaned in to examine her daughter-in-law closely for a moment. Abigail swallowed and looked down, fearing the woman’s disappointment. The older Mrs. Collins grinned and reached one shaky hand out to touch Abigail’s cheek. “I can see why you love her, Andrew, She’s a beauty.” The woman grinned.

He nodded. “Inside and out, Mother,” he said winking at his wife.

“Welcome Abigail, thank you for making my son happy all these years, please call me Mother.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Abigail smiled.

“Now Andrew, where are my grandchildren?”

“Come here, children.” He motioned. Abigail stood and moved out of the way, they hesitantly moved forward although Ruby hung back, unsure.

“This is Tommy, Lucy, Emily and Sally,” Andrew’s mother greeted them all with a kiss on the cheek. Andrew then motioned to Ruby, “And my oldest daughter Ruby.”

Ruby gulped and came closer, after Henry’s response she wasn’t so sure of herself.

Andrew’s mother just nodded, “Yes, yes of course. Hello Ruby.” Ruby nodded and smiled politely but then stood up and walked over to the settee and sat down. It wasn’t exactly approval, but she hadn’t been openly hostile. *‘That’s an improvement I guess,’* Ruby thought as she sat down with a sigh.



A lively game of hide and seek sent laughter echoing in the halls, inevitably turning into a noisy game of tag. It was a sound rather unfamiliar to the aging homestead. The children had brought much joy to the house and Andrew’s mother felt rejuvenated with the young people around and spent more hours out of her bed than usual. While the children played and ran around the enormous house, Andrew visited and prayed with his mother. He took great delight in sharing scripture with her and listening to all that she had to share. Abigail got the impression it had been some time since she’d had someone actually listen to her. Henry didn’t usually spend a lot of time with his mother, he preferred to keep to himself and often ate his meals in his room.

The children found ways to entertain themselves. They ventured outside to play several times despite the cold and the biting wind. Ruby stayed in her room as much as she could, she didn’t play with her younger sisters and used the excuse that she needed to work on her paper. But the real reason was she didn’t feel accepted. Andrew tried to reassure her, but she insisted she was fine, she just wanted to study. When she did venture out for meals or the occasional game with her sisters, she was polite and cordial but as soon as she could, she would excuse herself to return to her study.

Henry regarded them all with a cold indifference, except for Tommy, he liked the young man from the start. When he’d heard that

Tommy had a tendency towards farming and a way with animals, he took him for a ride out on the estate to view the herds and the land. The young man was most comfortable in the open spaces and the barrenness of this land appealed to him, somehow it seemed to speak to his soul. It very seldom snowed here, even in the depths of winter. Every day Tommy left the house and spent time riding the land and talking to the people who farmed it. He took the time to stop and talk to as many of them as he could.



“Is it really Christmas morning?” Sally asked Ruby, looking out their bedroom window.

Ruby looked up from her seat before the mirror and glanced at the small calendar on the wall. “Yes, it would appear so.”

“There isn’t any snow? Not even under the trees, all I can see for miles around is brown grass and bare trees.”

Ruby joined her sister at the window. “It sure is different from back home, isn’t it?”

“Mmmhmm.” Sally nodded and they walked out to the small sitting room. Lucy was waiting very impatiently for the rest of them to be ready, she was always the first up on Christmas morning. She paced back and forth in front of the fireplace.

“Bout time, I’ve been waiting for hours,” she exaggerated and rolled her eyes.

“Relax Lucy, it’s still early, Em’s not even out yet,” Tommy exclaimed, he leaned back on the chaise with his eyes closed. He’d have preferred to still be in bed, but Lucy always insisted everyone was up before the roosters at Christmas.

“I know, we always have to wait for her!” Lucy whined. “This is turning out to be the worst Christmas ever, I just want to get it over and done with so we can go home.”

“I’m here, Luce.” Emily walked out, immaculately dressed with her hair pinned up most becomingly. The contrast between the two girls was rather striking. It went beyond their physical looks. Lucy’s dress was slapped on, and she’d missed a button, grabbed the nearest

unmatching shawl and her old boots, her long hair hung wildly loose around her face. Emily on the other hand had carefully selected her clothing, everything was clean, neatly pressed and always matching perfectly.

“Bout time. Now can we go down?” Lucy stormed. A knock on the door brought a groan from the girl, “Oh now what?” she fussed. Ruby walked to open the door.

“You’re a grumpyboots this morning, Lucy Collins,” growled Sally as her parents entered.

“Hmpff,” Lucy scowled folding her arms across her chest.

“What’s this? It’s Christmas, Lucy.” Andrew smiled. He and Abigail made the rounds, hugging and kissing each of their children. “We came to say merry Christmas before we all go down to the drawing room.” When he reached Lucy, he cupped her chin and smiled. “Lucy, you usually love Christmas, you were even more excited than Sally last year. What is it, my darling?”

The girl sighed. “It just doesn’t feel much like Christmas this year, Pa.” Her eyebrows knitted together tightly, and she screwed up her mouth.

“Why is that?”

Lucy began to pace demonstrably flailing her arms about as she spoke, typical of Lucy whenever she gave one of her ‘speeches’. “Well, it’s just not right, there are no decorations, no tree, no special baking, we aren’t going to church, why can’t we go into the township? We saw the people yesterday decorating their houses, the lanterns, the ribbons but this house has nothing. It’s as though Christmas doesn’t even exist with these people.” She ended by throwing her arms up in an air of exaggerated indignance. Andrew shook his head and Tommy grinned. Lucy always had a flair towards the dramatic. She folded her arms and pouted.

“Lucy, darling come on, I know Mother has gifts for you down in the parlor.”

Slowly the girl looked up at him and unfolded her arms, moving her hands to her hips instead. “Well, that’s something I suppose,” she said trying determinedly not to smile at her own silliness.

Andrew glanced at Abigail, and they grinned at each other. Ruby rolled her eyes, “Lucy!” she exclaimed, “Come on, you contrary cat!”

Lucy glared at her and poked her tongue out. “Just because you’re the oldest it doesn’t mean you need to be so self-righteous...” She was cut off by Andrews sharp rebuke.

“Lucy!” He softened then and reaching for Sally’s hand, he put the other out to her. “It may not be Christmas as you know it, but it still has family and love, and we can celebrate Christ’s blessed birth anywhere, remember that. Those are things that make Christmas, Miss Collins, not decorations and a Christmas pageant.” He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Won’t you please come down with us and try to make the best of it?” Abigail asked.

Lucy took a deep breath and smiled a crooked smile. “Okay Ma. I guess so.”

“Good morning, dear children,” the elderly Mrs. Collins greeted them as they walked into the drawing room with their parents. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Granny,” Sally said skipping up to her. She embraced the old woman and kissed her cheek. “Granny, why don’t you have a tree or decorations?”

“I don’t know, Sally Girl, we haven’t really bothered since the boys were small, Henry thinks it’s a waste of money and with just the two of us there doesn’t seem any point. The staff sometimes have a little party in their dining room,” she said not meaning to sound nearly as condescending as she did. “But I do have a little gift for each of you,” she said motioning to a small wooden box.

Sally passed out the small gifts and Andrew read the Christmas story. They each gave a gift to Mrs. Collins and to Henry who sat in the corner smoking and barely acknowledged them.

Each of the children found joy in the gifts they’d been given. Sally received a new doll with a porcelain face. The first store-bought doll Sally had ever owned. She had a gentle face and woolen hair tied up in braids, a beautiful day dress in crimson and black with rows of

lace and a parasol. Sally hugged the little toy and grinned. ‘Molly’ became an instant favorite with the young girl.

Emily was given a silver-plated mirror and hairbrush, the ideal gift for the fashion-conscious girl. Tommy received a new pocketknife and Ruby a pale blue shawl.

It was Lucy though, who was the most delighted with her gift. Hers was the only one that wasn’t store-bought, in fact it had once belonged to her father. Lucy pulled the string and released the brown paper. She genuinely hoped it wasn’t a shawl like Ruby had got, or a mirror and brush. That really wasn’t her thing. She held her breath as she pulled the paper aside and then gasped. “A kite?” She grinned.

“That was your father’s kite, I had Hester the parlor maid repair it and give it a new tail, your sister told me you like to fly kites, so I had the servants find this one for you.”

Andrew grinned. “It was my favorite; I’d forgotten about it.”

“What’s this, Pa?” Lucy asked unrolling the fabric and attaching the two sticks. On the bottom corner of the diamond shaped kite was written in shaky handwriting ‘The eagle’.

Andrew smiled and ran his hand over it. “That was what I called it, it soared and dipped just like an eagle on the wind. Don’t you remember, Henry?” He nodded to his brother. “You had one too, yours was blue and you called it ‘Skywinder.’” Andrew chuckled at the memory.

“Don’t recall,” Henry said gruffly, blowing out a long trail of smoke into the room.

“Pa, will you fly it with me?” Lucy asked eagerly.

“Of course, darling. Shall we all go?” he smiled to everyone. Abigail grinned and the children nodded. Ruby shrugged, kites didn’t interest her, she couldn’t imagine why it excited Lucy so much, but it brought the girl joy, and she was willing to watch.

“Oh that’s a beaut, Luce.” Tommy said inspecting it as they turned to walk out of the parlor.

“You can have a turn, Tom,” she offered excitedly as they headed outside.

“Shelly, please take me out, I want to watch too,” smiled the senior Mrs. Collins.

“It’s too cold out there ma’am, you should stay inside where it’s warm,” the housegirl suggested.

“I agree, Ma.” Henry grumbled. “You’ll catch your death of cold for a stupid childish game.”

“Now Henry, I have a blanket, it’ll be fun. You know you could come too.”

“No thank you.”

They spent the rest of the morning watching as Lucy and Tommy, Andrew and even Sally had turns with the kite. Emily, Ruby and Abigail stood back with Mrs. Collins and watched the scene.

“Look how happy it makes her, Ma.” Ruby smiled, noticing her sister’s rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes as Lucy ran around, oblivious to the mud caking on her boots.

“Yes, it’s hard to believe a few hours ago she was thinking it wouldn’t be any fun today.” Abigail replied.

“I don’t get her,” groaned Emily. “Look at the dirt and dust all over her boots and skirts, she’s always such a mess.”

Abigail chuckled.

“It’s wonderful.” Mrs. Collins eyes lit up. It may have been a much less interesting Christmas for Lucy but for her it had been such a blessing, just what she’d needed. The woman knew with some certainty that this would be her last Christmas and she relished having Andrew and his children here with her. She shared with Abigail later that it was what she had always hoped Henry would have, a wonderful family and the house would be full of laughter and love again. “I’ll die a happy woman now; this is as it always should have been,” she exclaimed before she was wheeled away for her nap.

Andrew met with his mother’s physician the following day. The doctor told Andrew that she had very advanced cancer, there was nothing more they could do for her except manage her pain, it was likely she only had a few months left. The old woman told her son she would die happy now, having laid her eyes on her precious grandchildren and knowing her son was happy and doing the Lord’s work. It was all she had ever wanted for him.

Seven



Inheritance

A few days after Christmas Mrs. Collins summoned Andrew, Abigail, and Henry to a meeting without the children. She was feeling good that day although still quite weak. Christmas day had taken a lot out of her, and she'd spent the entire next day in her bed recovering.

Sitting at the head of the table between her two adult sons she looked from one to the other, "I have something important to say, and I want you both to listen and not speak until I am finished," she lay one hand on each of her son's arms. Both men nodded their agreement, Abigail nursed her coffee cup and sat back, a little unsure of her place in this conversation. "I know I haven't got much time left on this earth and I want to settle the matter of the estate before I die."

Both men began to protest but then stopped and just nodded. Abigail observed the three of them, her eyes turning from one brother to the other, their resemblance was noticeable although Henry's cheeks were rather hollow and gaunt and his eyes deep-set and calculating. It was obvious they were brothers however, despite the gangly frame of the older man being in stark contrast to Andrew with his broad shoulders and much more sturdy build. Her eyes turned to their mother, she could see the two men had inherited their mother's nose and wide lips. She pulled herself out of her thoughts and focused on the older woman's words.

“Henry currently owns the estate simply because he is a man.” The woman frowned and turned to him, “But you have no heir.” Henry shuffled nervously. “I still have some ownership and a say in the running and the administration of my husband’s estate. And these are my wishes.” She was looking at Henry as she spoke, and he nodded, knowing he would do his best to honor his mother’s wishes. “I believe this is what your father would have wanted.” The look on the woman’s face said she was not to be trifled with, she fixed first one and then the other son with her steely brown eyes that matched Andrew’s. She turned at last to look at Andrew, her lips pursed. “I want to leave the entire estate to your Thomas.” Andrew gasped and he started to protest. “No Andrew, I know how you feel but he is the rightful heir. He is the only male descendant of your father after the two of you, I know you have no desire to take on the estate yourself, and I have watched that young man, he is strong, mature and capable. I believe he could be the very person to turn this place around.”

Andrew interrupted then, “But Mother, he is only fourteen and what about Henry, he has many years ahead of him, he could potentially still produce an heir?” Henry’s face fell and he shuffled uncomfortably in his seat.

“Ah, I see you have not told him, Henry,” Mrs. Collins scowled at him.

“Told me what?”

“Your brother is also very sick.”

Andrew’s eyes swung to Henry’s face, “Sick?”

“Liver cancer,” Henry muttered under his breath. “I only have six months to a year at the most.” He then put his handkerchief to his mouth and let forth a stream of coughs with gusto, almost as though he’d been holding them back and was relieved to finally get them out. He wiped his mouth and sat looking down at his cup.

“Liver cancer?” Andrew asked incredulously.

“Years of drinking whiskey and smoking have finally caught up with him,” growled his mother. “Now, no more interruptions. This is what must happen. Tommy is to inherit the entire estate. With five hundred dollars laid aside for Lucy, Emily and Sally.”

Andrew listened, folded his arms across his chest and said tersely, "And Ruby?"

"She is not my grandchild," said his mother. There was no malice in her voice, she was simply stating a fact.

Andrew stood up abruptly, sending his chair crashing to the ground. "NO!" He said forcefully, the fire returning to his eyes. "I will not allow this. If Ruby is not considered the same as the rest of my girls than I will not even give this inheritance another thought." He brought his fist down on the table, causing his mother to exhale sharply and jolt in fright.

"I told you he'd say that, Mother," Henry smirked. "Some kind of moral responsibility or something no doubt, he always was a soft hand."

"Silence, Henry!" His mother exclaimed. Despite being a woman, she was clearly in charge. "Andrew, there is nothing I can do, the money is for direct descendants only, I know Ruby is a nice girl but it's out of my hands."

"No, it isn't, Mother," said Andrew, squinting his eyes and scowling at her. "You are the head of this family, what you say goes. You can leave the entire estate to the gardener's dog if you want to."

"Yes Son," she said, "I admire your obligation to your wife's daughter but that doesn't make me obliged to her."

"Obligation?" He spat at her, his eyes squinting and his jaw taut, he thrust his hand out as he spoke. "There is no obligation! I don't claim Ruby as my daughter out of obligation. She is mine, the child of my heart, I love that girl more than my own soul and I would lay down my life for her without question if it was required of me. Mother, I have made up my mind. If Ruby is not considered the same as the others, then I will not even consider this offer. That is my final word. Come Abigail." At Andrew's bidding she took his offered hand, stood up dumbly and followed him out of the room.



"What do we do, Abigail?" Andrew asked her that evening as they retired. His mother hadn't budged on her thoughts, and it didn't

sit well with the pastor. He paced in the bedroom, his dark eyes still ablaze.

“Andrew you’ve said your piece, if Ruby doesn’t inherit, they don’t. You seem quite sure of that decision.”

“I am!”

“Are you sure that’s the right thing to do? That’s a big decision, this is a big life changing thing for the children, I’m quite sure that Tommy would look after Ruby anyway....”

He cut her off, “That’s not the point. You speak like we will let the children have the money.”

“I’m only giving suggestions, but shouldn’t we discuss the idea, what if we did?”

He looked up and smiled wryly, stopped his pacing, and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. “Emily would sure like that,” he said. “No, we can’t, I don’t want anything to do with this life. And I don’t want it for my children.”

“None of them would have to have this life, I don’t think they are about to move here.” Abigail paused and raised her eyebrows, “It would set them up for life, that kind of money.”

“Money isn’t everything, Abigail, you’ve said that yourself many times.”

“I know. And I still think that.” She stood and walked across to him, laid her hand on his arm and smiled at him. “But I think you should at least consider this. You say you want your children to have every opportunity available to them, this would guarantee that.”

He nodded but still protested, “You may be right, but I’m still holding to my original word, if Ruby isn’t included then none should be.”

“I think she would understand...”

He cut her off again, he was riled, he’d always heard her out but now he was angry. He walked away a few paces and stood with his back to his wife. “Abigail, I’ve told you many times Ruby is my daughter. End of story.” He turned back to look at her. “If my mother can’t accept that then I’m not even willing to consider the proposal. I don’t think of her ‘as’ my daughter she IS my daughter, not out of obligation or duty but because I love her with all my heart and soul.

If I could give her my blood and make her mine by birth I would, but it would not change how I feel about her one little bit. Do you hear me! If Ruby gets nothing, then neither do the others!" he was almost shouting now, Abigail covered the distance between them and reached out to embrace him.

"Yes Andrew, I hear you, thank you for loving and supporting her." He wrapped his arms around her and lay his head on hers. Closing his eyes he took several deep calming breaths, drawing his strength from her.



The next day Andrew was still frustrated. "We need to get away, get some fresh air to think," he said. "I'll get the cook to prepare us a lunch and we'll go for a picnic in one of my favorite childhood spots down at Collins Creek, it's not so cold today and there is a sheltered spot I used to love, as long as we dress warmly it won't be unpleasant."

"I'd love that," Abigail said. "I'll go tell the children."

Ruby insisted on staying behind. She had finished her paper and posted it off, but she had three chapters left to read before she went back to her studies the following week when they got home. She'd relish the peace and quiet of the empty house.

Henry would be out for the day; it was the day he collected the taxes off the people, and he knew many of them couldn't pay so he was going to take whatever he could from them. Tax Day was his favorite day each month, it reminded him how much power he had over these people. He had asked if Tommy could accompany him, but Andrew said absolutely not.

Andrew took his family to the spot down by the creek, there was a large stand of trees, and a small clearing, it was cold but not unpleasant and he laid down some blankets and cushions for them to sit on. Abigail looked around, fixing her eyes on an ancient Oaktree, she grimaced. There carved in the tree trunk was a very faded but readable heart with Andrew's initials with Bonnie's. Andrew frowned, took Tommy's pocketknife and scratched it out, creating a

new heart with AC + AC instead. Abigail chuckled at his schoolboy act and kissed him.

It was a blissful day, despite being slightly chilly the children laughed and played and climbed trees, Lucy launched her kite and she and Tommy fished for a time. It was nice to see Tommy play with his sisters again like a boy should. He was rapidly becoming a man, so the couple cherished seeing the little boy in him for what would likely be the last time. Abigail and Andrew leaned back against the tree and enjoyed the scene before them very much, before gathering their picnic basket, and their children and strolling home, rosy-cheeked and refreshed.



“What’s this?” Andrew exclaimed with a grin and sparkling eyes. They’d walked into the drawing room to see something they hadn’t expected. Ruby sat on the small chaise next to Andrew’s mother in her wheelchair and they chatted like old friends. Ruby held the older lady’s hand while she listened to her speak. Both pairs of eyes shone in mutual admiration for each other.

“Hello Pa, Ma,” greeted Ruby with a smile as they walked in.

Andrew’s eyebrows raised and he cocked his head to the side and smiled a crooked smile. “How’s the reading going?”

“Fine, Pa, I finished most of it but I... got.... interrupted,” she smiled at the senior Mrs. Collins.

“Interrupted?” Andrew queried, the family climbed up onto the large couches around the room, Sally immediately snatching up the book she’d been devouring earlier that day.

“Yes, Son,” said his mother. “You see Nurse was outside helping Shelly with the wash and I took a tumble out of my chair and could not get up. I yelled out for help, and no one was around. Then your beautiful daughter came running down the stairs and helped me, she patched up my skinned knee, helped me back into my chair, tucked my blanket in around me and made sure I was alright. I was so touched by her kindness to me that we got talking. Why didn’t you

tell me this charming girl is training to be a teacher? I was a teacher you know?"

Andrew smiled at the turn of events. "Yes, Mother, I remember," he said taking the seat next to Ruby.

"Well as it turns out, Ruby is a bright and talented young lady and a real delight to have as a grandchild," she emphasized the word. "We've spent all afternoon chatting, her and I. I find her articulate and intelligent."

Andrew smiled at the praise of his beloved daughter. "Yes Mother, I agree," he managed, winking at Ruby.

Ruby blushed deeply at the complements paid her and said, "Oh Grandmother," she paused and addressed her family; "she has asked me to call her Grandmother," then she turned back to the woman and started again. "Grandmother, it was nothing, I was simply doing what I knew was the right thing to do."

"But you did it even though I'd been so horrid to you, to deny you the inheritance?"

Ruby frowned and Andrew's eyebrows flew up. The children were about to hear about it whether he liked it or not.

"Inheritance?" queried Ruby.

"Oh, so you didn't know. Very prudent, Andrew." She nodded to her son, admiring his wisdom and discernment in this situation. "Well never mind then, we'll talk about it later."

"What's inheritance, Ma?" asked Sally leaning over towards Abigail trying to whisper but failing miserably.

"Never mind, Sally, we'll talk about it later," said Andrew and Sally knew from his tone she should let it go, at least for now.



That evening after the children had retired, Andrew's mother summoned the three adults again to a meeting.

"Andrew," she began. "I was wrong to deny Ruby an inheritance. You were right, the four girls shall each receive one hundred dollars from the estate. You are the heir, after Henry, but seeing as you have no interest in the entire estate you and your wife

are to receive five hundred dollars, these funds are to be accessed immediately. Tommy shall inherit the estate, the house and all the remaining cash assets. It will be his to do with as he pleases once Henry passes, keep it, sell it, it's up to him, I have no desire necessarily to see it remain in the family. These are my final wishes," she said sternly looking Henry firmly in the eye, willing him to listen.

Andrew lifted his hand and motioned like he was going to protest, he stopped and curled up his lips into a wry smile and a light shone in his eyes. He leaned over and whispered in Abigail's ear, "For Luke." He raised his eyebrows at her. She gasped slightly and tears rushed to the corners of her eyes. She bit her lip and nodded, a wistful look crossing her face. She couldn't help but think what a difference five hundred dollars would make for Luke's treatment.

"Very well Mother! I consent to that offer. But it will be up to Tommy whether he wishes to inherit the estate or not. If he says no, I do not want either of you trying to coerce him. What say you, Henry?"

"Whatever you say, brother," he spat out, knowing he really had little choice in the matter, "I'll be dead soon and then it'll all be yours anyway!"

"Not mine," Andrew said forcefully. "You know I have never wanted this life!"

"But your wife might, Andrew, have you even considered that in your foolhardy attempt to appear pious! You are too pigheaded to see that you have deprived her of the finer things in life, are you really going to turn down all that money?"

"Yes, and I know Abigail feels the same way I do," He turned to look at his wife and she nodded her head in affirmation. "I'll accept the five hundred dollars which I will be giving to Abigail's brother for his medical expenses."

"Huh," spat Henry. "You'll change your mind once you get your hands on that money, when you know what it's like to be rich, you'll never want to be poor again."

"I've been rich remember Henry. I grew up here, too."

"Yes, but your country wife hasn't!"

Andrew went to speak on Abigail's behalf, but she put her hand on his arm to stop him. "I can speak for myself, Husband."

He nodded "Of course, my love!" he smiled at her, squeezing her hand and urging her to continue.

"Henry," Abigail said looking him in the eye, "I can say I absolutely do not want any of this money, not one cent of it. I'm only accepting it to help my brother who needs specialist medical treatment." She gripped Andrew's hand and smiled at him. "I am already rich. I have the love of a wonderful husband, I have five exceptional children, a lovely home and the love of my Heavenly Father. There is nothing more that I could receive that would make me any richer than I am now. I would not trade it for this entire estate and all the gold in all the world."

Henry knitted his eyebrows and pursed his lips. "Countryfolk will never understand. I made over three hundred dollars today in taxes alone."

Andrew closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them, they were full of the hurt and pain of his brother's actions towards others, "Yes, by exploiting people. What good will that money do you, Henry?" Andrew asked. "Will it lengthen your life?"

The smirk left Henry's face, he said nothing more.

Eight



The Children's Choice

Andrew and Abigail sat the children down the next day to talk about what had been discussed. The five children sat in silence, looking nervously at one another, the uncertainty clear on their faces.

Tommy shuffled in his seat and swallowed, he looked up at Andrew, his face pale and his eyes wide. "So, all this is mine?"

"Yes, Son," said Andrew kindly, "Once your uncle Henry passes away the entire estate would pass to you, if that's what you want."

Tommy swallowed again and scratched his head. "But what about you, Pa?"

"What about me?"

"Shouldn't it go to you?"

"I have no interest in it, Tom. It's to be yours, you are the next rightful heir of this estate. Your Mother and I are happy with the life we have, and we have talked about it, and we want this opportunity for you, if you want it. I was thinking earlier that perhaps this is what God wants for you, perhaps it's His plan that you stay here and turn this place around, make a real difference for the people that live here. This estate has been run with cruelty and malice for far too long." Andrew closed his eyes and shook his head. Opening them again, he raised his eyebrows suggestively to his son reaching over to put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "It needs a strong and Godly leader to turn it around with kindness and love."

Abigail nodded and put her arm around her son. “What a challenge that would be, Tom!”

“However, it would be yours to do with as you please, which would mean you’d be within your rights to sell it all and keep the money.”

Tommy gulped; a huge amount of responsibility now lay squarely on his very young shoulders. “When do I have to decide?”

“We need to let them know before we leave the day after tomorrow.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then that’s totally fine, God will work out the details. You pray about it overnight, we will too, and you can let us know tomorrow.”

“I will, Pa.”

“And each of you girls will receive one hundred dollars to go towards future study or setting up your life however you want it.”

“One hundred dollars!” said Emily wistfully. “What I could do with one hundred dollars,” the girl said picturing beautiful gowns, carriage rides and sparkling jewelry

Andrew nodded, watching her response carefully.

“What about you, Pa?” asked Lucy.

“Your Ma and I will receive an amount of money, but we do not plan to keep it to use for ourselves.” Lucy nodded and considered his words carefully. “Well children this is a lot for you to consider. Go and spend time praying to God about all this and seek Him to find out what He wants for you.”

Andrew and Abigail sat up for several hours talking and praying, and reading scripture together, seeking God’s wisdom for their children and the potentially life-changing choices they faced. It was well after midnight when they talked about finally going to sleep. Andrew reached to extinguish the lamp but a knock on the door stopped him. “Come in,” he called.

Tommy opened the door, “I’m sorry to come in so late, Pa, I just wondered if I could talk to you both for a moment.”

“It’s fine, Son, we’re still up, what’s on your mind?” Andrew asked.

“Pa, I’ve made a decision,” he said crossing his arms across his chest.

Andrew raised his eyebrows and gripped his wife’s hand, “I’m listening?”

Tommy took a deep breath, the stubborn lift to his chin proclaimed the determination of his choice. “I went for a ride on the estate today as you know.” Andrew nodded and Tommy continued. “I saw how the people here live, Pa; I even stopped and spoke to many of the farmers. They are good folk. Many of them are God-fearing folk and they work so hard. They remind me so much of the family at Rivers Junction. They just want to make a living to look after their families. Many can’t afford to go anywhere else because they have no money, every spare cent goes to pay Uncle Henry’s taxes and he takes half of all their crops and profits, and they can’t get ahead.” Tommy furrowed his brow, the injustice of it affecting him deeply. “They can’t afford to really live, and they can’t afford to leave. Many have dirt floors and thatched rooves. No one should live the way they do. But still they work hard, they smile, they play and love their families. Few were bitter or resentful. I met one man, Matheson was his name, who said his family pray for Uncle Henry every day and they feel that God has asked them to do that. They work so hard, Pa and get next to nothing in return!” His impassioned speech brought tears to his eyes, and he quickly swiped one away with the sleeve of his nightshirt, took a breath and continued.

“Then I rode into the town, even the stores that are on the estate must pay inflated taxes and as a result must charge the farmers so much more to be able to afford them, they don’t want to, but they are just trying to survive too. The town desperately wants to build a schoolhouse and a larger church. They shared their hopes with me, to find a teacher and a reverend so they can have a proper church of their own and not have to go to Springsdale for marrying and burying.” In the flickering lamplight Andrew could see the tight clench of Tommy’s jaw and his pain at the plight of these good people, just a touch of anger in the tremble of his lips.

Andrew encouraged his son to continue, “So what’s your decision?”

Tommy walked over to the bed on Andrew’s side and sat at the end of it, he looked Andrew square in the eye. In that moment the little boy was gone, and a man sat before them.

“Pa, I know that I’m young, perhaps too young for this responsibility, but I want to stay here. I want to learn the running of this place with Uncle Henry, then I will bide my time and when I get the opportunity, I will turn this place around. I will give the land back to the farmers and let them make their own way, I will set the house up for those who need places to live. I have no desire to live in a big house like this, I couldn’t live a decadent life while a stone’s throw from here people struggle like that.” He clenched his jaw and took a deep breath to squelch the rising anger. “I hope to stay just long enough to turn the place around and then leave and head west to get my own ranch just like I planned. I know it will take some years, and I’m prepared to commit as long as I need to here, and when the time comes, and the Lord leads me I will move on.”

Andrew reached his arm out to grip his son’s shoulder, he swallowed, and his eyes misted over. “I am so proud of you. You are doing this not because of what you will get from it but for the benefit of others. I know that with God’s help you will turn this place around, make it what it always should have been, a blessing and a ministry. You are young, Tom, but sometimes that can be of benefit. Remember what David achieved, facing up to Goliath, he was about your age, perhaps younger and he led the whole Israelite army. Remember what the Bible says in 1st Timothy. *‘Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example for the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.’* Hold onto that Son, because it isn’t at all about you. I’m certain you alone cannot do it. But with God, ALL things are possible if you trust Him and follow His leading. I’m so proud of you.” Andrew said in a rather husky voice, he swallowed his emotion and grinned wryly, squeezing the lad’s shoulder he held. “I sure am gonna miss you.”

“Does that mean you agree?”

“It’s not up to me Tom, but I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

Tommy wiped away another tear that had escaped his eye without his permission. "I'm gonna miss you too Pa, and Ma! You have my word though that I will always see to it that my sisters are looked after, and you and Ma as well, I will use this money to make sure they never want for anything," he said determinedly.

"You don't need to worry about that Tommy," Abigail said finding her voice at last. "We are just fine, and so are your sisters, but I thank you for being so caring and kind. I'm going to miss you so much; our home will not be the same without you." She reached over to place her hand on his shoulder.

"Aww Ma, don't cry, I'll write all the time."

"I know, Tom. I'm so proud of the man you are becoming." He received a hug from both of his parents and then promptly left the room.

"He's quite a young man that son of yours," Andrew said his voice heavy with emotion.

"I know," Abigail smiled. "He gets it off his father, you know." She tilted her head and raised her eyebrows to him. Andrew grinned and reached a hand up to her cheek, leaning in to kiss her. He pulled back and chuckled, there was another knock at the door.

"Popular place!" He grinned at his wife. "Come in." he called to the door.

The four girls stood in the doorway in their nightgowns and robes.

"Pa, Ma, can we talk to you about something?" asked Ruby.

"Certainly darling, come and take a seat." Andrew motioned to the foot of the bed.

The girls came in and sat on the bed cross-legged just like they used to when they were younger, Ruby sat on the chair next to her father's side of the bed.

"What is it, my darlings?" asked Andrew, always willing to listen to his beloved girls.

"Pa, do we have to keep the money from the inheritance for ourselves?"

“No Ruby, it will be yours to do with as you please, and your sisters too when they turn sixteen.”

“Where will it be until then?” asked Lucy.

“Your Ma and I will keep it for you in our bank.”

The girls nodded.

“If we wanted it for some special reason, could we get it sooner?” asked Emily.

Andrew looked at Abigail and then back at the girls. “I guess that would depend on the reason, my darling.”

“What if it was something very important?” Sally asked.

“Why don’t you tell us what you have in mind, and we’ll talk about it, girls?” Andrew said becoming impatient at the cryptic nature of the questions.

Ruby spoke on their behalf, “Well Pa, we’ve all been talking...”

Lucy butted in, “and praying.”

“I was getting to that,” said Ruby.

“So, hurry up then or I’ll tell it,” chided impatient Lucy.

“I am,” Ruby scowled at her and continued. “We’ve been talking and praying, and we want to give the money, all of the money from our inheritances to Aunt Lydia for Uncle Luke’s treatment!”

Abigail gasped and put her hand to her mouth, her eyes immediately flooding with tears. Andrew reached for her hand, his own eyes misting over.

“Well Pa, can we do that?” asked Emily.

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do, Emily? One hundred dollars is a lot of money for a girl to have and it’s your dream to be wealthy.”

“It was her idea, Pa,” Lucy explained in support of her sister, she reached for Emily’s hand and squeezed it.

Andrew reached out and stroked Emily’s soft cheek, “That is a wonderfully generous offer girls, you don’t have to do that you know, it isn’t your responsibility.”

“We know, Pa,” said Ruby. “It’s what we want to do, we all want to, we have been praying and we’re sure that God gave us this money so we could help Uncle Luke.”

“What of your future, girls?” Abigail asked wanting to know they’d considered it carefully.

Emily spoke then, “Pa, Ma, you’ve always taught us that we should obey God’s promptings in our life even if it costs us dearly. You taught us that God would bless our obedience and that He would look after our futures. I’m not really concerned about being wealthy, Pa. I’d love to be able to afford nice dresses, but in truth I love the life we live too. I’ve been in this fancy house for two weeks now and I couldn’t find a single thing to do with my spare time but sit around and look pretty, I think that would be a very dull life. I’d much rather give this money to Aunt Lydia.” The pretty twelve-year-old commented.

A tear streaked down the pastor’s face.

“Why are you crying, Pa?” asked Sally.

Andrew sniffed back his tears and smiled, “Because I’m overwhelmed with pride at your selfless obedience to what you feel God is asking you to do and your desire to put your own dreams on hold to help Uncle Luke. I can see you’ve given this much thought and if that is what you want to do, and you still feel that way in the morning then your Ma and I will make it happen. We planned to give the five hundred dollars we’ve been given to Aunty Lydia as well.”

The girls eyes lit up.

“That makes nine hundred,” said Lucy in triumph. “That will last nearly the entire year! I can’t wait for us to get home to give that money to Aunty Lydia.”

Andrew was so overcome with pride at his girls’ loving gesture that he reached for them all and wept. They embraced together as a family in a big circle for some time and Andrew prayed a blessing over his girls and kissed them all and sent them off to bed.

Too overwhelmed to sleep Andrew and Abigail lay in the darkness for some time praying, thanking God for the amazing courage and love of their remarkable children.



Two days later they prepared to leave Miners Plain. It was an emotional time for the entire family. Andrew had to farewell his beloved mother. He held her, knowing he would not see her again. "I wish I could stay with you, Mother." Andrew wept as he kissed the frail woman on the forehead.

"I wouldn't hear of it, Son. You have the Lord's work to do. You mustn't lose any more time on me. Besides I'll have your boy here, it'll be like having a piece of you here with me." She whispered so only Andrew could hear, "Don't worry about Thomas, he's young but he's just like his father so I know he'll make out fine, because you did. This place sorely needs him, and I can leave this world happy now knowing things will be put right!" Andrew nodded and kissed his mother goodbye.

He then farewelled his brother. Andrew had spent some time the previous day trying to witness to his brother in the hopes he would accept Christ, but Henry's hard heart wasn't willing to budge, and he remained as cold and calculating as ever. But the man had grown to care about Tommy. He was determined to train the younger man in how to run an estate. Andrew was concerned but knew his son, though young, would not stoop to the cruelty of his uncle. He was young to run a large spread, but he knew that Tom was smart enough to appoint wise council when he needed it. Besides God was with him, just as he had been with the little shepherd boy thousands of years earlier as he'd defeated a giant and an entire army.

Tommy moved into the Rose suite, the smallest suite on the bottom floor that had traditionally been used by household staff. He wasn't interested in any of the larger suites in the house, he didn't know what he would do with that much space.

Abigail promised to ship his trunks and the family was glad at least one of them would be nearby when Luke moved to Springdale for his treatment. Tommy promised to keep in touch with his Aunt Lydia and Uncle Luke as often as he could.



The morning after they arrived home Andrew, Abigail and the girls stood around Luke's bedside. His condition hadn't changed, but his eyes lit up and he reached out his stronger left hand to his sister, and she held his hand and kissed him.

Andrew caught Ruby's eye and nodded. She pulled the envelope from her pocket and approached her Aunt Lydia who was sitting by Luke's bedside.

"Aunty?"

"Yes, Ruby darling?"

"We have something for you."

Lydia stood up and raised her eyebrows, "You do? What is it?"

"Open it," Ruby said holding out the envelope. "It's from all of us."

Lydia reached for the envelope and opened it, pulling out the check. She gasped and put her hand up to cover her mouth, "What is this?"

"It's our inheritance money from Grandmother Collins, Lucy, Emily, Sally and I, and Ma and Pa, we all pooled our money together to give to you, for Uncle Luke."

A whimper escaped Lydia's lips and she closed her eyes for a moment. Then looking up at the girl with misty eyes she said, "I appreciate this more than you know but I can't take this, this is your money, you girls must use this for your future," she said reaching out to hand back the check. Ruby motioned to speak but Lucy stepped forward instead.

"Aunt Lydia, you have given up so much and you and Uncle Luke have been such an inspiration to me, to us in how you live for God. I've watched you give to others from the little that you have and go without when you've needed to. Now you spend hours looking after Uncle Luke and you never complain. Uncle Luke always says to us, 'If we know the delight and privilege it is to serve others, how can we deprive others of the privilege and delight of serving us.' I know he always lives that." She reached out and put her hand on her aunt's arm, "Now won't you please give us a chance to be his servant. It would mean a lot to us if you would allow us to do this for you!"

There wasn't a dry eye in the room and Andrew's 'Wild Horse' showed once again her determined compassion for others. Andrew nodded and grinned widely, so impressed with her maturity. He swallowed back his tears and looked on in pride as right before his eyes his daughter transformed from little girl into beautiful, determined and capable young woman. He squeezed Abigail's hand and she smiled at him; she shared his thoughts.

Lydia paused for a moment, and then took a deep breath and lunged forward to embrace Lucy tightly. Tears streamed down her face, "Lucy, you are so right, I am delighted and honored to take this gift, it will show Uncle Luke how much you all love him." They held each other for some time and then Lydia embraced each member of the family in gratitude.

"Open the other envelope, Aunt Lydie," said Sally excitedly. Lydia looked up and noticed Ruby holding out another brown envelope.

Lydia nodded and reached for it; it was ten crisp ten-dollar bills. Lydia gasped and read the attached note.

"On behalf of the Western Plains Seminary College we bequeath one hundred dollars to Reverend Luke Anderson for his years of faithful service."

Lydia gasped and sat back in her chair. "It's the whole entire amount, all one thousand that I need!" she wept. "I don't know how to ever thank you all."

Andrew knelt next to Lydia's chair to look his beloved sister-in-law in the eye. "You needn't thank any of us, Lydia. I speak for us all when I say that the Lord provided the money, right when you needed it most and it is He you should thank."

"Absolutely." Abigail agreed and the four girls nodded and stood with their arms around each other.

Lydia hugged Andrew, "I absolutely will thank Him, but I also thank you for your generosity and selfless service, the Lord gave you the money, you didn't have to give it to me, but you did without a moment's hesitation, I will thank the Lord for that too, and I'll never forget this."

Luke seemed to understand what was happening and managed to whisper a very strained and slurred ‘thank you’ past his tight throat.



Confirmation arrived that the thousand dollars had been received and the hospital assured Lydia in the return letter that her accommodation and food at the nearby hotel had been covered for the duration of Luke’s stay, as well. Luke was expected by the middle of January. The arrangements were made and two weeks later, the family gathered to farewell the wonderful servant of the Lord assuring both that their prayers would follow him.

Abi and Charlie moved into the Anderson’s much larger home to take care of her younger siblings so Lydia could focus solely on Luke’s recovery and live in tighter quarters.

Letters arrived from Lydia and Tommy a week later saying Luke was settled into his room in the hospital and Lydia in hers at the hotel. The intensive program was already beginning, and the specialists were confident that Luke would in time make excellent progress.

It was with great relief and much prayer that the scholars returned to school, but Luke was never far from their minds.

Nine



Jake

Jake McAllister walked out of the post office feeling satisfied. He'd just sent a letter to his parents back home on the farm telling them he'd arrived and was settled with his aunt and uncle in Olivers Grove. He was looking forward to taking on the carpentry apprenticeship that his uncle had found for him under master craftsman Eli Hayes beginning the very next day. He took the time that first day to explore this town, it was not unlike his hometown, and he felt sure he'd be right at home in no time.

He whistled as he walked around the corner, excited to be beginning his new life and this new adventure. He'd been praying for some time that God would lead him to the right opportunity. Jake's entire family had been so excited for him when his pa's sister, Aunt Jo had written to them with the offer of the apprenticeship.

He stopped mid-stride and his whistle made a funny little squeak before it stopped altogether, and his mouth hung open, noticing a beautiful young woman with golden hair step out of the bank and prepare to cross the road. He held his breath and watched her for a moment. Jake had never seen such a lovely woman before. He smiled and blushed and wished he could know who she was. Then he chastened himself. Someone like that was way out of his reach. She was likely already married anyhow. But he admitted it never hurt to dream.

He noticed her golden hair tied back from her face in a simple, youthful style with a lemon-colored ribbon, that matched her dress. He watched her smile at another woman, and from his spot across the road he could see how her face lit up as she laughed at a joke. His heart began to beat a little faster.

He shook his head and scolded himself under his breath, “You’re losing your mind, McAllister,” and continued down the path towards the mercantile. He grinned as he picked up his tune again, he couldn’t get the lovely young woman out of his mind.

The sound of stampeding hooves pierced his thoughts followed immediately by a woman’s scream. He looked back and saw two riders galloping through town with a third rider, the Sheriff, hot on their heels. Just as the beautiful woman had stepped off the sidewalk to cross the road the riders galloped around the corner, narrowly missing her. With a startled scream, she leapt out of the way, ending up sprawled on the ground, her packages landing on the dusty road near her.

Impulsively Jake reacted, sprinting in her direction. He was there helping her up before others on the walk had even moved. He picked her up in his strong arms and she lay her head against his chest. Jake gulped and his heart raced again. He called out to someone nearby, “Where is the doctor?” they pointed him towards the end of the street. Two nearby women rushed to pick up her parcels and followed Jake to the clinic.

He strode quickly towards the clinic, not wanting to cause any hurt, his head swirled, the smell of her perfume tantalized his mind. “Pull yourself together, Jacob!” he scolded himself again. “This could be someone’s wife for all you know.” Forcing his swirling thoughts deep down inside, he entered the doctor’s office and laid the disoriented girl on the table at the doctors bidding.

“Oh, Miss Collins,” Dr Price frowned, “What’s happened now?” he asked as Ruby lay her head back against the pillow, sharp pain pulsing through her brain, from where her head had hit the ground. Jake noticed the ‘Miss’ and stored it away, ‘*Still* he thought, ‘*she could be someone’s betrothed.*’

“What happened, Mr. ah, what is your name?” the doctor asked redirecting his question to the young man.

“McAllister,” said Jake, “Jacob McAllister, I’m new in town.”

The doctor nodded “What happened to Miss Collins?”

Jake recounted the story and then asked, “Is she gonna be okay, Doctor?”

“Yes, Mr. McAllister, she’s going to be just fine,” he replied after a quick examination. “Just a nasty knock to the head and banged up knee. You got her here quickly, so I’ll monitor her for concussion, but I believe she’s going to be okay.”

Jake nodded, “Is there anything I could do to help, Doc?”

“You could ride out to the seminary college and fetch her Pa, he’s the principal there, Pastor Collins.”

Jake nodded and took off at a run out the door and then caught himself and walked back in, “Um Doc, where is the seminary college?”

The doctor smiled in spite of himself and without even looking up he replied, “About half a mile from here at the north end of town, just take a left at the livery and you’ll see the North Road up in front of you, follow it all the way to the college”

Jake took off again and ran the entire half mile.

The receptionist opened the door a crack and saw Andrew meeting with Matty and three other ministers. “Sorry to interrupt, Pastor, but there is a young man here to see you, apparently one of your girls has had some kind of accident.”

Andrew immediately leapt to his feet. Without hesitation Matty said, “Go Andrew, we can finish this.”

Andrew nodded at his friend and hurried out of the room. He looked at the tall young man who stood before him, “What is it, who is hurt?”

“I don’t rightly know, her name is Miss Collins, and she is at the doctor’s office.”

“Is it Lucy?” He always assumed it was Lucy, because it usually was.

"I don't know, Sir." Jake swallowed nervously. "Golden hair and yellow dress." He couldn't help but smile.

"Ruby!" Andrew exclaimed. "What happened?"

"She was startled by a horse running through town, Sir, and it knocked her down, she may have a mild concussion the doctor said." Internally he thought '*Ruby Collins, that name suits the beautiful girl, it's a beautiful name.*' he carefully stored away that information as well.

"Thank you, Mr.....?" Andrew reached out to shake his hand.

"Jake McAllister, Sir."

"Not Sir, Mr. McAllister, just Pastor is fine."

"Yes Pastor."

"Now I must go to her, do you have a wagon here?"

"No, I ran here."

"You ran all the way here just to give me this message?"

"Yes Sir.... ah Pastor. I knew you'd want to know as soon as possible."

"Thank you. I'll hitch the wagon and I'll give you a ride back to town."

"Much obliged, Pastor Collins," he said following Andrew out the door.

Trying to take his mind from the situation Andrew chatted to Jake as they drove.

"I've not seen you around these parts before, Mr. McAllister, are you new to town?"

"Yes, I just arrived yesterday."

Andrew nodded, "Do you mind me asking what brings you here?"

"Not at all Pastor Collins, I'm taking on a carpenter's apprenticeship with Eli Hayes, do you know him?"

"Quite well, he's done some of the building at the campus, he's an excellent craftsman." Jake nodded his agreement. "Will you be living at the boarding house?"

"No, with my aunt and uncle in town."

“Can I ask who they are?”

“Robert and Josephine Simmons, Aunt Jo is my pa’s sister, Uncle Robert owns the feed and grain store.”

Andrew smiled, “Yes I know your uncle well, he and your aunt attend the small campus church here on occasion. They are lovely folk; we’ve had them to supper a number of times.”

It was Jake’s turn to smile then. “Yes, they are, and their children are all grown up, she’s a lot older than my pa. They are happy to have me board with them. I like it there; Aunt Jo is an excellent cook.”

“Yes, I’ve experienced her cooking firsthand.” Andrew laughed with him.

Andrew pulled the wagon up to the doctor’s surgery, “Thanks for playing messenger boy, Jacob. I hope to see you around and all the best for beginning your apprenticeship.” He shook Jake’s hand and entered the doctor’s clinic.

Jake knew that meant his services were no longer required and that should have been his cue to leave but he couldn’t drag himself away, something about the girl drew him. He took a seat outside and prayed for her. “Ruby Collins,” he said aloud with a grin, loving how the name sounded coming off his tongue. He smiled at his own foolishness. “Jake!” he said to himself again. “You have taken leave of your senses.” But still he stayed. He needed to know for himself that she was going to be okay.

“Pa!” Ruby exclaimed and Andrew hurried to her bedside with a worried look on his face.

“Oh, my darling, are you alright?” he said gently stroking her cheek.

“I’m fine Pa, it’s just a bump on the head. Doc says he needs to observe me for a while to make sure I don’t have a concussion.”

“I’m so relieved, Ruby, I was worried.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Mr. McAllister came to find me.”

“Who is Mr. McAllister?” Ruby asked, just as Doctor Price returned.

“He’s the young man who helped you up and carried you in here,” the doctor said.

“Oh,” said Ruby with a slight flush to her cheeks, “I don’t remember much, I remember the horse, and then being carried, but not much else. I wonder who he is, I don’t recognize the name.”

“He’s new in town,” said the doctor and Andrew at the same time. They both smiled.

“I’d like to thank him for helping me,” said Ruby.

“I’m sure you’ll get to, darling,” Andrew grinned, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

“Just keep an eye on her overnight, Pastor, if she becomes overly tired or slurs her speech, get her to me quickly. I don’t believe she has suffered any concussion, but she has had a nasty knock on her head and will have a very sore knee for a few days.”

Andrew nodded. “We will look after her, Doc. Fortunately tomorrow is Saturday, so she won’t have to walk around campus all day.”

The doctor smiled, “Yes and she should be right as rain by Monday, provided you keep that knee wrapped and elevated as long as you can, young lady,” he directed towards Ruby.

She nodded, “Can you help me up, Pa?”

Ruby expected him to help her from the bed so she could hobble to the wagon. But instead, Andrew scooped her up in his strong arms.

“Pa!” she gasped. “I’m much too old for you to carry around anymore!”

“Shh darling, you’ll never be too old for your pa to look after you!”

Ruby giggled.

“Thanks Doc, I’ll be in to pay later.”

The doctor nodded; Andrew’s word was good. “No need Pastor, I’ll see you on campus at some stage.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“Thanks Doctor Price,” echoed Ruby.

“It’s my pleasure, Miss Collins.” He smiled and held the clinic door open for Andrew to exit.

“Mr. McAllister, you are still here? Ruby blushed; Andrew lifted her up into the wagon.

“Ah yes, Sir, ah Pastor.....” Jake stammered, his eyes fixed on Ruby. He noticed then she had extraordinary blue eyes, he didn’t even know eyes could come in that color, a clear deep sky-blue like over the prairies back home, he couldn’t drag his own eyes from hers, they were captivating. He caught himself and finished his sentence. “.... I... uh, that is.... I, just wanted to check that Miss Collins is okay?”

“That’s awful kind of you,” Andrew said.

“Thank you, Mr. McAllister, for your kindness to me.” Ruby said, his approving gaze causing her to blush.

“Oh, it was my pleasure,” said Jake with a shy smile.

Ruby returned his smile and her usual confidence returned. “I’d like to do something to say thank you for your help.”

“There is no need, Miss Collins, just doing my Christian service.”

“Well, I still would like to. I’d enjoy making a new friend,” she said and genuinely meant it. “How about meeting us on campus for lunch sometime, I have lunch with ‘Principal Collins’ most days.” She grinned and Andrew laughed as he climbed up next to her. “If that’s okay with you, Pa?” she asked.

“Yes, I’d enjoy that, Mr. McAllister. I’ll buy you lunch at the campus cafeteria.”

“It’s not necessary, Pastor Collins....” Jake began to protest.

“Yes, it is!” Andrew insisted. “It is the least I can do for someone who takes such gentle care with one of my girls. We’ll see you there Monday at noon if that suits you.”

Jake smiled. He had been hoping he’d get a chance to talk to this remarkable young lady. That fact that her father would be there wasn’t ideal, but it would be worth it, just to get a chance to talk to her.

He nodded, “I’ll see you then, Pastor Collins, Miss Collins.” He looked into her blue eyes again and couldn’t help but swallow nervously.

“I’ll look forward to it, Mr. McAllister,” smiled Ruby.

“Me too,” said Jake to himself with a wry smile watching the wagon drive away.

Jake barely slept that night. He lay awake with one hand under his head, staring at the ceiling, thinking of Ruby Collins. He laughed at his own silliness, “*We barely said two sentences to each other,*” he murmured into the darkness. He couldn’t understand why he felt this way, especially about a girl he’d just met. He’d known plenty of beautiful girls in his youth group and church back home, but none had ever affected his mind the way she had.

He closed his eyes and saw her face clearly, he pictured her step out of the bank as he had earlier that day, he could see her striking blue eyes and slightly crooked smile. When she’d smiled at him earlier his heart had leapt. He could feel the warmth next to his chest where her head had lain when he carried her. He could still smell her perfume. He sighed and rolled over.

“Now you’ve gone and done it, Jake!” he said to himself. “You’ve fallen in love with that girl! Lord, help me,” he prayed and at last fell asleep with the image of Ruby Collins in his mind.

Ten



Lunch with Miss Collins

Ruby recovered quickly from her ordeal with lots of pampering from her parents and sisters. The girls clambered around eagerly to hear all about what had happened. Emily swooned when she heard how a young man had carried her in his arms.

“Don’t be silly, Emily,” scolded Ruby. “He was just a nice young man being kind to a stranger.” But she blushed as she said it. Ruby had noticed that he was very handsome and strong with broad shoulders, dark hair and deep, caring brown eyes. She grinned and blushed for just a moment until mature, serious Ruby took over as always, she was much too busy for silliness like that, she reprimanded herself and took firm control of her thoughts. She was happy to make a new friend but that was all, she tried to convince herself but still couldn’t shake the little thrill deep down in her heart.

They saw Jake again with his aunt and uncle at church that Sunday. Dressed in a navy suit he made a very handsome figure and Emily swooned over him to Lucy, who was not interested in the slightest. “Concentrate on the sermon, Emily!” she scolded her younger sister.

After church Jake made his way over to the Collins family and greeted Andrew. “Good afternoon, Pastor Collins, Miss Collins.” He nodded, his tone was friendly and kind. There was no obvious outward sign of his feelings. He’d worked very hard to bury them deep

inside over the last few days, he knew he had no right to assume anything and chose instead to try as hard as he could to leave it up to the Lord, and simply be her friend instead. But seeing her dressed simply in a pale green dress, her hair hanging long under her Sunday hat, made his insides churn. His feelings raged, his heart ached when he looked at her, and smelled her perfume. When she smiled at him his knees threatened to buckle beneath him.

“Mr. McAllister, good to see you again, lad,” said Andrew. “I’d like you to meet my wife, Abigail.”

“Mrs. Collins, lovely to meet you,” said Jake, creasing his eyebrows slightly. He’d expected to see a woman with golden hair like Ruby but instead she and the two younger girls around her were all dark with dark eyes. Ruby was nothing like either of her parents. He shrugged and supposed it happens that way sometimes. Why, his own sister had red hair and no one else in the family did.

Then he was introduced to Emily and Sally, who shook his hand and smiled. Emily gushed and swooned inwardly, giggling behind her hand. “Our other daughter Lucy is most probably out climbing trees somewhere,” grinned Andrew.

Ruby smiled at him again, “Lovely to see you again, Mr. McAllister.”

Jake gulped back the rising feelings again and smiled back at her. “I just came to see if you had recovered from your injuries, Miss Collins,” he said politely, desperately trying to keep the grin off his face.

“Yes quite, thank you for asking. My family took good care of me and I’m on the mend, my knee is still a little sore, but it will be right in no time. Thank you for your concern.” She smiled at him.

Jake swallowed and stammered out, “I. I’m... I’m glad to hear it. I’ll see you tomorrow, Miss Collins, Pastor Collins,” he nodded his head to them both.

“Yes, I’ll see you then, Mr. McAllister,” said Andrew shaking the young man’s hand. If he had looked in Jake’s eyes at that moment, he would have seen the shine of love and he might have taken back the invitation. But Andrew was oblivious to the young man’s growing feelings. Jake left the building as calmly as he could, fighting to resist

the urge to throw his hat in the air and whoop. Once he was out of sight of the church he turned and ran the short distance to his home, trying to pull his feelings into line. What was it about this girl that affected him so? Right at that moment if she asked it of him, he was sure he would give her his right leg.

Emily drove Ruby mad for the rest of the day with teasing and swooning over Jake. "He's so dreamy!"

"Oh, stop Emily, he's merely a nice young man and a nice new friend, it sounds like you are the one with the crush!"

Emily laughed and inwardly sighed, if only she was almost seventeen like Ruby and old enough to entertain callers, she'd accept Jake's call for sure. Emily soon got over her silly infatuation and moved on to another boy, there was always someone in her young mind she was 'in love' with at any time. The family despaired over her silliness but hoped she'd grow out of it in time.



Jake excused himself from work at eleven o'clock. Mr. Hayes had been more than happy to give him the early lunch break, Jake could make the time up later.

He headed home, changed into his nicest shirt and clean trousers, applied just a little cologne so he didn't smell like wood shavings and made his way on horseback to the campus. He found the cafeteria and took a seat, arriving early he reached for the newspaper that was sitting on one of the tables and began to read it.

Andrew saw the young man walk to the cafeteria from his office window, he finished up his task and joined Ruby and Jake right on noon.

Jake laid down the paper and looked up, across the campus from him he could see a group of young people who'd just been released from class. Miss Collins was among them, he watched as she and three of her girlfriends strolled towards the cafeteria each with satchels over their shoulders and books in their arms. Jake was about

to stand up and walk across to offer to carry her books for her when Andrew walked towards her, he automatically reached out for the books she carried and Jake heard her say, "Here's my pa, I'll see you in class."

"How are you today, ladies?" Andrew greeted the girls.

"Just fine thank you, Principal Collins," the girl closest to Ruby said.

"I trust your studies are going well."

"Yes, thank you," another of her friends nodded in response.

"I'll see you for Professor Michael's class," Ruby said with a wave and headed towards the cafeteria with her pa.

This was their daily routine, sometimes the girls had lunch with them but today Ruby had said she was meeting a friend, so they waved and walked away to eat their packed lunches under the shelter by the library.

Andrew took Ruby's arm and they laughed together about something as they walked in the door.

Jake stood to greet the pair and Andrew placed Ruby's books down on the table.

"Good day, Mr. McAllister." Andrew reached out to shake Jake's hand.

"Good day, Pastor Collins, Miss Collins." He tipped his head to her and held her gaze just a moment longer than he meant to.

"Hi," Ruby said kindly, taking the seat her father offered her. She took off her satchel and hung it over the empty seat beside her.

Jake waited until she was seated and sat down opposite her. Andrew left the table to fetch their lunch and for a few moments Jake was alone with Ruby, he gulped, suddenly acutely aware of her every move. From his place across from her he could smell her perfume. He swallowed and fumbled with his coffee cup and stammered trying to find something to say. It felt to Jake like time sat still and he realized that Ruby had spoken to him, and he'd missed it. He took a deep breath and looked up at her. "I I I..." He sighed and then shook his head. "Sorry, Miss Collins," he said rather contritely. "I'm not much good at making small talk." Jake apologized, his cheeks reddened, betraying his embarrassment.

Ruby smiled kindly and reached out to touch his arm briefly. Jake gulped at the small gesture that sent lightning bolts through his body. She pulled her hand back quickly as though she hadn't meant to touch him and she chuckled, immediately putting Jake more at ease. "It's quite okay, Mr. McAllister, really it is, I understand. I don't much like small talk either, I'd rather have a meaningful conversation with a friend." She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head sideways.

"I'd like that, Miss Collins; I'll tell you anything you want to know about me. I just don't know where to start these conversations."

"Very well, Mr. McAllister, I'll start then. My pa told me you're going to be a carpenter, have you always wanted to work with wood?"

Jake smiled, she seemed genuinely interested in him and he soon heard himself sharing his passion for making things with his hands. She nodded along and asked him further questions. By the time Andrew arrived back at the table with their lunches Jake had grown at ease with Ruby. He still couldn't get his swirling feelings to slow down but his initial uneasiness was gone. He found Ruby so interesting and easy to talk to. He was mesmerized by her eyes and her delicate features. She had a shapely nose and a crooked smile. He loved how her lips curled up more on the right side of her face and she had just the hint of a dimple when she smiled. He found himself trying to make her smile just so he could make that dimple appear. Every move of her head sent shimmering waves of gold down her long tresses as the sunlight shone through the window. He noticed every movement, every crease in her face, every smile, every blush to her cheeks, and oh, her silvery laugh.

The lunch was pleasant, and Jake worked very hard to keep his focus on the conversation, his thoughts constantly threatening to overtake him and come bubbling out every time she looked at him with those intense blue eyes.

Andrew enjoyed Jake's company and found him to be a charming and educated young man. They learned a lot about him at that meal. He was eighteen years old and had come from the small prairie town of Pine Ridge, some ways east of Olivers Grove. It was not unlike Rivers Junction where Abigail's family had come from and

he'd grown up on a farm there, with his parents and three older brothers and his younger sister.

"You didn't want to farm?" Andrew asked him.

"No, I was telling Miss Collins earlier I've always loved to carve and build things. Been whittling since I was a boy and I've made most of the furniture for my bedroom at home and a few pieces good enough for my ma's kitchen. Pa agreed I need some formal training to learn the rest of what I need to know. When I was twelve years old, I spent my summer carving the most ornate chicken coop in the West." His eyes sparkled.

Andrew and Ruby both laughed heartily, and Jake took delight at watching the small dimple bounce on Ruby's cheek. His heart raced and he couldn't help but grin, he loved to make her laugh.

"I'll bet your folks miss you dreadfully." Ruby asked and she nodded to the lady offering her a refill of her coffee cup.

"Yeah, I'm sure, I miss them too, but Pa gave me his blessing. Harvey, Simeon and James are capable of running the farm and Tammy is still in school. Ma suggested I come here, and she wrote Pa's sister, Aunt Jo, to see if there were any opportunities in this town. Uncle Robert knows Mr. Hayes and gave me a good report and well, here I am, I'm two days into the job and I'm loving it already."

"That's great," Ruby smiled. "Your aunt and uncle are wonderful people."

"Yes, Aunt Jo is spoiling me, all my cousins are spread across the country now and she doesn't get to see them much, so I think she's rather enjoying having another person to look after."

Andrew chuckled. "She's very hospitable, always got cake ready and waiting whenever a person calls."

"Is that all you notice, Pa," Ruby teased. "The cake."

Andrew winked at her, "I sure do love cake!" he said and picked up the muffin from his tray and took a large bite. The two young people laughed outright.

"Tell me about your family, Mr. McAllister," Ruby asked.

"My folks are devout Christians; Ma played the piano at church and my pa is an elder. He sometimes leads the singing when

Ma plays and I remember as a boy we used to stand around the piano at home and sing all the hymns while Ma practiced.”

“That sounds wonderful,” gushed Ruby, “I love to sing the hymns.” Andrew nodded and his eyes shone, the blessed songs they sung on Sundays carried so much meaning in their worship of the Lord.

“Two of my brothers are married,” he continued, “Harve lives on the farm with Pa and his wife and their new baby girl who is about three weeks old.” Jake grinned and his eye shone.

“Such a blessing.” Andrew said.

Jake nodded and smiled, “I agree, it was so special to hold her before I left, little Daphne sure is precious.” He seemed wistful for a time and then continued, “Ma used to be a teacher back east before she married. She was raised in the city, and she insisted we all received an excellent education, worked with us every day. She insisted there’d be no ‘prairie talk’ in her home. She said farmers were just as capable of speaking properly as city dandies were. She never did completely succeed with Pa, but we’d have got our ears boxed if we didn’t ‘enunciate correctly.’” He said deliberately, causing Ruby to flash him a wide grin, and yes, that dimple. He swallowed again.

“James is the next brother up from me, he got married last fall and they live in town, but he works the farm with Pa. Simeon still lives at home, I’m not sure that boy will ever marry, he’s always goofing off.” Jake laughed. “And Tam, well she’s got red hair and is the most stubborn and headstrong girl I ever knew, but then she’s got four older brothers, so I guess she has to be.” He smiled. “She’s sixteen and just finishing up at school.

Ruby could tell he thought very highly of his sister. “You have four boys and a girl, and we have four girls and a boy,” she chuckled.

“I didn’t realize you have a brother; I’ve not met him.”

“Tommy lives in Miners Plain with my uncle,” Ruby said, and her father flashed her a grateful smile, thankful she hadn’t disclosed anything about the fortune, it was no one else’s business.

“You must miss him.” Jake offered.

“Yes, I do. Our house isn’t the same without him, Lucy’s been in quite a mood ever since he left.” Andrew frowned at her, but Jake laughed.

“She’ll adjust I’m sure, Miss Collins, it can take time.”

The lunch hour came to an end, and they had to depart, it was much too soon for Jake, he could have gone right on talking to Ruby all afternoon. Andrew paid for their lunch and farewelled the young people. “Great to see you again, Mr. McAllister, we must do this again soon, I’ve really enjoyed getting to know you. Would you pass on my greetings to your aunt and uncle?”

“I’d be happy to, Pastor.”

“Could you also pass on Abigail’s invitation for the three of you to come to Sunday lunch after the service?”

“Jake grinned,” I’d be happy to. Aunt Josephine will be delighted, but she’ll throttle me if I don’t ask, do you want us to bring anything to go with the meal?”

“Don’t ask me,” Andrew chuckled. “I know nothing about cooking, only tried it a handful of times myself and it was disaster every time. But I’ll check with Abigail.”

“I’ll take him the message when I go for the mail this evening, Pa.”

Andrew nodded, “That will be just fine,” he winked and said for Jake’s benefit, “Just watch out for rogue horses!”

She giggled, “I will.”

“Now I must get going, you need anything, darling?” said Andrew.

“No Pa, I’ve got to walk across to Block A now,” Andrew nodded.

“I’ll escort you if I may, I’d like to check out the buildings my boss built,” Jake said, quickly scrambling for a legitimate reason to spend more time with Ruby.

“That will be fine thank you, Mr. McAllister.” Ruby smiled and Andrew raised his eyebrows, and farewelled the two, striding back to his office and paperwork that awaited him.

Ruby stood and picked up her coat, Jake remembered his manners and reached out to help her with it and she nodded her thanks. His hand brushed her golden hair and it shimmered in the sunlight as it moved. He swallowed back the leap in his heart and scooped up her books in his other arm while she pulled her satchel over her head.

“Miss Collins,” he said politely offering her his arm. She smiled and placed her gloved hand on his arm. Jake grinned and his heart raced more, just having her so close to him sent thrills through his body.

Ruby chatted pleasantly with him as she led him towards her classroom in the fall sunshine. They walked right past Andrew’s window and he looked up to see his smiling daughter on the arm of this handsome, strong young man. He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat as he thought about all the young men that admired his beautiful daughter. Matty walked in and saw Andrew watching the pair.

The younger minister chuckled, “It’s only a matter of time friend. You better prepare yourself for the inevitable, Pastor Collins.”

“Inevitable?” Andrew turned and cocked one eyebrow up, pretending he didn’t understand.

“Mark my words, friend! You’re gonna lose that girl soon. Every day I see a different young man fighting for her attention.”

“Ugh,” said Andrew. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“You can’t keep them forever, Andrew, you have to teach them how to be independent and then let them be, trusting that you’ve taught them right and they make wise decisions.”

“You sound like my wife,” laughed Andrew.

“She’s a wise woman,” they both laughed. Matty watched the two as they passed by and turned towards Ruby’s classroom, her free hand pointing out features while they talked. “They sure do make a handsome couple, Pastor.”

Andrew groaned but he nodded, he had to agree they seemed comfortable with each other, and he was certainly a young man of real integrity.



Later that night Andrew confided in Abigail about the conversation he'd had with Matty earlier that day. "He's right, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so, Husband."

"They did make a handsome pair though, I must admit."

"Do you think they have feelings for each other? Ruby hasn't said anything."

"I really don't know, I don't think Ruby does anyway, she was polite, and kind and he was very courteous. I don't think there is anything there, Ruby is that way with all the young men. I just thought they made quite a picture walking through campus together. No doubt tomorrow a different young man will escort her to class, and I'll have to watch them from my window too!"

"Poor man," Abigail laughed, reaching out to touch his face gently.

He reached for her hand and held it becoming serious then. "You know I'm very proud of Ruby. I've never seen her flirt with a boy or lead anyone on, she's polite and kind to them all but I haven't seen her gush and swoon the way other girls do. I believe that is why she is so attractive to them."

"Yes, she's a very mature girl, she's got her head switched on. One day she'll notice a young man though and it might be a different story," Abigail replied.

"I guess you could be right, Wife," Andrew said with a wry smile. "But even so, I just don't think that's in Ruby's nature." He sighed then, "I wish I could say the same for Emily. I despair of her foolish flirtations. I've talked to that girl many times, but she seems to just have her head in the clouds about boys all the time."

"I know, I don't think you need be concerned. I've seen girls like that before and they usually grow out of it."

"I sure hope so, Abigail. I don't want to see her get hurt."

Jake and Ruby's friendship only grew, and he often joined the Collins family for supper or dinner after church. On one occasion

after Ruby had farewelled Jake for the evening Abigail asked her if she thought Jake was special.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders, "I don't know, Ma," she said. "I really haven't given it much thought. I'm much too busy with my studies now, I graduate in two months you know! I like him plenty though, I do enjoy Jake's company, he's so easy to talk to. But I feel that way about all the friends I have at the college, several of them are men."

Her mother nodded. "Yes, you have made some fine friends, Ruby. I'm proud of you for putting your studies first, there is plenty of time for courting later. But if one of those young men does become special to you, you'll tell me, won't you?"

Ruby blushed and smiled. "If I can work out my own feelings, Ma, I'll try to put them into words."

Abigail laughed at the girl but totally understood how hard those feelings could be to articulate.



Letters travelled backwards and forwards across the prairies between Olivers Grove and Springsdale with news of Luke's slow progress and Tommy's new life in Miners Plain.

A few weeks after Ruby's seventeenth birthday Lucy brought home the post as she often did. There was a letter from Tommy. Andrew eagerly ripped it open that evening to read to the family as he usually did. It wasn't Tommy's usual lengthy missive full of the ups and downs of his life. It was a short simple note telling them that Andrew's mother had died peacefully in her sleep.

Andrew dropped the letter and covered his face and wept with his family to comfort him. "Mother made me promise not to mourn her. She's with her Lord and savior now and I can only rejoice in that." He curled his mouth up on one side in a rather unconvincing smile and nodded. "I loved her very much, and we'll be reunited, all we can do children, is live to make her and her Heavenly Father proud." They all nodded and embraced their beloved Pa.

Tommy's short note had gone on to say Henry had softened somewhat when his mother had passed, and he had been there to help his uncle grieve. Tommy did all he could to share the Good News with Henry and prayed for him daily. He believed that his words were slowly beginning to sink in, and the Collins family determined to pray for both men.

Henry's illness was progressing rapidly, the doctor had been several times but there was little they could do for him, and they knew it wouldn't be much longer. He seldom got out on the farm anymore and young Tommy was now running the estate. He had felt so overwhelmed at the task and had made the decision to form a council of farmers among those who farmed the property. He as yet did not have any power to make drastic changes, leastways not while his uncle remained alive, but he was beginning to build relationships with the people and earn their trust, daily he worked alongside them and proved himself to the older men. He promised them that things were going to be different, and he truly listened to them and what they wanted.

His council of farmers were his advisors to some extent. Tommy didn't have the knowledge or experience needed to run the estate on his own, so he relied on the wisdom of these weathered men. The eight men and Tommy met together weekly to decide what was best for Miners Plain in the future. and begin to draw up plans to make some changes. One change Tommy had been able to convince his uncle to approve of was to drop the high taxes on the land. Tommy hoped it was a step in the right direction towards eventually giving the farmers back the land.

He had found out, and even Andrew hadn't known, that the land used to belong to the farmers and the town, leastways most of it. Andrew's father had bought the land that housed the mine and then as his fortune grew, he slowly bought each farm out from under the struggling farmers. It had been during a drought that had lasted several years, and they had no choice but to sell to him, he would then graciously allow them to stay, and they would pay a small tax to him. At first it was a good deal, with money in their pockets the farmers were able to increase their crops, or flocks or herds, but the drought

continued, and the money was soon gone. Then Tommy's grandfather began to increase the taxes ever so slowly until the farmers did nothing but slave away for him, gaining very little, if any, profit. Many were barely able to keep food on the table but with no money and no land to sell they were stuck.

Tommy was more determined than ever to see these hardworking men get their land back. They had well and truly repaid the value of their farms over and over with the stiff taxes. He hadn't been able to get Uncle Henry to completely forgo the taxes, but he had dramatically reduced them and assured the farmers they were now able to begin to keep the profit that they made off their small farms. It was a huge relief to the council, and they began to dream about the possibility of building a proper church and school, and perhaps even paying a real teacher to come and teach their children and a real reverend to minister to them.

These stories and their dreams made Tommy even more determined and his family in Olivers Grove daily committed the young man and his council of farmers to the Lord in prayer. Andrew was incredibly proud to hear of the difference that young Tommy was already making at Miners Plain and he knew without a doubt that he was the best person for the job. He was so impressed that Tommy hadn't tried to takeover when he had no experience but had wisely leaned on those who knew. To those farmers he was no foolish kid but a very wise and fair young man.



Weekly Lydia reported back on the progress Luke was making. To begin with it looked like there was no change to his condition. He still couldn't do much for himself and could only utter a few whispered words. While most of the damage had been confined to his right side, his whole body was still very weak, the fever had set back his progress some, and he remained frail as a result. Lydia hadn't been allowed to be in most of the therapy sessions so she couldn't report on all that was taking place, but she had been trained on how

to properly help Luke to stretch his muscles each day and exercise the stiff and unused limbs.

It seemed like a waste of money for the first month and Lydia was considering pulling the pin and coming home. But one young wife she met in the wards whose new husband had also suffered the same condition convinced her to have faith. Her husband had been in the program for six months and was now sitting up, beginning to talk again and had even been able to feed himself. She was confident that soon he'd be up and about. Marcy became a good and supportive friend to Lydia, and they prayed together a lot and encouraged each other when the going got tough.

The most recent letter was full of encouraging news. Luke was gaining strength and his left side was getting stronger. He couldn't yet sit up by himself but when propped up he was able to feed himself, although due to weakened facial muscles he struggled to keep all the food in his mouth at times. He was also rapidly regaining his speech, every day he improved. Some words remained a challenge and he mumbled and slurred when he spoke, but Lydia was delighting in being able to have some sort of conversation again with the man she loved. She had been impressed at his positive outlook. He managed to tell her to be faithful, he felt like much change was taking place in his body and he praised the Lord every day. There were certainly times he despaired and chafed at not being able to do the work the Lord called him to do, but together they faced the challenges ahead.

Lydia missed her children and little Timmy fiercely. He was growing by the day and Abigail did her best to keep Lydia up to date on all his happenings.

Once a week Tommy would saddle his horse, Polly and ride into Springsdale, pick up Aunt Lydia and take her out to a nice restaurant for lunch. They compared messages from home and chatted. It was wonderful they had each other's company.

The Collins family enjoyed the newsy letters that came regularly as a family and Andrew would lead them all in prayer around the supper table each evening for all the family in different parts of the country. It seemed to Abigail that no one ever just stayed put anymore, families spread far and wide across the land. She was so

thankful for regular mail and the fact that there was nowhere that a person could go that God was not already, meaning that they could pray with certainty knowing without a doubt that God's mighty hand would be with them, even when they couldn't.

Eleven



The Chicken

Spring arrived seemingly overnight that year. One day chilly winds blew down from the north and while there had been very little snow it was certainly cold enough. The next day it was as though someone had clicked their fingers and it was a whole new season. The paths abounded with wild-flowers and the fields around the college became a kaleidoscope of floral beauty. The trees were lined with blossoms and the early spring lambs soon made an appearance; the world was suddenly teeming with activity as all of creation celebrated the increasing warmth.

In Olivers Grove the people celebrated the coming of Spring with a dance. The spring dance was a very big deal and young people clambered to get the attention of each other. Many happy marriages began as a shy invitation to that dance. The pressure was immense to some, especially the shy young men who needed to pluck up the courage to invite the young lady of their choice to the event.

This was the problem for young Jake McAllister. He and Ruby had by now built a steady and growing friendship. Ruby enjoyed spending time with the thoughtful young man and although he was very busy learning his trade they saw each other from time to time at church, youth group and town events.



One early spring day Ruby strolled to the post office enjoying the spring sun on her face. She posted the letter to her brother and stepped outside, she saw Jake on one of his rare breaks from the carpentry shop sitting outside the store on a nail box whittling and taking a long drink from his canteen.

“Hi Jake,” she called cheerfully walking over to him. Her smile still made his knees weak and when she said his name like that, eyes shining in joy at him, his heart leapt. Try as he might he hadn’t been able to curb the feelings inside him, he had to admit that he was hopelessly and completely in love with Ruby Collins. She was young and still finishing her studies, so he was more than happy to bide his time. But, oh how difficult it was not to take her in his arms and hold her all the time. When he saw her coming that spring day, he dreamed for a moment that she was walking the aisle in the church to become his wife. “Stop it Jake, you are making a fool of yourself!” he chided but he couldn’t help thinking that the sun shining on her golden hair gave her a halo like an angel.

“Morning Miss Collins.” Jake smiled at her. Ruby had asked him many times to use her given name, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so, he couldn’t trust his feelings not to betray him and come tumbling out if he didn’t keep it formal, so while he thought of her as Ruby, he always stuck with the formal greeting. She didn’t feel the same way however and he delighted to hear her say his name.

“Whatcha making, Jake?” She grinned at him, motioning to the growing carving in his hand. She loved to see his creations and he took great delight in showing her. Several times she had come into the store and admired his handywork. Her praise made his heart sing. She really seemed to love the beautiful wooden pieces and he hoped in the future to be good enough to make her something special. He’d been working for a time on a beautiful wooden bracelet that Mr. Hayes was helping him to carve. It was almost finished, and he wondered if he’d ever have the courage to give it to her.

“Oh, this is nothing, just whittling, but I’ve been working on a number of small pieces in the shop today.”

“Oh really?” she smiled. “May I see them?”

He gulped, “Sure, if you’d like to!”

"I'd love to, Jake, lead the way," she said flashing him the crooked smile he loved to see, and knowing he'd put that smile there, that made his heart leap, he lead her into the workshop where Mr. Hayes was sanding a piece of wood to make a dining table for the Morris family.

"Hello Mr. Hayes," Ruby called out to the gentlemen.

"Why howdy, Miss Collins, beautiful day ain't it."

"Yes, it is. I've just come to see Jake's new creations."

"Very good," he said and went back to his job.

Jake led Ruby out into the storeroom at the back of the shop where the pieces were put before they were varnished and ready to be placed out in the store for sale. He showed her the little wooden animals he'd been making. He'd just finished a pair of galloping horses and was preparing to sand and paint them.

"These are beautiful, Jake," she said turning over the piece in her delicate hands, he noticed how soft and white her hands looked.

"They aren't very good yet, I'm still learning."

"Oh no, they are wonderful. What other animals have you made?"

"All these here."

"These are all yours, you made all of these?" she asked, the admiration shining in her eyes.

"Yes ma'am," he said.

"May I?" she asked reaching towards a three-inch-high carved chicken that had recently been painted and varnished.

"Of course,"

"Oh, it's so beautiful, the colors are so real."

He chuckled, "You like chickens?"

Ruby blushed then and nodded, and her eyes sparkled with humor. Those shining eyes, how they cut deep into Jake's soul and there was that dimple, he swallowed and chuckled at her.

"Yes," she giggled. "Don't laugh but I love chickens, I always have. When I was a little girl, we had chickens and I loved to play with them. I'd climb right inside the chicken coup and try to hug 'em."

Jake laughed, "Did they let you?" How he loved the candid and easy way she had about her, she had a delightful sense of humor and wasn't afraid to laugh at herself.

"Yes, some of them. I made one of them, Mrs. Feathertail, my special pet, I even snuck her into my room one night and had her in my bed."

"You didn't?"

"I did! I was six years old and tucked Mrs. Feathertail right down under the covers, she sat down and went to sleep. I might have got away with it had Pa not sat on my bed to talk to me that night and Mrs. Feathertail squawked her displeasure." Ruby's eyes shone with laughter and her cheeks colored slightly as she spoke, Jake drank in the sight of her, and grinned at the small glimpses he got of that dimple on her cheek that bounced between her words.

"I'll bet your Pa wasn't overly happy with that?"

"No, as you can well imagine. He scolded me and my punishment was that I wasn't allowed to play in the chicken coup for a whole week. Longest week of my life." She laughed rolling her eyes. "But I've always loved chickens. I bet you think that's a bit weird."

"Not at all, I think it's great that you love chickens, I've never before met a girl that loved chickens."

"Well, I'm not like most girls."

'That's for sure!' thought Jake. But he just smiled. "Do you have chickens now?"

"Nope, we haven't had 'em since we left Oceansview when I was twelve. I do miss them terribly. I hope that one day when I have a home of my own," she blushed slightly. "I'll get to have a big flock of chickens and get to raise baby chicks again!"

"I'm sure you will," said Jake but internally he thought, *'If I have anything to do with it, you'll have a whole army of chickens, the whole world if you want it.'* He tried so hard to keep his feelings in check, but these thoughts just tumbled into his brain whether he liked it or not.

"You can have this chicken if you want it." He said, trembling internally. It was the first time he'd ever given her anything and he

wasn't sure what her reaction would be. He hadn't meant to say it, but the words poured out before he could stop them.

"Oh, I couldn't Jake, you need to sell these things."

"I want you to have it, Miss Collins, so you can remember Mrs. Feathertail."

"It does look like her, are you sure you don't mind, your boss won't mind?"

"Not at all, I made it out of scrap materials and if they don't sell, we usually give 'em to children."

Ruby laughed, "Not overgrown children like me?"

"You're hardly a child, Miss Collins," he said. "I'd really like you to have it if you want it."

"Oh Jake, I really would, thank you that's so kind of you. I will keep it on my nightstand, and I will think of Mrs. Feathertail and the craftsman who carved this." Without hesitation she stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you so much, I will treasure it. I have to go now but I hope to see you tomorrow at the service."

Jake mumbled some response, but his head was swirling. He watched her walk out cradling the wooden chicken. He immediately sat down on the stool nearby afraid that if he didn't his knees would buckle beneath him. He lifted his hand to his cheek where he could still feel her lips. His eyes misted over, and he grinned.

It took Jake a good five minutes to regain his composure and go back to work but his mind was far from the tasks in front of him, his mind was firmly focused on the beautiful dancing sparkling eyes full of humor and fun, and the warm spot on his cheek. In that moment he doubted he could ever wash his face again. He vowed then and there that he was going to find a way, try to find the courage to ask her to the spring dance.

Mr. Hayes chuckled when Jake finally came out of the back room with sparkling eyes, he'd been watching the two from his spot in the workshop, through the opening into the back room. He'd seen the lad give her the chicken and he'd seen the Collins girl kiss him on the cheek and he'd seen Jake's reaction. 'Poor lad,' he thought 'he's a

goner!" He knew from experience exactly what the young man was going through.



Ruby cradled the small wooden chicken in her arm as she walked back home. Andrew asked her about it. "What have you got there, darling?"

"Mrs. Feathertail." She blushed slightly.

"Mrs. Feathertail?" Abigail questioned coming out of the kitchen to see. "Why it does look like that cheeky chicken."

Andrew laughed, "Sure does. Where'd it come from?" he asked curiously.

"Jake McAllister carved it, I told him the story about Mrs. Feathertail being in my bed and he laughed and told me I could have it."

Andrew looked at his wife and she returned the knowing look. "That's great, my darling." He reached for the chicken, turning it over in his hands and giving it a thorough investigation, "The carving is excellent, he's learning very well, did he paint it too?"

"Yes, he's made a whole zoo of animals, he's still learning, and some did look a little awkward but he's really getting very talented, he had just finished a pair of galloping horses and they were excellent. He has a very good eye for detail."

Andrew nodded; he couldn't help the gnawing feeling that a relationship was developing between the two.

Ruby placed the chicken on the shelf above her desk where she did her study. Whenever she sat at her desk it was almost at eye level and she smiled whenever she saw it, that little chicken remained one of Ruby's favorite possessions throughout her life.

Twelve



Rejection

Ruby did see Jake at church that Sunday and he asked after Mrs. Feathertail. “Did she get home safely?”

“Yes, I made sure she did.”

“I hope it isn’t sleeping in your bed.”

Ruby laughed heartily and Jake took note of the appearance of the dimple that made his heart dance in delight. “No, I sat her on the shelf by my desk where she will be safe.”

“Good,” then they were surrounded by many other youths from their town youth group who were making plans for a hayride and both Ruby and Jake were invited to go along.

“*This might be the time I pluck up the courage to ask her to the spring dance,*” he thought to himself. “I’ll see you at three for the hayride?”

“I’ll be there,” said Ruby.

But Jake barely got a chance to even talk to Ruby on the hayride, and he certainly didn’t get a moment alone with her to ask her to the dance. A constant swirl of gentlemen swarmed around Ruby all afternoon. She started the hayride sitting by her cousin Samuel and her friend from the college, Lizzie Sanders. But throughout the afternoon many young men vied for her attention. Jake sat near the back and although he couldn’t spend time with her, he enjoyed watching her animated face as she laughed and chatted to

others. He felt pangs of jealousy every time a young man would fawn over her. She never refused any of their advances, but she didn't encourage them either. He liked that about her. She was certainly no flirt, just friendly and kind to everyone.

Jake watched while Lewis Evans put his arm around her to support her when the wagon hit a bump in the road. His arm remained around Ruby's waist for some time and Jake fumed at his forwardness. When the wagon stopped at the meadow Carl Foster leapt down and reached up to help Ruby down from the wagon taking her by the waist. She put her hands on his shoulders as he lifted her down. Jake leapt down and walked away sadly; he didn't want to watch other young men fawning all over the woman he loved.

Oh, how he wished he could be the one to help her, he'd do anything for her, but he knew he had no right to feel this way. He'd not made any offers to her, she wasn't his and she wasn't doing anything inappropriate, simply being polite and accepting the help of others who were also just being polite. He just didn't want to watch it.

The young people all had a great time playing games together at the meadow and Jake really did enjoy himself. Molly Brooks seemed to have taken quite a shining to him and she asked him to be her partner for the three-legged race. He knew he couldn't refuse, it would be impolite, besides Ruby was busy tying her boot to Leo Barnes, a man she knew from college. The wealthy, charming young man looked very pleased with himself as he helped Ruby stand up and put his arm around her waist. He was tall and very handsome, and all the girls swooned over him. He had eyes for Ruby too, but Jake knew it wasn't genuine love, not like his was. Leo always had to have the best of everything, the nicest wagon, the best horses, the most expensive clothes and now he wanted the prettiest girl, not because he loved her, just because that would make him look good.

She and Leo lined up right next to Jake and Molly. Ruby smiled at them, "Good luck." Then the gun sounded, and they were off.

Jake and Molly were in the lead by some way, they had good rhythm, but Leo and Ruby were close behind. Just before the finish

line Jake deliberately tripped so that he and Molly crashed to the ground letting Leo and Ruby win. Leo hugged Ruby and kissed her on the head, they quickly untied their string and accepted their ribbon. Molly berated Jake waving her arms and fuming about their loss, but he didn't hear her. He was too busy watching Ruby's face shine with happiness. Even though he didn't get to be her partner it was worth it to see her win.

Jake walked over to congratulate her. "That's a nice ribbon," Jake said kindly.

"Yes," she said and then looked a bit contrite. "I'm sorry you fell so close to the line, you and Molly made an excellent pair up until then."

He cringed at the insinuation that he and Molly were a pair. But he just smiled. "Nah, it's okay, you two deserved it, I tripped over my own three feet!" Ruby laughed heartily at his joke. They were interrupted then by the bell to signal that dinner was ready. They lined up with their plates and Jake motioned for Ruby to take the place in front of him in line. Molly sidetracked him by asking him to put some cold roast beef on her plate since he was closer. He was happy to oblige her but when he looked up Ruby was being escorted to the nearby log seats by several of her girlfriends.

Jake took the last remaining spot next to Molly and he found her good company, they chatted while they ate, but his eyes would inadvertently drift to Ruby whether he liked it or not. He turned his attention briefly to look at Molly, she was a beautiful woman too, with delicate features and long eyelashes, almost black hair and high cheekbones. She was nice, and kind and in most people's minds would be a good catch, but Jake didn't feel anything for her, other than kindness and respect he'd give to any young lady. His eyes floated from young lady to young lady around the group, each had their merits and were nice girls too. Some very beautiful but still, none made his heart leap inside his chest the way Ruby did. He turned his eyes back to her smiling face. It was as if in that animated face his eyes had found their greatest delight, and unless they were looking at her, they could never find satisfaction. He smirked and shook his head sadly, could he ever compete with all the men fawning over her?

He an apprentice carpenter amongst these trainee doctors and lawyers.

When they finally got back to town Jake still couldn't get a moment to talk to Ruby alone. She saw him though, across the group and smiled and waved as Carl Foster helped her climb up into the wagon. He lived not far from the campus, it made sense that he'd be taking Ruby and Samuel home. Jake waved back to her and began his short walk home. Shoving his hands deep in his pockets he tried to reconcile his feelings as he walked. She hadn't done anything to encourage any of those young men and yet they threw themselves at her. Jake knew that wasn't the right way to do it and was much too shy and polite to try, but it irked him to see them fawn over her. She was a sweet and kind girl and deserved better than them.

'But then, why shouldn't she like one of those young men, they are much wealthier than I am,' he thought. *'Apprentice wages don't go far, and I have virtually no money to my name.'* He sighed; he was not destitute but certainly could be classed as poor in comparison to these young men. He always did his best to dress well with the help of Aunt Josephine, but he owned only one good suit and that was strictly for Sundays. These young men had lots of fancy clothing and came from wealthier families. At least three of them from the hayride where at college with Ruby and he knew that Leo and Carl were both training to be lawyers. *'How could he expect to compete?'*

He kicked at a large stone and told himself he was wasting his time. *'She'd never go to the dance with me anyway.'* He opened the door of his uncle's home and slumped down on the sofa utterly dejected. Uncle Robert looked up from his newspaper. "A penny for your thoughts, Jake?"

"Oh, it's nothing Uncle Robert, just feeling sorry for myself." He crossed his arms across his chest and stared into the fire.

Uncle Robert closed the newspaper. "Jo, we need some coffee," he announced, and the stout lady obliged, bringing both men steaming cups of the rich black liquid and a tray of cookies. She sensed the lad needed to talk and cookies always helped a young man open up. Robert sat down opposite his nephew and asked knowingly, "Girl trouble, Son?"

Jake knitted his brows together tightly and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked up at his uncle and smiled a sideways grin, "That obvious, huh?"

"I'm afraid so, it's usually what's ailing a young man like you. I've seen you walking around with stars in your eyes, I know you've got a young lady on your mind. Who is she?"

"Ruby Collins," he admitted out loud for the first time.

Uncle Robert's eyebrows shot up, he grinned and nodded, "You picked a fine one there boy. Just about the loveliest girl there is in this town. Very fine family."

"I didn't exactly pick her, Uncle, it just kinda happened." He smirked and slurped at the coffee.

Uncle Robert took a bite of his cookie. "Ya love her?"

Jake just nodded sadly.

"She love you?"

Jake shrugged "I dunno. She's friendly and kind enough and when it's just the two of us I feel like maybe she could." He sighed and leaned his head on his elbow resting on his knee.

"Then what's the problem?"

"I can never get near enough to her to find out, there is always a dozen other guys swarming around," he grimaced.

"I see, you did fall for the prettiest girl in town, you gotta expect some heavy competition." Uncle Robert slurped at his coffee.

Jake took a long draft of his coffee and then, placing it down on the table, he lowered his head. "That's the problem, I just don't think I am competition. I can't compete with those guys, I'm just a poor carpenter's apprentice. I've got nothing to offer a girl like that." He closed his eyes.

"Doesn't she like carpenters?"

Jake looked up. "Sure, she does."

"Has she seen ya work?"

Jake smiled then for the first time and his eyes shone as he remembered the chicken and the gentle kiss, subconsciously his hand flew to his cheek. "Yes, she often comes by to see what I'm working on."

“Sounds to me like she doesn’t mind that you are a carpenter at all.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean she’ll marry me.”

Robert smiled. “You’re getting ahead of yourself, why not just ask her to the dance?”

“I want to, Uncle.”

“What’s stopping you?” asked Aunt Josephine, her knitting needles clicking rapidly while she spoke.

Jake stood up then and put another piece of wood on the fire he leaned against the mantel and sighed again. “She’d never go with me!”

“You might be surprised,” added Aunt Jo.

“Just ask her, Son,” Uncle Robert suggested.

Jake turned back to face him, pain and doubt in his eyes. “How? How does an apprentice carpenter compete with lawyers and doctors?”

“What does what you do for a living have to do with going to a dance?” asked Aunt Jo.

“I can’t even afford to buy her flowers for her buttonhole.”

“Jake,” Aunt Jo smiled at him “Just ask her, I’ll arrange the flowers.”

“What if she says no?”

Uncle Robert answered, “That’s a risk you have to take and of course by now someone else may have already asked her, you have to be prepared to take those knocks. I can’t promise she’ll say yes to you lad, I can’t promise you have a chance with her but if you love her you gotta try. Isn’t she worth it?”

“Oh yes,” said Jake with great feeling closing his eyes and sighing deeply, falling back into his chair.

“Then the only thing I can guarantee you is she definitely can’t say yes if you don’t ask her.” Aunt Jo added.

Jake thought for a moment and then smiled and nodded, “Okay, I’ll ask her tomorrow,” he determined.

“Atta boy,” his uncle reached forward and patted the young man on the shoulder. “I’ll pray for you, Jake. I know that once a girl weasels her way into your heart there is just no getting her out. My

Jo led me on a merry chase thirty years ago. She about turned me inside out with worry and fear.”

“And he needn’t have worried,” Jo smiled, squeezing her husband’s arm. “I loved him from the first day I laid my eyes on him, it just took him forever to ask.”

Jake smiled a wry smile, “She certainly has me all twisted around.”



Mr. Hayes gave Jake some time off the next day so he could go and have a chat with Pastor Collins. He wanted to ask his permission to ask Ruby to the dance, it was the honorable thing to do, if he said no then Jake wouldn’t even bother. He reached into the drawer of his workbench and took out the small wooden bracelet he’d carved out of a single piece of redwood and polished to a high shine. He was very proud of the effort but was nervous to give it to her.

He knew nothing about flowers, nor could he afford an expensive gift, but he knew wood and he couldn’t go to her empty handed. He sighed, hoping she would like it, he’d made it out of scrap wood, and he calculated it was likely worth less than half a penny. He shrugged, “It’s not the cost that counts,” he echoed the words his aunt had said to him when he’d showed it to her. “You made it with your own hands, especially for her and that will mean a lot.” Trying to take heart from his aunt’s words, Jake slipped the little bracelet in a small cloth bag his aunt had given him and headed towards the college.

Jake walked across campus, his heart pounding in his chest. “Just ask her, Jake, that’s all you gotta do.” But first he had to ask her Pa.

Jake stood nervously in front of Andrew’s desk.

“Take a seat, Jake and tell me what I can do for you”

Jake sat down as bid. “Well sir, I... you see.”

Andrew chuckled unsure why the boy was so nervous, they’d spoken to each other many times. “What is it, Jake?”

Jake took a deep breath. *'You can do this, Jake, just ask him,'* he thought to himself.

"Well Sir, that is Pastor Collins. I've come to ask..." He stopped and stared at his boots, shuffling nervously in his chair.

"To ask what?"

He took another deep breath, "I've come to ask your permission to take Ruby to the Spring dance," he blurted out all at once.

Andrew sat up straight and knitted his brows, he had not expected a young man to come and ask him for permission for a dance but here was this young man doing just that. He admired the boy's manners and decorum. None of the other young men who fawned over his beautiful daughter had ever asked him anything. He frowned slightly.

The pause was excruciating for Jake and the confused look on her father's face worried him especially when he saw the frown. Perhaps he saw him as unworthy of his daughter.

Jake took Andrew's stunned silence for a no and rose to leave. "Sorry to have bothered you, Pastor, I'll be on my way."

Andrew found his voice then. "Stop Jake, come back." Jake returned and sat back down. "You just caught me by surprise is all, I haven't met a young man so polite and honorable for some time."

"Does that mean yes?" asked Jake, eager for the torture to end.

"Yes, you have my permission, I can't think of a nicer lad to escort my daughter." Andrew grinned in spite of himself.

"Do you think she'll agree to go with me?"

"I can't answer that, I know better than to speak for my daughters, you should just ask her."

"When."

Andrew chuckled; he knew only too well how it felt to be unsure like that. "It'll be the noon break in fifteen minutes. I'm not meeting her today, I have a meeting, but she's usually somewhere around the common." Andrew raised his eyebrows and Jake paused and thought for a moment, then grinned and ran out the door.

He waited in the cafeteria for the bell to signal the lunch break, trying to still the butterfly circus taking place in his stomach.

He looked up from the newspaper he was attempting to read and saw Ruby with a few of her friends across the courtyard sit down on some stairs. She was with two girls, and they opened their satchels and pulled out their lunches, sharing happy chatter in the sunshine.

He stood, "Well Jake it's now or never," he said to himself. He squared his shoulders and tapped the bracelet in his pocket and walked across the courtyard. From her position Ruby didn't notice Jake, there was too many people milling around and she was laughing at her friend's joke. He was several yards away when he saw Leo Barnes approach. Jake stopped to watch them. He could just make out their voices over the chatter all around. Leo was very loud and rather abrupt and enjoyed having an audience.

"Afternoon ladies," said the brash, vain Leo. He leaned against the post that held up the canopy nearby.

The two other girls giggled, Ruby just smiled kindly, "Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes."

"The name is Leo, Ruby," he said. Ruby cringed a little, she had never given him permission to use her given name, he had just assumed he could. She didn't consider their friendship close enough for that informality. She said nothing, just nodded.

"Do you need something, Leo," one of her friends asked flirtatiously. Ruby frowned, she despaired of Alice's silliness when it came to men.

"As a matter of fact, I do?" He smiled broadly, "I was hoping I could talk to you privately, Ruby."

Jake frowned, his feet were like stone, and he was pinned to the spot, he just couldn't tear himself away.

Ruby looked at her friends. "Sure, I guess" she shrugged her shoulders non-committally. She took Leo's offered arm and allowed herself to be led to a large oak tree. Jake followed but stayed out of sight. He stood up next to the building and peered around the corner. Ruby leaned against the tree enjoying the shade.

"Well, what is it you need, Mr. Barnes?" she asked kindly.

He put his hand out and brushed a wayward piece of hair off her face tucking it behind her ear. Ruby flinched but didn't move. Jake couldn't believe the brazenness of this man. He knew he

shouldn't have been eavesdropping, but he feared Leo was going to ask her to the dance and he didn't want to ask her if someone else already had, he couldn't face the rejection.

"I was hoping you'd go to the dance with me, Ruby," Leo said and brushed her cheek.

Ruby's eyes grew wide, and she gulped and pulled away from him, "I'm, I'm sorry Leo but you're too late." She stammered trying to come up with some valid reason to put him off, "I'm going with someone else..."

Jake didn't stop to hear anything else, he exhaled loudly and thumped the wall, turned on his heels and ran all the way back to the carpentry shop. He stormed into the shop, threw the bracelet in the drawer and slammed it shut, slunk into the back room and sat down on the small stool.

Ruby heard the noise from around the corner and looked towards the sound in time to glimpse a disappearing pair of boots, they looked like the kind Jake McAllister wore, but that wasn't possible because he'd have no reason to be on campus. '*A shame,*' she thought, she had hoped her friend was going to ask her to the dance, he was a nice young man and she thought he might ask her, but he hadn't. No one had. Well, no one except Leo. She knew she shouldn't have lied to him, but he repulsed her. She would rather not go to the dance at all than with him. She was never openly impolite to him, that wasn't right, but she certainly did not like him, he was over the top and vain and always overstepping the mark taking liberties with girls. It was all she could do to remain calm when he'd touched her cheek.

She realized then that she'd left Leo's second question hanging. He'd asked her who she was going with. His back was to the building, and he hadn't seen or heard Jake. "Um... I... I... can't say," she said to him.

"It's that no good Carl Foster, ain't it?" he asked but didn't wait for the answer. "What's he got that I haven't?" he sneered, gripping her around the waist, his eyes flaming with anger, he didn't like to be refused. Fear rose in Ruby's eyes and her lip quivered. Leo

faked contriteness, "I'm sorry Ruby, I guess it's okay, it's just a dance. I should have asked you sooner, but I want you to know that I consider you, my girl." Ruby gasped. He gripped her so tightly she couldn't move, he had her pinned up against the tree, his body pressed against hers. Her eyes widened and a slight whimper escaped her lips.

"If you change your mind about Carl, I'll take you. And here is something to seal the promise." He leaned in to kiss her, Ruby gasped, anticipating his intentions she reacted quickly, reached up and slapped him across the cheek. It wasn't very hard, and he didn't even flinch, he squinted his eyes sinisterly and tightened his grip. Leaning in close to her he sneered, "Whad'ya do that for? All I wanted was to give you a kiss, Ruby, you're my girl aren't ya?" He squeezed her tightly and then started to slide one hand up a little higher on her waist, Ruby's heart raced, and her eyes widened, she bit her lip and tried to wriggle out of his grasp. She lifted her hand to strike out at him again.

"Get your hands off my daughter, Mr. Barnes!" Andrew said very sternly, and Leo jerked his hands away from her and scampered away like a startled rabbit.

Andrew noticed a very upset looking Jake run past his office and off campus and knew that something had gone terribly wrong. He cut his meeting short, found Ruby's two girlfriends and asked if they knew where she was. They pointed him in the right direction, and he arrived at the spot to see the young man with his hands on Ruby's waist pinning her against the tree, he saw her trying to wriggle lose and the look of fear in her eyes. Andrew's eyes lit with fire, and he fought the urge to grab the young man by the scruff of his neck and throw him to the ground. Fortunately, he had the presence of mind to know that as principal of the college he couldn't do that. So instead, he took a deep breath, unclenched his fists and stuck to his words and he intended to have a few more with that young man later.

"Pa!" Ruby threw herself into Andrew's arms, "Oh Pa!" she sobbed. Andrew held her tightly and stroked her hair until she stopped crying. He walked her over to a tree stump and she sat down on it. There was only room for one person, so he knelt before her.

“My darling,” he said handing her his handkerchief, he waited while she blew her nose and wiped her eyes. “What happened?”

“He asked me to the dance, but I lied to him, Pa. I know it was wrong, but I didn’t want to go with him, I told him I was already going with someone else. I know it’s wrong to lie but I knew he’d keep asking, he’s not the type of person who takes no for an answer. I hope God will forgive me.”

“Is that all, Daughter? He had his hands on you and it looked like you were trying to get away.” Andrew gritted his teeth.

Ruby wept again and Andrew held her and let her cry. The bell for classes to resume rang out in the background but they both ignored it, this was much more important.

“Did something happen, Ruby?”

She just nodded.

Andrew swallowed back his anger, ‘*How dare someone try anything with my daughter.*’ He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, prayed for wisdom and asked again.

“What happened Ruby, please tell me?” he brushed a tear off her cheek.

She looked at her father’s kind eyes and saw love and concern there. She felt like a little girl again crying to her father.

“He tried to kiss me, and I didn’t want him to,” she hung her head and her lips trembled.

Andrew clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. He took deep breaths and pursed his lips tightly.

“It’s okay, Pa, he didn’t.”

Andrew nodded and let out a little of the breath he held, opening his eyes, he said, “Because I arrived just in time!”

She shook her head and grinned sheepishly, “No Pa, I slapped him.”

Andrew looked at her and dropped his mouth open, then he curled his face up into a grin, “That’s my girl!” he said.

She smiled, “That wasn’t what I expected you to say!”

Andrew grinned, “I know daughter, it’s wrong to hit people and I certainly don’t condone a lady behaving that way in general. But NO MAN,” he said much louder and angrier than he meant to, “no

man has the right to force himself on a woman in anyway, especially not my wife or my daughters.” Ruby knew he was thinking back to the time her mother had narrowly escaped being hurt by an angry drunk man.

He closed his eyes briefly, swallowed and then opened them and smiled. “So, daughter you have my permission to slap, kick, punch or whack any man that tries anything on you that you don’t want, okay? If you don’t, I will!” They both laughed, “Are okay, my darling?” he said tenderly stroking her cheek.

“Yes, thank you,” They walked back towards the campus arm in arm. Then something occurred to her. “How did you know I was there? I thought you had a meeting?”

“I saw Jake run past my office and I knew something must have happened.”

“Jake?” she asked, with a sideways grin, “I thought I saw him, but what was he doing here?”

“He didn’t talk to you, Ruby? I thought you must have refused him based on his reaction.”

“Refused him?”

“He came to ask my permission to ask you to the dance. A short while later I saw him run out of here as fast as he could. I figured you’d refused him, so I was coming to see if you were okay, I asked Alice and Marcy where to find you and I got to you just in time, it seems.”

Ruby’s face fell, “Oh no, poor Jake, he must have heard me say I was already going with someone, he couldn’t have known it wasn’t true. Oh Pa, see the damage that lies can do. I bet I really hurt him.”

“So, you wouldn’t have refused him?”

“No Pa, he’s a very good friend and much kinder than all the boys around here.”

Andrew squeezed her arm, “Yes he is a very genuine young man.”

“I have to go to class; I’ll talk to Jake later and make sure he’s okay.”

“Do you want me to?”

“No Pa, I prefer to fight my own battles.”

“I know you do; you’ve been fighting your own battles since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, and I’m right proud of you for it.”

“Thanks Pa. But there is one thing you could do for me.”

“Anything,” he said.

“Promise me you won’t be too hard on Leo!”

Andrew laughed, “Hmm, only because you asked, darling.”

Thirteen



Storm

Jake was very out of sorts. He slammed drawers shut and threw his hammer down, twice Mr. Hayes had to scold him for his carelessness.

“What’s gotten into you, lad?” his boss asked as they stopped for a water break that afternoon. “You ain’t ya usual, cheerful self today.”

“I’m fine Mr. Hayes, just got something on my mind is all,” Jake said flatly.

“Well, you better work it out soon or you’re gonna break that cabinet the way you’ve been sanding it, gonna sand clean through.”

“I’ll be fine, Mr. Hayes.”

Jake seethed inside, he wasn’t angry at Ruby, of course she already had a date for the dance. He was just angry at himself for letting himself even be talked into asking. *‘No doubt by now the pastor has told Ruby that I’d asked him, she is likely laughing at me. I’ve got nothing to offer anyway. I’m not sure why I bothered making the bracelet, I don’t even like the girl,’* he thought to himself. He sighed then and chided himself, that wasn’t true, it wasn’t a bit true, he loved her with his whole heart, it was entirely his fault not hers.

Jake agonized over it and spent the whole evening down at his favorite hidden fishing hole wallowing in his self-pity. He didn’t catch anything; he wasn’t even really trying. He sat staring at the water trying to pray, trying to work out what was going on. Uncle

Robert had warned him that she might already be spoken for, but he hadn't even entertained that thought. Why hadn't her pa told him? He continued to beat himself up until he was in quite a state.



Ruby walked into town that evening after supper to try to find Jake but couldn't find him anywhere. She tried the workshop, but Mr. Hayes said he'd stormed off after work in a huff. "Oh no!" said Ruby to herself. She was sorry she'd caused him this much pain, she had to find him and apologize.

She knocked on the door of his aunt and uncle's place.

"Miss Collins?" said Aunt Jo "Please come in."

"I can't, Mrs. Simmons, it's getting dark but please, I must speak to Jake, is he here?"

"No, I've not seen him since just after work, he stormed in, changed his clothes and stormed out, said he wouldn't be needing supper. Had himself worked up into quite a state."

"Oh no," said Ruby again.

"You can tell me ya message and I'll pass it on to him," the kind lady offered.

"No, thank you Mrs. Simmons, I need to speak to him myself!"

"Okay love, please yourself. Cheerio then."

Ruby left, it was getting dark, and she knew she must be getting home, or her pa would have a search party out looking for her. It was pointless looking for Jake, he obviously didn't want to be found.

Ruby left the town to begin the half mile walk home in the semi-darkness, one eye on the sky fearing it would rain. Halfway home the heavens opened, and heavy rain began to pour down. Ruby shrieked and lifted her hands over her head in a futile attempt to keep some of the rain off her face, she ran for the cover of a tree, but it was pointless, it was no shelter at all, and she was getting soaked. Lightning and thunder tore through the sky and she had no option but to find shelter and wait out the storm. *But where?* she wondered. *'There is nothing out here.'* No one lived between campus and the

town, and there were no old cabins or bars or caves that she knew of... Suddenly a thought occurred to her, down by the river was a fallen log that had made a little shelter where it split from the trunk and leaned over, she'd played down there with Sally not long ago. They both had been able to crawl inside like a little cavern, they'd had a picnic under there.

She left the road and headed for the spot under the tree trunk. It was up against a bank and made a neat little cave big enough to crawl right inside. It wasn't warm under there, but it was dry. Her clothes were soaked to the bone, and she started to shiver. She pulled her sodden shawl around her shoulders and prepared to wait out the storm. She shook and hugged her knees, the rain seemed like it was never going to stop. Should she risk trying to get home? No, surely the rain will stop any minute now.

Ruby waited nearly an hour and still the storm did not let up. She closed her eyes and prayed that the rain would stop. Water flowed down the hill from the road and little rivulets were being etched into the ground turning the world around her to mud. The river level started to rise and still she hovered under the trunk, shivering. Eventually Ruby fell into a fitful sleep.



Abigail fretted and paced in front of the fireplace. "Where is she, Andrew?"

"She'll be back any minute, I'm sure of it. I'll wager she's at the Simmons house drinking hot chocolate waiting for the storm to stop," Andrew tried to reassure his wife.

"Robert would have brought her home in the wagon,"

"I'll give it half an hour and I'll go look for her, but it's likely those two young people just got chatting."

Abigail couldn't shake the uneasy feeling she had that something was very wrong. Then as quickly as it had started the storm stopped.

"There see, the storm has stopped now, she'll be home right away,"

"I suppose you are right, Husband," Abigail desperately hoped. But another half hour went by and there was still no sign of Ruby.

"Andrew, you have to go and find her, she might be hurt."

He knew he could no longer stall; it was well after midnight, and it wasn't like Ruby to be out without letting them know where she was.

"I'll go find her," he said leaping to his feet. "I'll get Matty to help me."

Andrew ran to rouse Matty and the two of them saddled horses and searched the sodden landscape for Ruby. They enquired at the Simmons homestead.

"She left here just before eight o'clock; she'd had plenty of time to get home before the storm."

"Okay, thanks Jo, Is Jake here?"

"Yeah, he skulked in just before midnight, soaking wet and ornery, I heard the commotion and got up and told him to dry off and go to bed. He's sleeping. I'll go get him up!" added Robert who'd just now had to get up for the second time that night to people at the door.

"If you wouldn't mind. He may have seen Ruby tonight."

"Jake, Jacob, lad wake up."

"Hhhmm, what is it, Uncle Robert?" asked Jake drowsy from having had less than three hours sleep.

"Have you seen the Collins girl tonight, lad?"

Jake sat up then, "Ruby?" he said sadly. "Not since midday, why?"

"Her pa's here, she came looking for you this evening and never came home, they think she got caught in the storm."

Jake was immediately out of bed and on his feet, tucking his nightshirt into his trousers and reaching for his long coat, he followed his uncle out into the living room.

"Pastor Collins, Reverend Bourke."

"Hi Jake, sorry to wake you lad, have you seen Ruby?"

He hung his head, "No, I wasn't home till late."

“Okay thank you, we’ll find her,” said Andrew and they headed out into the semi-darkness again.

“Wait!” Jake called. “I’ll come with you.”

“Me too!” Robert offered.

“Much obliged. We’ll split up; we’ll go down the Northern Road in case she wandered off the trail looking for shelter.”

“We’ll go down by the stream,” suggested Jake, “Lots of places to shelter there.”

“Good thinking. We’ll meet in the town square in two hours, and then regroup from there,” cool-headed Matty suggested.

“Righto,” Robert added, grabbing his lantern and following the others out the door. They galloped off in two different directions.



Ruby woke up shivering and dizzy, the storm had stopped, and it was dark out. She was soaked through to the core and freezing cold. She pulled her shawl around her shoulders and tried to stand up. Her body was stiff and sore, and her neck ached from the uncomfortable sleep. Getting to her feet she staggered up the bank, it was muddy and difficult to climb, and she fell twice and was soon covered in a thick layer of mud. Her hands were frozen, and she couldn’t get any grip in the muddy ground as she tried to claw her way up the bank, it was futile, so she stopped and, crawling back down towards the tree, she decided to follow the riverbank into town.

Disoriented, she followed the stream; her head began to spin, and she staggered for several steps and fell to the ground. Trying to get up she collapsed again, and started to cough, a deep chesty cough. She thought she might have coughed up blood but, in the moonlight, and with her head spinning the way it was she wasn’t certain. All she knew for sure was she couldn’t go another step. She couldn’t remember which way the shelter was. “Help me Lord.” She said aloud before she passed out.

Jake and his uncle had been searching the riverbank from up on the road, they were close to the time when they needed to turn back but Jake didn’t want to stop. He’d forgotten his hurt feelings,

for now anyway, they simply didn't matter, he just had to find her. *I have to,* he thought. He didn't care what happened after that, he didn't even care about the dance, he just had to make sure she was okay. He'd rather she lived, and he watched her from afar for the rest of his days than have something happen to her and not be able to see her ever again, and worse still, be the reason she didn't survive. He was determined to find her.

"I can't see anything up here, Uncle Robert. I'm gonna leave the horse and go down by the river," he called out.

"If you think that's wise, Jake? It's nearly time to meet her pa."

"I've got a feeling about this, Uncle. I have to go down there."

"Okay, I'll stay up here with the horses. Call out if ya see anything."

Jake nodded and scrambled down the hillside using the roots of trees to slow his descent. He finally reached the riverbank and headed downstream.

"She's a smart girl, she would have known to go downstream." He said out loud, he heard a slight groan and called out, "Miss Collins, can you hear me, It's Jake, Miss Collins, are you there?"

He heard a cough and a very shaky voice say, "Help me."

Ruby had come too just as Jake had decided to venture down the bank, she hadn't gone very far from the tree trunk, she'd wandered back and forth aimlessly and was only several feet from her original spot.

"Ruby!" called Jake, he found her, just trying to sit up, she bent over as coughs racked her body. She was covered in mud and shivering, and he knew he had to get back to town, she'd catch pneumonia for sure.

"Jake," she said in a small, raspy voice, never had he felt so relieved to see her. She looked so vulnerable and pleased to have been found but passed out again in his arms. He held her and called out. "Uncle Robert, I've found her, go get help, I've found her, the path is too muddy, we'll need ropes to get her up."

Robert yelled, "I'll get help, hold tight," and sped off on his horse.

Jake looked at the girl in his arms and his heart ached, he took out his wet handkerchief and gently wiped the mud from her lips, cheek and eyes. Even in this state she was beautiful. He felt her skin, she was frozen. He knew little about medicine, but he knew enough to know he had to get her warm.

He pulled off his long coat and wrapped it tightly around her holding her close to himself so she might draw from his body heat. Her gentle breath on his neck told him she was still alive but weak. He tried to carry her to higher ground, but the terrain was too sodden, the usual gentle slope up the hill towards the road was now a muddy slide, he kept slipping without the use of his hands to brace himself. He stopped and walked the few feet to the old tree trunk, he sat down on it and held her in his arms close to his chest. He leaned back against the tree and began to pray aloud.

“Lord, please save Ruby Collins. If necessary, I’m willing to trade my life for hers. I’ll give up my feelings for her if that’s what you want, I’ll trade them, anything if you just save her, Lord...”

His prayer was cut short by the sound of galloping horses, then there were voices and Andrew scrambled down the bank. “Ruby, oh Ruby my darling!” he said reaching for his daughter. Matty and Robert tied ropes to two trees then Matty scrambled down to them. “Oh baby, my baby girl,” Andrew said over and over, *“Lord please save my baby girl!”* Matty and Jake used the ropes to climb partway up the bank.

Each man wrapped himself in the rope and gripped on, Matty halfway up the bank and Jake a little higher. Andrew, closest to the bottom of the hill handed Ruby into Matty’s arms, who then passed Ruby up to Jake who then passed her up to his uncle at the top. It was a difficult challenge but between the four of them they got Ruby and then themselves to the top.

Jake shivered and his teeth chattered but he barely noticed, he wore nothing but his nightshirt and trousers but was oblivious to his own discomfort. Ruby was all that mattered now.

Andrew climbed up on his horse and Matty passed Ruby up to him carefully, still wrapped in Jake's coat. Andrew gathered her in his arms, and they travelled as fast as they dared until they reached the clinic.

The group roused the doctor and brought Ruby in.

"Miss Collins," he said to her as he examined the girl, "got yourself in another scrape I see." Then he addressed the men. "Pass me those blankets, we have to warm her up, and just pray she doesn't contract pneumonia."

They moved to do his bidding and soon Ruby was tucked up tightly in the bed in one of the recovery rooms. Andrew sat with her and Matty turned to leave, "Andrew," he said as he left. "I'll let the girls know, I'll bring them to ya." Andrew nodded gratefully to his friend.

The pastor sat in the chair by Ruby's bed, holding her frozen hand and prayed. He almost never prayed for anything for himself, but this was different, this was his beloved daughter, and he felt his heart breaking before him as she lay there lifeless and pale.

Matty tried to persuade Jake to go home and get some sleep, his uncle already had, but Jake knew there would be no sleep that night. How could he have been so foolish? It was his fault she was out there. She was looking for him. Pastor Collins had said she'd come to find him, he didn't know why, he guessed to tell him she already had a date to the dance. But he hadn't been there and why? Because he was off feeling sorry for himself and licking his wounds.

"Foolish. McAllister." He quietly chastened himself "This is your fault, Jake, she nearly died because you were out pouting about your lot. Well, that was the last time!" he swore to himself. "If she survives, I'm never going to put her in that position again." He hung his head and considered the situation. If she didn't love him, he'd learn to live with it, but he vowed then and there that he would always be there when she needed him. No matter what it was she needed, however trivial he would not let her down again if she survived. "If," he said aloud and gasped. A horrid thought crossed his mind, *'What if she doesn't survive?'* How would he ever look Pastor

Collins in the eye? How would he look himself in the eye?" Jake sat outside the clinic and buried his head in his hands and wept, he'd never really cried much before but now heart wrenching sobs rocked his body. He could never live with himself if she didn't make it.



"Andrew, I need to examine your daughter now. Perhaps you should wait outside with the McAllister boy." Dr Price said, now confident she'd warmed up enough.

Andrew's eyebrows shot up, "He's still here?"

"Yes," the doctor nodded, placing his palm against Ruby's forehead as he spoke, "He refuses to leave. I believe he feels responsible for what happened, last I checked on him he was weeping."

"I should talk to him."

"Go Pastor, she won't wake up for some time, I promise to get you when I'm finished."

Andrew kissed the pale forehead tenderly and left the room.

He found Jake outside, head on his knees, the sobs shaking his body. Andrew sat next to him and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Jacob," he said kindly, "Jake". He stopped crying and rubbed at his face, sniffing back the tears, swiping at his eyes with the sodden sleeves of his nightshirt. Andrew reached into his coat and pulled out his handkerchief, Jake wiped his eyes and blew his nose.

"Sorry Pastor, here I am crying like a child."

"You needn't apologize, there is no harm in tears, I've done my fair share of weeping, don't worry."

Jake nodded, if Pastor Collins thought it was okay to cry, he needn't be ashamed.

"She's going to be fine, you found her in time, Jake. I wanted to say thank you for finding her. I'm ever in your debt."

"So, she's better?"

"Oh no, she's got some way to go, but the doctor is with her and he's optimistic she'll make a full recovery, now that she is warm."

Jake nodded and hung his head, "It's all my fault, Sir, it's all my fault, she's in there suffering, it's all because of me!"

"What's that now?"

Jake sat back and looked at the older man. "It's all my fault, I was out licking my wounds because she already had a date to the dance, and she couldn't find me. It's my fault she was out tonight, and it's my fault she almost died. How can you even look at me?"

Andrew gently reached out to touch him on the shoulder again. Jake nervously looked up at him, and for a moment Andrew saw the face of a timid little boy. "Jake, none of this is your fault, it's just a tragic accident. I don't blame you for it and neither will Ruby."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know my daughter. And I know how much your friendship means to her. She came to look for you, she wanted to make sure you were okay, she wanted to tell you...."

They were interrupted when Matty came riding up with Andrew's family. Jake sniffed and brushed at his tears again, quickly sitting up and Andrew walked over to greet his wife and daughters. Abigail clung to him, and he reassured her Ruby was going to be okay. He reached for Lucy, Emily and Sally, "Oh my darlings, your sister is going to be just fine. We must praise God for bringing her through this," he said as he clung to them.

Jake watched on, he admired Andrew greatly and his love for his girls. He'd never seen a man so devoted to his daughters before. They truly were the darlings of his heart. Ruby was the pastor's darling too, and he hadn't blamed him for any of it. He'd even thanked him for saving her. Jake began to feel hope again and prayed that someday he might get to make it up to all of them.

He couldn't help but wonder what the thing was she was going to tell him. Perhaps it was to explain that another man had asked her first. Pastor Collins said she'd cared about him, wanted to make sure he was okay. A flame sparked in his heart again, she had to get well. He needed to tell her that he was okay, that even if she went to the dance with another man, he'd be okay and he'd always be there for her. He just needed her to be okay.

Fourteen



Misunderstanding

Andrew and Abigail spent the next day by Ruby's bedside in worry. The entire family prayed earnestly for her recovery. She had a steady stream of visitors come and go, her sisters were in and out and she was never left alone. Still, she slept soundly. The doctor assured them that sleep was good, and it was normal, the more she got, the better now that she was warm and dry, he was no longer concerned about her contracting pneumonia.

Jake did not enter the room where Ruby lay. But he never left the clinic, he paced back and forth along the front wall outside, he sat and prayed, then he paced some more. Andrew urged him to go home and get some sleep, but he knew he'd never be able to sleep until he could see for himself that she was going to be okay.

His thoughts fluctuated between blaming himself and telling himself it wasn't his fault, convincing himself she'd never be interested in him anyway and he should just forget about her and then dreaming of holding her in his arms. The longer he sat, the more sleep deprived he became, the more his feelings tossed to and fro, churning like the tempest of the previous night. He was so confused, and the fatigue didn't help.

Finally, he slumped down on the chair outside the clinic and sighed, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

Lucy plonked herself down beside him. "Hey Jake."

He opened his eyes, “Hi Lucy,” he replied rather flatly, he didn’t feel like talking to Lucy right now, or anyone for that matter.

“I hear you found my sister!” she stated matter-of-factly. Jake just nodded. “Thanks.” Lucy wasn’t given to long flowery conversations, she was always forthright and honest, but she seldom thought before she spoke and usually said impulsively whatever was on her mind.

“You shouldn’t be thanking me, it’s all my fault in the first place.”

“That’s not what I heard,”

“She was looking for me, my fault,”

“That’s dumb!” said Lucy in her usual blunt manner, Jake, caught off guard by her forthright words frowned. Lucy continued. “It wasn’t your fault; you aren’t in control of the weather or else you’d be God. If you are looking to blame someone perhaps you should blame God, he’s in charge of the weather.”

“Lucy that’s sacrilegious!”

“I know, that’s why I said it was dumb. This isn’t anyone’s fault. Pa says accidents happen and we aren’t in charge of the circumstances or the results even if we are the reason for the circumstances in the first place.” Then Lucy paused and cocked her head to the side and asked. “Where were you anyway? Pa said she couldn’t find you.”

“Fishing!”

“But you came home in the middle of the night, not even I want to fish in the middle of the night and fishing is about my favorite thing to do.”

He was becoming annoyed with Lucy; she didn’t know when to leave someone alone. “I guess I was feeling sorry for myself,” he finally said with a sigh

“How come?”

“Never you mind.”

“Was it cause that dumb old Leo Barnes kissed her?”

“What?” he said, his eyes wide.

“Didn’t you know? By the oak tree, He kissed her!”

Jake didn't reply he just stared wide-eyed at Lucy, his mouth hanging open.

Lucy was called away then by her parents, Ruby had woken up. Jake seethed under his breath, '*So Leo Barnes, is it?*' he seethed. Well, he had no time to dwell on that right now, for now she was awake. He breathed a sigh of relief and followed Lucy into the clinic. He didn't enter the room with the family instead he stood outside the door and looked in. Ruby was sitting up in the bed, she was pale, but she was smiling. He felt his heart leap when he saw her smile and then the image of Leo Barnes kissing her came into his mind and his heart began to break.

He looked at her for a few more seconds, Ruby looked up and caught his eye and smiled at him, he tried to smile back but it hurt too much. He shrugged his shoulders and walked away sadly. He'd satisfied himself that she was okay and now he had to let her go, there was no way he'd be able to compete with Leo Barnes.



Ruby got stronger each day and was soon up and about again. She recovered fully and within a week was determined to be back at her studies. The doctor told her she could return to class the following Monday as long as she didn't overdo it, her body still needed to regain its strength.

No one saw Jake again until the service on Sunday and then he kept his distance, he did not walk over and greet them as he usually did. Instead, he merely smiled his greeting and walked sadly out of the church towards his home. Ruby wanted to chase after him to thank him for saving her life, but she was surrounded by people who wanted to express their gratitude that she was okay. She sighed. It would have to wait.

Jake walked slowly and aimlessly along the church path with his hands in his pockets, he kicked all the stones off the path as he walked, not even caring about scuffing his carefully polished Sunday shoes. Sally skipped up beside him. "Hey Jake, where ya going?"

“Home,” he said curtly.

“Aren’t you staying for the picnic?” asked the little girl.

He sighed, ‘*She’s about as nose-y as Lucy,*’ he thought. “Nah, don’t feel much like a picnic,”

“How come?”

“Just don’t want to is all.”

“Ruby sure would like to see you, she’s been wanting to talk to you for days now,” the girl was not put off one bit by his demeanor.

“That right?”

“Yeah, she wants to thank you, and explain.”

“Explain what? That she loves Leo Barnes?” He didn’t know why he’d said that, least of all to a ten-year-old, but it had just slipped out.

“What? Why d’you think that?”

“Because he kissed her.”

“Who told you that?”

“Lucy,” he said. He knew he should send the girl away but somehow talking to her seemed to help even though she was only young. Maybe that’s why it did help, she was young and innocent and not tangled up in affairs of the heart.

“Oh, Lucy never tells anything right!” she stopped abruptly by the chair under a tree in the church yard.

Jake stopped and turned to look at the girl, “What do you mean, didn’t he kiss her?”

She plonked herself down on the seat, folded her arms across her chest and screwed up her face, “He tried,” she swung her legs backwards and forwards under the chair.

He sat down beside her, he wasn’t sure why, he didn’t really want to know the sordid details, but he found himself asking, “What do you mean he tried? He didn’t succeed?”

“Nope!” Sally laughed.

“Why not?”

“Ruby slapped him!” said Sally, her eyes sparkling in sheer delight.

“She slapped him?” he raised his eyebrows, finding himself rather intrigued.

“Yup, then Pa came along and chased him away.”

“He did?” Jake was beginning to think he had somehow misread the situation. But she had still said she was going to the dance with someone else.

Sally poured out the whole story in one mouthful very quickly, waving her arms around in an exaggerated fashion as she spoke. “Yeah, Ruby told Leo she already had a partner for the dance, even though she didn’t ‘cause no one had asked her yet, she only said it ‘cause she doesn’t like him, and she didn’t wanna go with him. He got angry and told her she was his girl. She said she wasn’t, but he held her by the waist against the tree and tried to kiss her, but she slapped him, and he squeezed her and was about try to hurt her or something when Pa came up behind him and told him ‘Take your hands off my daughter.’” She imitated his voice and shook her finger. “Pa said he scampered off like a startled rabbit,” Sally’s face shone with enjoyment, but Jake only heard, ‘no one had asked her yet.’

“Jake, you fool!” he said aloud.

“What?” asked Sally.

“Never you mind, Pipsqueak,”

“I’m not a pipsqueak!” Sally said storming off in a huff.

“Jake, you fool!” he said again, “You should have trusted her. You should have known that she’d never take up with a puffed-up peacock like Leo. You gotta find her and apologize and.... ask her to the dance.” A glimmer of hope shone in his eyes and slight smile toyed with the edges of his mouth, he paused for just a moment and then grinned and ran as fast as he could to the woodshop, found the bracelet and slipped it into his pocket. His heart began to soar again. He started to hope again.



Abigail put down the vegetable knife, wiped her hands on her apron and went to answer the knock at the door. “Hello Mr. McAllister, won’t you come in, it’s lovely to see you. This family owes you quite the debt of gratitude.” Jake walked in and took the offered seat.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Ah no, thanks Mrs. Collins, I was really hoping to talk to Ruby, is she here?” He asked looking around anxiously.

“She is in her room studying, I’ll get her.” She walked to Ruby’s room “Ruby sweetheart” she said knocking on her door.

“What is it Mama?”

“Jake McAllister is here to see you.”

Ruby smiled and put down her pen, stood and stretched her back. “I’ll be right there, Mama.” Ruby’s heart leapt to her throat and the butterflies started to dance in her stomach. She couldn’t place the current feeling, perhaps it was just nerves because she knew she owed him an apology. She grabbed her shawl from the hook, took a quick look in the mirror, tucked in a wayward strand of hair and left the room.

Jake’s heart leapt as he saw her, she wore the same pale green cotton dress with the delicate lace collar that she’d worn that morning at church. She smiled at him, and her eyes held no malice.

He stood and greeted her nervously, “Good afternoon, Miss Collins, I am sorry for calling unannounced, but I wondered if we might go somewhere we can talk?”

She looked at her Pa and he shrugged slightly and nodded. She smiled her thanks. “Yes, I did want a chance to say thank you, Mr. McAllister, where should we go?”

“Well,” he looked at Andrew for his approval as he spoke. “I hoped we might walk over to the small waterfall, it’s not far and it’s very beautiful. If that’s okay with your pa?”

“That’s more than okay, it’s a beautiful spot, I’m sure Mrs. Collins will give you a pitcher of coffee to take to enjoy at a table there if you like?”

“Oh yes Mama, that would be ideal.” Abigail packed up the coffee and some cookies to send with them, they were both acutely aware they had some talking to do, they were friends who’d suffered a misunderstanding and they needed to talk it out. Andrew was glad Jake had been the one to come, it showed a depth of character that many men don’t have.

Jake took the basket from Abigail's outstretched arm; he then offered his free arm to Ruby, and she gladly accepted it. "I'll have her home in time for supper." Andrew nodded and said there was no hurry. Abigail decided to push supper back a bit, hoping she could convince the boy to stay to eat with them.

Jake and Ruby chatted politely as they walked, the waterfall was less than quarter of a mile from their home on the edge of campus. A clearing had been made overlooking the waterfall and a few picnic tables set up there for people to enjoy the splendor. Jake led Ruby to one of the tables and laid his jacket over the wooden seat so she could sit down without her dress getting dirty. She smiled at his thoughtfulness and took her seat. She laid down the small tablecloth and poured them both coffees, then since Jake hadn't, she decided to start the conversation. Taking a deep breath, Ruby whispered a prayer for wisdom and began, "Jake, I owe you an apology."

"Oh no Ruby, it is I who owe you an apology," he said, he looked like he was going to go on, but she stopped him.

"Please Jake, let me say this."

He smiled, "Of course Miss Collins, please go on."

"Ruby, please, it's just Ruby, Miss Collins is much too formal for friends, we are friends aren't we Jake?"

He nodded. "Yes, of course we are, Miss.... Ruby." He finished with a shy smile, his heart pounding in his chest.

She smiled, "Much better. Before I say what I want to say, I want to thank you for saving my life. It seems to me that whenever I'm in trouble you are there for me. I'm very grateful to you for that." She reached for his hand to squeeze it. "Thank you, Jake McAllister."

He gulped and just nodded. "It was my pleasure, Ruby. I'm glad I could be there for you." He smiled. It seemed such an inadequate response, but it was all he could come up with.

"Now," began Ruby with a contrite heart. "I owe you an apology Jake. Even though I didn't know it and I didn't mean to, I hurt you and I'm sorry."

He began to protest, "You have no need to be sorry."

She stopped him again, "Please Jake, I want to explain to you." He nodded and let her continue. His kind brown eyes never left hers

the whole time and something about his gaze unnerved her, it left her shaken somehow. She explained all that had happened and how she despised all the men fawning around her all the time, but she knew it was wrong to be impolite and her pa had advised her to treat them with Christian love. She had tried on several occasions to give Leo the message that she wasn't even slightly interested but he wouldn't listen. "I believe he's made it his personal mission to win me, like I'm some kind of trophy," she said ruefully. "I didn't know how to get him to stop so I told him a lie, that I already had a date to the dance so that he would leave me alone, only it didn't work."

"Sally told me you slapped him," he blurted out, he hadn't meant to, but it was out there, and he couldn't take it back.

"She did?" asked Ruby mortified. She buried her head in her hands in embarrassment, "I wish she hadn't, I'm so ashamed! Although Pa said if I hadn't, he would have." She soon got over her embarrassment and continued her apology. "I didn't know you were there, Jake, and I didn't know you were going to ask me to the dance. I came looking for you that night to tell you it had all been a misunderstanding.

"Pa saw you run away, and he came looking for me, that's when he saw Leo trying to... well... who knows what he might have done?" She hung her head and softened her voice. "He really had me scared that he'd hurt me, he held me so tight and pressed himself against me." She shuddered and Jake seethed, Ruby looked up at him then "I'm so grateful that God sent Pa when he did, I don't know what might have happened." Ruby shivered and her wide eyes held a mix of gratefulness and fear. Jake put his hand on her arm.

"Are you okay, Ruby?"

"Yes, thank you, just reliving it wasn't pleasant. I want you to know that I'm sorry I hurt you. I knew when I couldn't find you that you must be upset. I'm so glad you came looking for me and found me, I was relieved to find out you didn't hate me."

"Hate you?" he asked.

"Yes, without meaning to, I trampled all over your heart. I'm so sorry."

“Ruby, you have nothing to be sorry for, it was just me jumping to conclusions.”

“And then when I saw you from my room at the clinic you looked so sad and you walked away, I thought you’d never want to see me again. I was so thankful you turned up today.”

“Lucy told me that Leo had kissed you and I was busy blaming myself for you getting sick, if you hadn’t been out looking for me then none of it would have happened.” He would have continued but Ruby cut him off.

“Lucy told you what?”

“She told me Leo kissed you and then she got called away before I could find out more, I assumed the worst and that you were Leo’s girl and I walked away from you because I didn’t want to know.”

“Oh Lucy!” laughed Ruby, “She never could get a story straight!”

“That’s what Sally said!”

“What?”

“Oh, Sally set me straight after church this morning. Told me the whole story, how you slapped Leo and everything!”

“Did she just, little scamp?” said Ruby but she grinned. “I thought something had changed since I saw you at the service this morning, I wanted to talk to you, but you walked away.”

“Yes, and then Sally set me straight and I had to come and say sorry to you. I’m sorry for thinking the worst of you. Ruby and for thinking that a smart and beautiful girl like you would ever be interested in Leo. Please forgive me, I miss your friendship so.”

He’d never complimented her like that out loud before, it had just slipped out, Ruby flushed slightly.

“Of course, Jake, if you’ll forgive me too.” She smiled at him and placed her hand on his arm for a moment.

He nodded, “Of course.”

“I can see why some girls like Leo though, he is charming and flatters people, although I find him greasy and fake. I much prefer honest and trustworthy people than puffed up peacocks. He thinks his money is all that matters, but I always say I’d rather have a friend that is honest and poor than rich and untrustworthy.”

This was all sweet music to Jake's heart. So, she wasn't interested in the flashy showoffs, perhaps he had a chance yet.

"Ruby," he asked, suddenly finding his courage. "If I had asked you to the dance, would you have gone with me?"

"Yes of course, Jake," tilting her head to the side she looked at him shyly, "Are you asking me?"

He gulped, took a deep breath and replied, "Yes, if you still want to."

She placed her hand on his and said, "I'd be honored, you know I had hoped you'd ask me."

"Really? I thought you'd say no to me for sure. I have nothing to offer."

"Who says I want anything?"

"Don't you?" he asked searching her face with his kind eyes.

"Just to dance with my friend at the Spring Dance." She smiled hopefully at him, the dimple he loved to see appearing on her cheek.

"I'm afraid I'm not much good at dancing but I'll try."

"You'll be just fine, Jake."

"Ruby," said Jake nervously.

"Yes."

"I made you something," he said reaching into his pocket.

"You did?" her eyes lit up and Jake's heart leapt. "What is it?"

"Just something small that I made, I couldn't afford to buy you a gift and I wanted to give you something when I asked you to the dance, you know to kind of butter you up to say yes." His eyes twinkled.

"What is it?"

He nervously gave her the bag, she opened it and pulled out the bracelet.

"Oh Jake!" she said. "It's beautiful."

"Do you really like it?" He asked.

"I really do," he helped her put it on her wrist. "I shall wear it with pride." She stood to start packing up the coffee, Jake helped. He gave her his arm to escort her home, carrying the basket in his other hand. She took his arm and then reached up and kissed him on the

cheek, “Thank you Jake, for saving my life and for my bracelet. You are a most kind friend.”

He swallowed and gulped back the lump in his throat, took a deep breath to quieten his surging feelings and mumbled, “My pleasure.”

They walked home in silence, but Jake’s eyes shone as he imagined dancing with the prettiest girl in town in two weeks’ time.

Fifteen



Shame

Ruby hummed as she pinned up her hair, she was eager to get back to her studies. Dr Price had told her that she was fine to go back if she took it easy. Looking up she caught sight of the little carved chicken on her shelf and grinned widely. She reached for the wooden bracelet and slipped it on her wrist. *“It really is quite beautiful,”* she thought to herself running her finger along the smooth top where an intricate rose was carved. It was very detailed work. She smiled as she thought about Jake, he really was a very good friend, and she was growing to rely on him and care about him a lot. He always seemed to be there just when she needed him.

Lucy came bursting through the door of her room without knocking like usual. “Ruby, breakfast’s ready.” She bounded out the door as quickly as she’d come. Ruby shook her head slightly and finished getting ready then joined her family for breakfast. Every morning they ate breakfast together before going their separate ways. They’d always done that as long as she could remember, they prayed together and read from the Bible too. Her pa often said it was important for them to start their day together as a family.

The three girls left for school and, as he did every morning, Andrew walked to the campus with Ruby, arm in arm, his other arm carrying her small bookbag. Every morning she argued that she could carry it herself, and every morning he argued that it was the gentlemanly thing to do. “Besides, you carry it most of the day, this is

the least I can do,” he’d grin, and every morning she’d say, “Okay Pa” and they’d leave.

Abigail’s head was spinning after the hustle and bustle of the morning. So, after everyone left, she took her coffee and picked up her Bible and headed for the comfortable armchair, put her feet up on a footstool and spent time reading and praying.

That morning she spent some time praying for her family. The last letter from Luke said he was making excellent progress, so she prayed for him too. She prayed for Tommy as he tried to bring the gospel to his ailing uncle and run the large estate. It still seemed like a fairy story, a young man like him inheriting a huge spread, but it was all true, no matter how crazy it sounded.

She prayed for her family in Rivers Junction. She prayed for her husband and her children, and she especially thanked the Lord for Ruby’s recovery. Abigail finished her prayer time and then got on with her daily tasks. She’d only have a certain amount of time before the girls arrived home and it was also the day she met with Susan in town for coffee. It was their weekly treat and she hurried to get the wash done so she’d be ready to go with her.



“Have a good day, darling.” Andrew said giving his daughter the customary kiss on the forehead as he did every morning. He passed her bookbag over to her, she slung it over her shoulder.

“I will Pa,” she said and headed off for class.

Andrew watched his beautiful daughter go and smiled. “Thank you, Lord, that she is well,” he said aloud and entered the building ready for a day of tedious administration.

Ruby could feel eyes on her as she walked. She looked around and saw that there were a lot of people in the common in the morning as usual, milling around but as she walked by conversations suddenly stopped and all turned to gaze at her, puzzled, she shrugged, *‘Perhaps they are just glad to see me back.’*

She attended her morning classes and felt uneasy. For some reason, people were acting strangely around her. Her professors were the same as they always were but some of the people in her classes stared at her and when she tried to talk to a few they walked away. She noticed several people whispering and laughing behind their hands or in small groups and they became silent as she approached. It became more and more obvious and by the lunchbreak she knew something was going on and it involved her.



Jake was walking on a cloud. Since Ruby had accepted his invitation to go to the dance with him, he'd been dreaming of nothing else. He struggled to keep his mind on the job and Mr. Hayes had to remind him several times to focus on what he was doing.

Aunt Jo was going to teach him how to dance and she even promised him she'd make him a new shirt and suit for the dance, but he needed to find out what color Ruby's dress was so she could make a matching waistcoat and tie. He said he'd try.

Aunt Jo had also asked him to invite her whole family for dinner that week, Thursday evening would be good. She asked him to run over to the campus today and ask her father if they would come. Smiling knowingly, she knew any opportunity to even glimpse Ruby from a distance would be welcome.

He timed his lunch break carefully so that he'd be on campus when the students were out, then he might get to see her, may even be fortunate enough to speak to her, but just getting to see her would be the highlight of his day.



Ruby rounded to the corner to see her friends sitting in their usual spot on the stairs, waved out to them and hurried towards them. Leo was standing before them gesticulating like a preacher, telling an animated story. Ruby noticed the horrified looks on the faces of her friends as she approached, they were too engrossed in his words to notice her creep up behind them.

She listened in horror for only a few moments and caught the tail end of what he said. “.....she lets men do those things to her, she let me. After all, Ruby is an illegitimate child, we all know they have issues....”

“NO!” cried Ruby and threw her books on the ground and took off at run out of the school. All heads swung around to see the pretty girl fleeing as fast as she could out of there.

None of her friends had defended her and none had stopped Leo’s lies. He’d been spreading horrible lies about her for the entire week she she’d been away and telling his story to anyone who would listen, trying to shame her all over the campus simply because she had refused him. She wasn’t going to stay there and listen. She ran and ran towards town, she really didn’t want to talk to anyone, didn’t want to face the shame.

For reasons even Ruby didn’t know she left the roadside and headed down a track that led into the woods. Just at that moment Jake rounded the bend on his way to the campus and saw her leave the road and head into the trees, he could hear her crying.

“Ruby,” he called and chased after her, “Ruby, are you okay?”

But she didn’t hear him, she just kept right on running. Jake caught up to her and he could hear her repeating over and over, “It’s not true, no, it’s not true!”

“Ruby? Ruby, are you okay? What’s happened?” he asked when she at last stopped running, his caring soft eyes were more than she could bear. She threw herself into his arms and sobbed. Jake closed his eyes and held the woman he loved in his arms and let her cry against his chest. He stroked her hair and whispered, “It’s okay, Ruby, I’m here, you’re safe.” He hoped she’d trust him enough to confide in him.

Jake’s heart ached, and he wished he could take away her pain, but he relished this chance to hold her and be there for her when she needed him just as he had promised himself he would be.

After a while she stopped crying and stepped back from him. He handed her his handkerchief and she smiled her thanks to him, she wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at him, searching his

face hoping to see she could trust him. The deep hurt darkened her eyes, and it pierced his heart.

“Ruby, what happened?” he asked her, one arm around her waist, she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Jake,” she said. “I’m just so ashamed, why do people have to be so cruel?”

“Ashamed?” he asked indignant that anyone could be cruel to such a caring person.

“Yes,” she nodded slowly and stared at her shoes.

“Do you want to talk about it, Ruby? I’m a good listener and you can trust me, you know that.”

She just nodded and he led her to a nearby fallen log. He removed his coat and laid it down for her to sit on, then sat down beside her, turning slightly towards her so he could look at her, perhaps even hold her if necessary while she spoke to him.

Ruby felt strangely at ease with Jake, she did feel like she could tell him anything. She loved him for that, for his friendship and gentle way with her, she instinctively knew he could be trusted and that as long as she was with him, she’d be safe. She wasn’t sure why she felt that way. Perhaps it was just because in so many ways Jake reminded her of her pa.

Jake watched her face patiently, intently, waiting for her to speak, so she began.

She sighed deeply. “It seems Leo Barnes hasn’t forgiven me for saying no to him, he’s been spreading rumors on campus that I let him do things to me. He claimed that I was illegitimate and that was just in my nature.” A large tear rolled down her cheek.

Jake gasped. He reached to put his arm around her, she took a deep breath and attempted to regain her composure.

“Ruby,” he said, not really knowing how to comfort her, he prayed for divine wisdom. “Why would he say such slanderous things, just because you rejected him?”

Ruby shrugged, “I guess so, he doesn’t take no for an answer, and I bruised his ego so now he’s out to shame me in retaliation.”

“I can’t believe he’d say those things about you. Why is he claiming you are illegitimate? Everyone knows Pastor Collins is your Pa.”

“Jake,” Ruby asked searching his face with her eyes. “Andrew Collins isn’t my father, well at least not my birth father.”

Apart from a slight raise of the eyebrows Jake didn’t respond for a time. “I didn’t know that, Ruby, you two are so close.” Suppose she was illegitimate? It made no difference to him; it would just mean that her very vulnerable heart would need even more tender care. He was willing to be the one to care for it, and he would, if allowed, till his dying day. They sat in silence for a time, both alone with their own thoughts.

“You didn’t ask me if any of what Leo said was true?”

“No.”

Ruby cocked her head to one side, “Why not?”

“I don’t believe any of it, not for a minute. Even if Andrew Collins is not your real father, it makes no difference to me.”

“Really?” she asked, wide eyed like a trusting child.

“Yes,” he said matter-of-factly, “And you only have to tell me what you want to tell me, I won’t pry.”

“I want to tell you, Jake, you are my friend, you should know about my father.” She placed her hand on his arm and smiled at him. He continued to study her face, waiting for her to continue when she was ready.

She removed the locket from around her neck and showed him the gold necklace and the now very faded photos of Reuben and Samuel.

“I never met my birth father, or my adopted brother, they both died in an accident when Mama was expecting me. My father was a doctor and they lived in Rivers Junction a ways west of here, they married and moved to the east coast town of Oceansview. They were married nearly ten years and were unable to have their own child. My pa adopted the baby of a woman who died in childbirth and brought my brother Samuel home to her. It took Mama a while to bond with him but eventually she loved him like her own.

“They went to the port near their town to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary when Samuel was nearly seven. They had recently found out about me, and they had thought Mama was barren so you can imagine the celebration that time was. While they were there Samuel and some other boys were exploring an old tugboat and boatshed and a rotten floorboard broke, bringing down part of the building on the boys. My pa went in to save Samuel who was stuck in a hole in the floor and the whole building came down and both my pa and Samuel were killed. “

Jake grimaced and without realizing it, he reached out and gripped her hand. Holding it and stroking it gently with his thumb as she spoke, he was amazed she felt so safe with him she could pour out her heart like this to him, tell him such personal information. He felt waves of love wash over him for this woman with the tragic past who was so full of hope and love and trust despite all that had happened. She continued.

“Pastor Collins was my pa’s best friend; he was there for my ma who, you can imagine, was in a very dark place. She hit the depths of despair and it was only for the sake of Rueben’s baby that she even managed to go on. Pa, that is Pastor Collins, came every day to visit with us. He told me not long ago that he loved me from the moment I was born, something about the responsibility he felt to Rueben but also his little girl. He told me I got all twisted up in his heart right then and he’s loved me ever since. That probably sounds silly to you,” she said shyly.

“Not at all,” he said aloud, internally he said, *‘No it’s not silly, you’re all twisted up in my heart too.’*

“Eventually, after Ma came out of mourning, he confessed that he loved her, she’d grown to love him too and they married when I was thirteen months old. He’s a wonderful pa and he’s always been determined to not let me forget my real father, he isn’t a bit jealous or sad when I talk about Rueben, he knows I love them both.”

“He certainly is a great man,” agreed Jake. “So, you were named Ruby after your first pa?”

She smiled her crooked smile at him, “Yes, and Samantha after my brother.”

“Ruby Samantha. I like that.”

“Actually, it’s Ruby Samantha Anna Young Collins.”

Jake raised his eyebrows and grinned, “that’s quite a mouthful, but it suits you. A lovely lady like you should have a grand name like that,” he said running his hand down her arm.

She laughed then. “I’m not sure it’s all that grand, but I thank you. Now you know my full name what is yours?”

He laughed, “It’s not nearly so grand as yours, It’s plain really. Jacob Aaron McAllister.”

“Jacob Aaron, I like it. It’s important I know your middle name should I ever need to tell you off!” she teased, and her eyes sparkled.

“I’m sure you’ll get that chance,” he laughed.

“I’m ready to go back now, Jake,”

“Are you sure, all those people still know the rumors, and Leo is still there.”

“I have to face it sooner or later, I’ve dealt with these misunderstandings before, and I will do it again. I know who I am, and I am not ashamed. I did not do any of the things Leo has accused me of and anyone who knows and believes that I would, is not worth my time worrying about.”

Jake had a look of sheer wonder on his face, “You are the strongest, bravest woman I know, Ruby Collins,”

Her cheeks colored, “I’m not so brave, Jake, I just draw my value, my worth and my strength from my Lord, if He is for me than who can be against me?”

He grinned, “and add to the list, the wisest!” he said, offering her his arm to escort her to campus. “Mind if I escort you?”

“I’d like that.” She reached up to kiss him on the cheek again.

“What was that for?” he asked with a grin.

“For always being there for me. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

They walked in silence for some time and Jake reflected on all he’d learned about her. She truly was a remarkable woman. He knew without a doubt in his heart that this was the woman he wanted to

marry. He was determined to earn her love and respect and to be the man she needed him to be.

They entered campus just near the end of the lunch break. Leo was still strutting around like a peacock, and he saw Ruby and Jake approach and headed straight for them to stir up some more mischief. “Lord give me strength,” Jake heard her whisper.

Leo smirked and before he’d even reached them, he called out loudly for all to hear, “Oh look, if it isn’t the woman of...”

But he never got to finish that sentence. Jake’s blood began to boil as soon as he saw Leo and heard Ruby’s silent prayer and noticed the look of frustration cross her face. He let go of her arm, whispered, “Forgive me, Ruby,” and stepped forward and socked Leo fair in the jaw. It knocked the larger man off his feet, and he hit the ground behind him with a thud, and suddenly the whole crowd stopped as one, gasped, then applauded.

Andrew and Matty had just stepped out onto the common, heading for the chapel when they saw Ruby and Jake approach arm in arm, saw Leo strut up to them and then Jake hit him. They gasped in unison and ran in their direction.

Ruby gasped. “Jake!” she scolded, but inwardly she was thanking him for doing the very thing she was not strong enough to do herself.

Leo leapt back to his feet and grabbed Jake by the collar and began to swing at him, Jake didn’t try to hit him again, but he avoided the blows from the enraged Leo. Andrew and Matty were there then, and they quickly pulled the men apart.

“You better get that slimy weakling away from me,” Leo spat out, “I’ll knock his lights out. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” He gestured at Ruby, “I mean, look at the company he keeps.” Andrew seethed and Matty instinctively knew Andrew was about to hit him too, so he dragged Leo away before Andrew did anything he’d later regret.

Andrew released his grip from Jake’s shoulder and tried to calm his nerve. He ran to Ruby and hugged her. “Are you okay, my darling?”

“Yes Pa,” she said, “Thanks to Jake.”

He released her, crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Jake, “Care to tell me what happened?”

“Yes Sir.” Jake was not ashamed of his actions and prepared to own up. “I punched him in the jaw, Pastor.”

“Yes, I saw that, Jake, can I ask why?” Andrew tried hard not to smile.

“He was defending me, Pa,” said Ruby.

“Defending you?”

“It’s a long story, care for some coffee?” she grinned.

He nodded and they headed for the cafeteria where Ruby poured out the whole story. Jake sat back and let her speak. Andrew’s emotions fluctuated between care and concern for his daughter, blind rage at the man who would do that to his daughter and admiration for this brave young man that stood up for her. At the end of the day, Andrew had to admit he would have done the very same thing and he planned to do just that when he got his hands on Leo.

He hugged Ruby tightly, “I’m sorry darling, sorry that I wasn’t there for you.”

“It’s okay Pa, Jake was.”

“Yes, it seems he often is.” Andrew said with a wry smile, but his eyes held sincere gratitude towards Jake. “Once again Jake, I owe you my thanks.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Pastor Collins, just standing up for my friend.”

“I’m grateful to you, you did what I sorely wish I could do.”

“Pa!” said Ruby mortified. “You’re a pastor!”

“But I’m still a man! I know I’d have done the same thing; I won’t tolerate anyone hurting my girls,” he said through gritted teeth. “And I just hope I don’t see that young man anytime soon.”

“Pa, please don’t, it won’t help anything. You need to forgive him.”

Andrew’s eyes misted over, and he stroked her cheek, “You are just like your ma, darling!”

Andrew never did get to have words with Leo, in fact he never saw the young man again. Matty had taken him away and strongly

suggested he leave the campus on his own before they took legal action and expelled him for slanderous comments.

Sixteen



The Spring Dance

Andrew paused and stood staring into the flames, he crossed one arm across his waist and with the other he toyed with the buttons on his nightshirt. Abigail put down her brush and came across to him, she stood next to him, and he smiled and reached his arm around her waist. “You’re deep in thought, Husband?”

Andrew nodded and turned to look at her, he chuckled. “I was just thinking how grateful I am for Jake. I’m proud of that lad, for defending Ruby the way he did.”

“I don’t condone the violence, but I know that’s how men defend the ones they love.”

“Love?”

“I believe he loves her very much.”

Andrew nodded slowly and looked back into the flames, “Yes, I suppose he does.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Andrew’s eyebrows raised, and he smiled rather hesitantly, “He’s certainly a better choice than half the young men that are always buzzing around her.”

“I think he’s an excellent man, he’d be good for Ruby, don’t you think they are well suited?”

Andrew lay his head on hers and his voice became nostalgic, “I have to admit I’ve been impressed by him. He doesn’t fawn all over her like others do. He seems to genuinely want to put her first.

If I must give her up to some man, then I would be happy for it to be Jake. He's a young man of great integrity I know that much," he ended with a long sigh.

"He seems happy to bide his time, I love the way he cares for her. You know he's a lot like you, you're a man of great integrity too."

"Thank you, Wife."



"That looks great, Em." Ruby smiled from her spot on the couch. Abigail knelt at her daughter's feet, pins in her mouth, lifting the hem of Ruby's red dress she had just adjusted to fit Emily.

"I wish I could have a new dress, how come Ruby gets one and I don't?" The younger girl fretted.

"Stand still," muttered Abigail around her mouthful of pins she was removing from the newly sewn hem.

Emily stopped fidgeting and sighed, "I hate being poor."

Andrew looked up from his newspaper and scowled. "Emily Collins, we are not poor. God provides very generously for all of us, you know as well as I do your sister purchased her gown herself, from her savings. Perhaps if you saved your pennies rather than spending them on frivolous foibles, you'd have the money to buy a new gown too."

"Yes Pa!" Emily smiled wryly and crossed her arms across her chest.

Andrew stood up and walked to her. Abigail stood, her task complete, "Emily, my darling., Andrew said reaching out to cup her chin. "You look lovely in that color, and it doesn't matter if your dress is old, or new, it is the quality of your character that is worth so much more. Beauty really is about what's on the inside, it's your heart that impresses me most and that is what you want a man to fall in love with, external beauty is only skin deep."

"I know, Pa." Emily turned to look at Ruby. "Thank you for your dress, Ruby, thanks for giving it to me."

"Well, Lucy didn't want it," laughed Sally.

Lucy put her book down. "I don't want a nice dress."

“But don’t you want to look nice for the dance?” Sally asked.

“No! Dancing is dumb!” Lucy declared. “I’m not going!”

“Why not?” asked Emily, “I bet some boys would dance with you even if you do stand on their feet.”

“Who’s gonna dance with me?” asked Lucy, getting to the real heart of the matter. Lucy was tall and awkward and at fourteen was struggling to find her place as a young woman. She wanted the boys to notice her as a girl and yet strangely at the same time she’d prefer to be one of the boys.

“Well, I want to dance with all of my girls!” said Andrew. “I was rather hoping to show you all off tonight?” he said as he stood while Abigail looped the new tie around his neck.

“You can’t dance with Ruby, I bet she has all her dances with Jaaaaaaake!” swooned Emily.

Ruby blushed deeply and scowled at her sister, “No, I won’t, he won’t mind if I dance with my pa. I’d like to.”

“I’d like to, darling.” Andrew said with a wide grin, “but as always my first dance is with my favorite girl of all.”

“Who’s that, Pa?” asked Sally, twirling around the floor with her doll.

He looked at his wife and grinned, “Why, your mother of course!” and he reached for her hand and began whirling her around. The loosely hung tie fell off and hit the ground and they laughed as he trampled on it.

“I guess that saves me pressing it,” Abigail chuckled.



Jake stood looking at himself in the mirror and the butterflies began to dance in his stomach. He ran his hand over the new green waistcoat his aunt had made to match Ruby’s dress, he grinned as he pictured them together, he was so proud to match her as her escort. He reached for his suit coat and shrugged into it; his hands shook as he fumbled with his buttons. Grinning he looked in the mirror at himself. “Tonight’s the night, Jake, you get to escort the most beautiful girl in town,” the idea both delighted and terrified him.

He'd gone all out for this; he'd even had Molly Brooks teach him to dance. He was afraid she might have taken it too seriously and maybe even had a crush on him. He wasn't the least bit interested in Molly. She was a nice, kind and even pretty girl but he had room in his heart for only one woman and Ruby filled every inch of it.

Jake walked out into the lounge and Aunt Jo smiled her approval. "You look right handsome, Jake."

He blushed. "Thanks, Aunt Jo."

"Now, here's your little flower, it goes here like this, and I have a little posy for you give to your lady."

"She's not my lady, Aunt Jo, we are just friends..." seeing the raised eyebrows from his uncle he grinned and said, "... least for now."

"They are peonies Jake, Mrs. Collins told me she likes 'em."

"Peonies," Jake said, trying to commit that to his memory. "Thanks, Aunt Jo, you've done so much for me."

"Least I can do, you're my nephew, least I can do." Jake kissed his aunt on the cheek. He turned towards Robert, "Uncle, is the gig ready?"

"Yes, out front just like you asked."

"Thank you, both of you. I wanna do things right, a gentleman picks up a lady and returns her to her father's home afterwards. It's just right, my folks taught me that."

"You're a good lad, Jake. Pastor'll be right glad to have his daughter treated so respectful like."

"Thanks, Aunt Jo, she's worth it." He grinned widely and his eyes shone, "I'll see you two at the dance," he threw over his shoulder on his way out the door.

He arrived at the Collins home in the gig around six thirty, they would get there in plenty of time to get a cup of coffee before the dance began at seven. Aunt Jo had woven together a string of flowers and laid them around the neck of the horse, old Maisy looked very regal with her floral adornment.

Jake took a deep breath and knocked on the door, the small flower posy in his hands. He was welcomed warmly but refused the

offered chair preferring to wait by the door. His hands were visibly shaking, and he swallowed over and over. His eyes darted back and forth; he was unaware of where to focus them.

“Relax Jake,” Andrew chuckled. “It’s just a dance.” He grinned at the lad, knowing all too well how he was feeling. He still felt that way and he’d been married to Abigail for sixteen years. She still made his heart race and his knees weak.

The family were all ready to leave for the dance except Emily, she was still preening and fluffing. Andrew left the room to fetch Ruby, he knocked on her door and was invited in, Ruby took a last glance at herself in the mirror and turned to leave. “Poor Jake!” Andrew grinned.

“Why Pa?” Ruby frowned.

“Because he’s not going to know what to do with himself when he sees you, darling. You are so beautiful, that emerald dress is spectacular and makes your eyes sparkle and your face shine, unless... is it the young man that makes you feel that way?” He cocked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

“Oh Pa!” said Ruby as she always did. “He’s a nice young man but you are really getting ahead of yourself, it’s just the excitement of the dance is all.”

“Okay darling, if you are sure,” he said, with a knowing smile. “Are you ready?” he offered her his arm.

“Yes, let me grab my shawl.” Andrew reached for the shawl and put it over his arm then offered her his other arm and lead her from the room. “Poor Jake, he’s got no idea what’s about to hit him, especially with your beautiful golden hair down like that, you are very striking.”

“Oh Pa!” said Ruby again.

Andrew opened the door to the lounge and lead Ruby out on his arm and presented her to Jake. The young man let out a gasp and his heart leapt, his knees buckled beneath him, and he very nearly collapsed in a heap. He gripped tightly to the door frame and grinned widely. She was so beautiful it made him ache inside. It took him a few moments to regain his composure enough to step forward. He

swallowed twice quickly, “Miss Collins,” he said reverting to the old formality. After another deep breath and a much more confident smile he reached for her hand and corrected himself. “Ruby, you look very beautiful,” his voice trembled, suddenly very bashful with all the eyes on him.

“Thank you, Jake,” her cheeks colored, she looked up at him and smiled shyly, “You look very handsome, too.”

He gulped and tried to still the butterflies in his stomach, “These are for you.” With shaky hands, he pinned the flower on her buttonhole the way his aunt had shown him, acutely aware of his closeness to her.

“Thank you, Jake, they are lovely.”

“Are you ready to go?” he asked, beginning to calm his nerves now.

“Yes,” she said and reached for her shawl from her father.

“You two have a lovely drive, we’ll see you at the dance,” Andrew said. He turned to Jake, “That’s my precious daughter you have there, Jake, please drive carefully.”

Jake reached for her shawl to carry it for her and looked Andrew square in the eye. “I will take good care of her, Pastor, you have my word.”

“Oh Pa!” said Ruby, “It’s just a dance.”

“I know, my love,” he said stroking her cheek. “These things are just hard on pa’s you know, seeing our darlings on the arm of another man, no matter how innocent, is not easy, it’s my job to make sure he’s honorable.”

“I understand, Pastor Collins, you can trust me, Sir.”

“I know, or you wouldn’t be taking her.” The piercing eyes and knitted brows left Jake no doubt that the pastor meant every word. That faith in him both excited and frightened Jake. He would do everything in his power to not let either of them down.

Abigail turned to look at her husband after the young people had left and a single tear ran down his face. “What is it, Husband?”

“It’s begun, hasn’t it?”

“What’s begun?”

“From now on I can expect to lose them one at a time!”

Abigail grinned and reached up to touch his face. "I'm afraid so, but you still have them for some time yet."

"Not that one," he said motioning at the door. "I expect that young man is already making plans for my Ruby." He shook his head sadly, "It's only a matter of time."

"Perhaps," she said consoling him. "He's a fine young man, he'd make a wonderful son-in-law," Andrew couldn't help but nod. "But I think we are getting ahead of ourselves, and I believe we need to let Ruby decide."

He nodded again and looked far away for a few moments as his eyes swept the room looking at each of his girls. Abigail knew he was picturing this night for each of his daughters. At last, he took a deep breath and smiled. "Are you ready to go girls?"

"Yes Pa," said Emily, finally entering the room.

"Let me look at you all." He inspected his daughters and then his wife, ending with a whistle. "Beautiful, I'll be the envy of the town with four beautiful women on my arms tonight."



The dance was wonderful, all the girls enjoyed themselves, even Lucy had a full dance card and loved being whisked around the dance floor, even though she didn't know the steps well and often tripped over her own feet. Emily was very popular with her refined, delicate beauty and graceful steps, she was wonderful to dance with. Even little Sally danced happily, usually with girls from her class. A few of the boys shyly approached and asked the pretty ten-year-old to dance. She had more than one dance with her cousin Samuel, and Oliver Bourke. Andrew filled his wife's dance card with his name but also took great delight at dancing with each of his girls.

After his traditional first dance with his 'best girl' he approached Jake and Ruby and asked to cut in. Ruby laughed as her father led her in a merry dance. "Having fun, Daughter?" he asked her tenderly as they picked up the waltz together. Jake invited Abigail to dance, and she was delighted to accept.

"Oh yes, Jake is a wonderful, thoughtful escort."

He nodded, "He'd better be," his eyes flashed with humor.

"Or what, Pa, you'll punch him?" she laughed.

"I was more worried about you slapping him!" he said. And they both laughed heartily.

"You don't have to worry about that, he's the perfect gentleman."

"Good." Andrew smiled, but his eyes said he was very serious. The music stopped, and he kissed her on the cheek and returned her to Jake. "Here you go, Jake, my most precious treasure."

"Oh Pa!" said Ruby rolling her eyes at him.

Jake had surprised Ruby by knowing all the steps. "You dance beautifully, Jake," she said as he whirled around making the emerald fabric shine and shimmer in the lamplight.

"I've had some lessons."

"You did? From whom?"

"Aunt Josephine," he laughed. "And Molly Brooks."

"Molly Brooks? Is that why she wouldn't speak to me earlier when I tried to greet her?"

"Yes, I believe she is upset that I learned to dance from her, so I could take you to the dance and not her."

"Oh," said Ruby. "You'd best make sure you dance with her at least once tonight."

"Trying to get rid of me, are you?"

"Oh no, you're a wonderful escort, I'm just being kind and sharing you is all." Jake grinned but he really hoped a time would come when he needn't share or be shared with anyone and was wholly and truly hers alone.

Jake did dance with Molly and a few of the other ladies of the town, he even gave Lucy a twirl around the dance floor. It wasn't because he didn't want to dance with Ruby, it was because of the long line of young men who wanted to dance with her. She danced with them to be polite but always found Jake again and made sure most of her dances were saved for him. Jake was the envy of every eligible man in town that evening. He arrived with the most beautiful young woman on his arm and many of them wished they could be him.

He very nearly came to blows with George Meyer who tried to con three dances out of Ruby and clung to her much too tightly making her feel very awkward. Jake noticed her discomfort and stepped up, tapping the young man on the shoulders. "Dance is over, George."

The man stopped dancing but refused to let go of Ruby. "Aww, music ain't stopped yet, I got 'er till the music stops," he growled, holding her tightly against his body. Her eyes were as large as saucers and Jake grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pulling him off Ruby and 'helping him' to the other side of the dance floor, pushing him down onto a nearby chair.

"I said dance is over, George, and she won't be dancing with you again."

George tried to complain but Jake stood over him. "Fine, didn't want to anyway, girl's pretty but she can't dance." Jake ignored him and walked over to check Ruby was okay. He led her to the refreshment stand, sat her down and brought her coffee.

The incident, though brief, had not gone unnoticed by Andrew. He nodded in their direction, "Good lad," he said to Abigail while they danced. He admired Jake's willingness to stick up for Ruby when needed. He saw the shining gratefulness in Ruby's eyes, and he knew without a doubt that Ruby would always be safe and protected with Jake.

After the dance Jake returned Ruby home as promised. She thanked him kindly and kissed him on the cheek again. "You don't need to come to the door with me, Jake, I'm okay."

"I don't mind, Ruby." He said jumping down to help her down off the wagon. "It's my honor and expectation as a gentleman to return you to your father."

"Oh Jake, you're as bad as my pa," she smiled.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said, offering her his arm and leading her up to the house.



“I have to admit, Abigail,” Andrew said, sitting up in bed with his wife. “If I have to lose my Ruby, I’d be glad if it was to that young man.”

“There is your problem, that you think you will lose her. She’ll always be your daughter, whether she marries or not! That goes for all of them.”

He nodded. “Did you notice that young man with eyes on my Lucy?” he asked with a grimace.

“Yes,” Abigail admitted. “I’d hoped you hadn’t seen him.”

“I see all the young men eyeballing my girls,” he laughed. “It’s a father’s job.”

“He truly seemed just enamored by her,”

“Can you blame him?” asked Andrew with a wide grin. “She’s a rather remarkable girl.”

“Strong and wild,” Abigail grinned.

“Some men love a passionate and headstrong woman; they know she’s no fool and won’t be taken advantage of by anyone. That’s what I love the most about Lucy,” he sighed. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“You are a great deal too tenderhearted, Husband,” Abigail said with a smile and stroked his cheek.

“How can I not be, I have four beautiful daughters and a stunning wife, that alone makes a man’s heart as soft as cotton, I do often fear it might entirely melt sometimes.” Extinguishing the lamp, they slid down under the covers. Andrew took his wife in his arms.

“And that is why we love you,” she said, kissing his stubbly cheek, and they were soon asleep.



Jake was a frequent guest at the Collins supper table after that, Ruby wasn’t yet sure of her feelings for him, she was much too busy with her studies for any relationship, but she valued his friendship very much. The family enjoyed getting to know the young man and Andrew was impressed with his manner and willingness to get to know the whole family. He talked to each of the girls, played

catch with Lucy, helped Sally with her spelling words when she'd exhausted everyone else's patience and he played endless games of chess with Andrew. The pastor was delighted to finally have someone to play with, most times Jake came over he'd pull out the board and challenge him. They were about even in their record of wins and losses.



A week after the dance Andrew arrived home with an envelope in his hands and a bemused look on his face.

"What's the matter, pa?" Asked Emily, looking up as he entered. Andrew walked to embrace and kiss his wife as he always did and then plonked himself down on the table opposite his three daughters who were working on their homework.

Abigail placed a coffee cup in front of him and slid over the tray of cookies. "A penny for your thoughts, Husband?" she asked sitting next to him.

He sighed and passed the envelope to her. "A letter came from Tommy today."

"Tom?" She grinned reaching for it. "But why would that have you feeling down? Did something happen?" her face fell, "Is it Luke?" She feared.

"No, it's Henry, he passed a few days ago."

"Oh Pa, I'm sorry," Emily said looking up from her sums.

Abigail put her hand on his, "I'm sorry."

He nodded and then smiled, "But there is good news too, read it."

Abigail scanned the page, then she gasped, grinned widely, and tears flooded her eyes. "Oh Andrew, that is such great news."

Lucy cocked her head to the side, "What's great news, Ma? If it's so great, why are you crying?"

"Your Uncle Henry accepted Christ before he died," Abigail wiped away a tear. "These are tears of joy my darling, there is nothing sweeter than knowing another soul has been saved."

Andrew squeezed her hand tightly; his voice was tight and raspy. "Our son led him to the Lord, Abigail, he's quite a young man, isn't he?" he raised his eyebrows.

Abigail nodded. "Yes, he is."

"So does that mean Tommy will come home?" Lucy asked hopefully.

"No, he says he's going to stay and turn the place around." Andrew summarized the long and newsy letter for his family. "He's turned the farmland and stores over to those who have worked them for all those years. Aunt Lydia came up with the wonderful idea of turning the house into a convalescent home, working in conjunction with the hospital."

Abigail grinned, "That is a wonderful idea."

He continued, "Tommy hopes to employ some new farm managers for his remaining land and build a mill for the nearly two hundred acres of pine he has. He's on the look out for a teacher and a pastor for the town and staff to help at the convalescent home.

"He finished his letter by saying he doesn't plan to stay there, he'll set the place up, leave managers in charge and then leave. He's worked out a system for income for the house, no one would have to pay to stay there unless they want to donate, and Tommy will maintain care of the bank accounts. He hopes at this stage to stay a few years to get it all set up and running and then travel west but he's leaving it up to the Lord."

"I wish he was coming home, Pa." Lucy said sadly, "I really miss him."

Andrew nodded, "Me too, darling. But he's doing the Lord's work where he is, God is doing amazing things through your brother, and I couldn't be more proud."

Abigail smiled widely and squeezed his hand to let him know she agreed.

"What's that, Pa?" Sally asked, noticing a small slip of paper sticking out from the envelope.

Andrew smiled, "This is the most surprising part. Henry has bequeathed five thousand dollars to the seminary college." He sniffed back the tears that threatened to overflow. "Tommy wrote that Henry

was always proud of me and our work here. He'd always secretly admired me for following my heart rather than staying on the farm out of obligation. He told Tom that he'd never truly been happy at the estate either and had always wanted to be a lumberjack. Working the trees and the small mill was what had brought him the most joy. Alas though, as the oldest son, he was obliged to take over running the estate.

“He made Tommy promise he would never stay out of obligation and that he would do what made him truly happy rather than what he felt he should do out of duty, that it is just land and there is no need to ensure it stayed in the family. I guess he realized that estates, lands and holdings don't give a family value.” All the faces listening on nodded their agreement.

Seventeen



The Jewelry Box

The third of June was a warm, bright Wednesday afternoon, Ruby walked into town just after noon. She didn't have any classes after lunch on a Wednesday and often went to meet Jake for lunch and then walked to the school to volunteer her services for the afternoon. Her family had encouraged her to do this, it would look good when they were trying to select the best candidates for the three jobs that were available at the school for the following year. Ruby was among eight applicants for the jobs and would do anything it took to secure one of the places. The school was more than happy to have her help and Ruby spent time in each of the classrooms over the weeks, working with the students, grading papers, tidying, filing, preparing books, just whatever they needed help with.

Ruby swung by the carpentry shop to sit and have lunch with Jake as she often did. She breezed in and Jake's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. Today she had her golden hair hanging long down her back in the most becoming way and she wore a lovely cream-colored blouse and pale blue skirt, a very simple outfit with little adornment but Jake noticed how even the simple, homely style was so beautiful on her. But then he was somewhat biased.

"Afternoon Jake, Mr. Hayes," she greeted cheerily.

"Afternoon Miss Collins," returned Mr. Hayes. He liked the girl a lot, she was a regular visitor to his shop, and she was confident and easy to chat to.

“Hi Ruby,” smiled Jake. “Let me just wash my hands and I’ll come join you.”

“Take your time, Jake, I’m not going to the school today, they have examinations. I’ll bet Lucy is thrilled by that,” she laughed, and Jake smiled. It was great news, usually she could only stay for half an hour and then she had to race off. Still, he cherished every moment he could get with her. She filled his lunch break with her happy chatter, and it thrilled him. He declared Wednesday his favorite day because of the time he got to spend with her.

“Why don’t you two take an hour or so and go to the café today,” said his kind boss. “We are up to date on orders, and you have been working hard, Jake.”

“Thanks Mr. Hayes,” He turned to look at her, “Would you like to, Ruby?”

“Yes, very much.” She smiled widely and took his offered arm, and they crossed the road towards the café. They enjoyed their light meal and lingered over coffee. At last, they stood to go. Ruby reached for her coin purse to pay for her lunch, but Jake stopped her.

“A gentleman does not make a lady pay for her own lunch.”

“But Jake, I can afford it and I know you don’t make much money.” It came as a kick in the stomach for Jake’s manly pride, he didn’t like being reminded he was a poor apprentice.

“Ruby, I assure you I can afford it,” he said a little gruffly. He noticed Ruby frown slightly and he changed his tone, “It would be my pleasure if you would allow me to serve you in this way.”

“Very well,” she agreed with a smile, and he paid for their meal. “I’m beginning to feel like a kept woman.”

‘*That’s the whole idea,*’ he thought to himself although he said nothing.

“Would you like to walk for a while, Jake?” she asked, “I need to walk off that piece of cake I ate.”

“I’d like that very much,” he said. “Where would you like to go?”

“Wherever you lead me,” she smiled. So, Jake led them through the town to look in the shop windows. Ruby enjoyed it very much. When they came to the window of the mercantile Ruby gasped

and stopped. "Look at that, Jake," she said pointing to an ornately carved wooden jewelry box. "Look how beautiful the carving on that is."

Carved into the box was a scene; a stagecoach drawn by four horses; a beautiful lady waved from the window of the stagecoach. On the front it had a hole for the key and wrapping around the sides was a winding vine with leaves and flowers. The scene was carefully painted in vivid colors, from the magnificent black horses to the red of the stagecoach and the woman waving from the window who had long golden hair that flowed out behind her.

"I think she looks like you."

"I guess she does, but then I do have a very common look."

Jake smiled. *'How could she think she was common. I've never met anyone with hair as golden as hers, or a crooked smile or eyes that light up like that. She sure is one of a kind.'* "It certainly is an interesting box," he said nonchalantly, blushing slightly, hoping earnestly she couldn't read his thoughts.

"Jake, it's wonderful. I bet you could make something like that."

"Perhaps, but I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet, I'm still learning."

"Nonsense Jake, I've seen your carvings and they are beautiful, like here on my bracelet." She pulled her sleeve up so he could see.

"You're wearing the bracelet I made?"

She became very serious then, "Oh yes, I wear it all the time, it's very special, its seldom off my wrist." Jake blushed and swallowed the lump in his throat.

His thought was interrupted by the postmistress calling out to him from across the road, "Jake McAllister, is that you? There is a letter here for you."

"Thanks Mrs. Mason, I'll be right over." He turned to Ruby then, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all, I go where you lead, remember." She smiled, took one last look at the beautiful jewelry box and followed Jake across the street.

“It’s from my sister,” he said as they sat on the park bench while he read the short letter.

“I don’t think you’ve told me much about her?”

“About Katie? She’s a year younger than me.”

“Same age as me then.”

He nodded. “She’s getting married,” he said incredulously, frowning, “but she’s so young.”

“I don’t know about that, plenty of girls my age are married. My cousin Abi wasn’t much older than me.”

Jake smiled, “Yes, but it’s different when it’s your sister, I’ve always been a bit protective of Katie.”

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Jacob Aaron,” she said affecting her teacher voice.

“Yes ma’am,” he grinned.

“Will you go to her wedding?”

“I’d like to, if I can get the time off,” he said and then, “Oh no.”

“What is it, Jake?”

“Her wedding is on the twenty-ninth of June, the same day as your graduation.”

Ruby tried to hide her disappointment and said, “That’s okay Jake, your sister’s wedding is much more important.”

“But I was so looking forward to watching you graduate; your teaching certificate is a great achievement.”

“I know, but you can’t help it, I know you’ll be there with me in spirit, and I’ll have my family there, so I’ll be okay, it’s much more important you be with your family at that time. I would want my brother at my wedding.”

“You really don’t mind?”

She put her hand on his arm, “I’m sad about it, Jake but I’d never want you to miss your sister’s wedding for it.”

“You’re a good sport, Ruby. I won’t stay home any longer than I’m needed, two weeks, maybe three tops.”

“How long does it take to get to.... Oh, what’s the name of your hometown?”

“Pine Ridge and it’s a two-day train ride east of here to Campbelltown and then half a day south by stage.”

“Oh, I traveled through Campbelltown on the way here. That’s a nice part of the country.”

“My folks live a ways south of there, it’s a pretty small prairie town but I call it home,” he laughed.

“Sounds a bit like Rivers Junction where my ma came from. It’s pretty there.”

“I best go wire my folks that I’ll be coming, and then talk to Mr. Hayes. I sure hope he’ll give me the four weeks off.”

“Four weeks, Jake, I’ll miss you when you are gone.” Jake noticed the tears flood to the corners of her blue eyes.

“I’ll miss you too,” he said and thought ‘*I’ll miss you more than you’ll ever know, and I know I’ll ache for you until I can see you again.*’

“Well, Ruby, we’d best get back to the workshop, I’ve been gone far too long already.”

“Yes of course, I do admire your dedication to your job. Can we go back past the mercantile? I’d like to look at that beautiful wooden box again.”

“Sure,” he smiled. ‘*Someday I’ll tell you I made it,*’ he thought.

Eighteen



New To Town

“Well, this is the place, Lottie, what’d’ya think?” said Dr Howard Hart.

“Just like any other town I suppose,” his wife smirked.

“We will be here for some time, Lottie, so I hope you grow to like it. Kids, welcome to Olivers Grove, our new home.”

Dr Hart had arrived from the east to assist Dr Price in his newly extended practice. Dr Price was getting on in years now and the town was growing rapidly, he desperately needed help and Dr Hart had answered the advertisement. He’d been out for a few weeks a month earlier and declared he was happy to stay. He’d already secured a home for his family and was looking forward to life as a country doctor. His wife and five children were not so happy about ‘traipsing out to the prairies’ but here they were and they would have to make the best of it.

Howard hoped Victor would finally work out what he wanted to do out here. He had been in college back east but had dropped out of law school last semester and seemed a bit aimless. They had been to many towns hoping he’d change his ways. There was a law school here now, a good one too, he’d heard, and he remained optimistic that Victor would return to his studies, perhaps next semester. He was already a lot older than most students as it had taken him three years at college to decide on his major. He was already almost twenty-five years old, and Howard hoped he’d find his way soon.

His four other children were with him, too. His adult daughter who'd been a teacher and three younger children would be attending school here. They dragged their feet frowning at the rough boardwalks and quaint stores. "Sure, ain't much of a town," moaned fifteen-year-old Tina.

"You'll learn to love it," Dr Hart said, leading them towards their new home.

"Huh, I doubt that," she snarled in return.



Victor strolled into the woodworking shop where Jake was working just one more day and then he'd leave for his journey. "Hi there," said Jake, placing down his hammer and coming to greet the smartly dressed man. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah," he said. "The names Hart, Victor Hart, my father's the new doctor, we've just moved here."

"Oh, welcome to Olivers Grove, Victor, where've you come from?" Jake asked eyeing the man's clothing.

"Spotswood," he said condescendingly, "It's some ways east and south of here on the coast."

"Yes, I know where Spotswood is, it's a great big city I've been told, you'll find Olivers Grove quite quaint in comparison." Something about this man's manner told Jake he couldn't be trusted, still he tried hard to remain professional and kind.

"Oh, so far it's okay, I quite like the view," he said with a whistle as Ruby walked down the street on the other side and waved to Jake. His heart leapt as always, and he waved back at her. He wanted to call out to her, but he knew one did not shout at ladies. So, he just motioned with his hand to come over, she lifted her basket to demonstrate she was going to the store but would be over afterwards. He nodded and turned back to Victor and frowned as the taller man ogled her.

"Wow, what a beauty," Victor grinned when Ruby disappeared into the shop, and he turned back to Jake. "I'd sure like to get to know her."

'Aren't you a little old for her?' Jake thought with a frown. He had no rights to Ruby, none at all, he knew that, but that didn't stop Victor's comment from bothering him.

"Do you know her?" Victor continued.

"Yes, she's my friend," Jake grinned and blushed slightly, Victor got the distinct impression that there was more to it than that.

"I'd sure like to make her my friend, and if all the ladies in this town look like that I'll have no problem fitting in here." The look on his face made Jake uneasy, he didn't seem genuine at all.

Jake frowned and then changed the subject. "What can I do for you, Mr. Hart?" he asked more than a little tersely.

"Oh, I think I've hit a nerve, is that girl special to you?" Victor sneered. Jake didn't respond, he wasn't going to be drawn into his fight.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hart?" he said again.

Victor scoffed, and then realizing any further goading was pointless he smirked. "Ma admired that dining table you got on display and wondered how much it cost."

"It's twenty dollars," said Jake flatly. It only cost eight dollars, twelve with the chairs, but he didn't like this man very much and wanted to drive him away.

"Phew," Victor whistled. "High prices here in the country. Oh well I'll let Ma know, for now there is a beautiful blonde I need to go and meet."

Jake tried to protest, he thought about punching Victor, but it was no use, there was nothing he could do. Why did he feel so threatened by the man? He'd been nice enough, he'd only complimented Ruby. But it bothered him, he didn't want any competition for her heart, and right as he was about to go away. He'd hoped to get a little time alone with her before he left but he'd been so busy completing orders. Well, he'd be joining the family for supper, that would have to do.

Nearly half an hour later Ruby, escorted by Victor, came to the woodshop.

“Hi Jake,” she said letting go of Victor’s arm and walking over to him. “This is Mr. Hart; his family is new in town. His Pa is the new doctor.” Victor smiled, it was so quaint how these country folk called their fathers, ‘Pa.’ He liked the way she talked.

“Yes, we’ve met.”

“Good,” she said. “He hasn’t yet made many friends. I was just bringing him to meet you although I guess he’ll have to wait until you come back to meet you properly.”

“Are you going away?” asked Victor, hoping that he was, obviously he was special to the girl, and he didn’t want any competition as he had already made up his mind to win her.

“Yes, for just shy of a month, to go home for my sister’s wedding.” Jake said flatly.

“When do you go?” Victor tried to sound interested in the conversation.

“Tomorrow,”

Victor smiled, “Safe travels, boy, have a nice time with your family.”

Jake fumed, ‘*Boy!*’ he thought, ‘*Who does he think he is?*’ He had a bad feeling about Victor all together.

“I need to go Miss Collins; do you need any more assistance?”

“No, that’s quite fine Mr. Hart, I’ll manage thank you,” Ruby said kindly.

He smiled at her, “Please call me Victor, I imagine I’ll see you in church on Sunday,” he wasn’t a church going man, but he figured she was and it would impress her.

“Yes,” she grinned, and he turned on his heels and marched up the street. “He seems like a nice man,” Ruby said to Jake. He swallowed the angry retort that formed on his lips that he knew wasn’t fair. One thing he loved about Ruby was how she was so kind and genuine to all people. How could he begrudge her that now? He just wished she wasn’t quite so nice to all the men. They may get the wrong idea.

“Yes, I suppose he does.”

“Perhaps I’ll invite him to the youth group, that way he could meet all sorts of folks.”

Jake gritted his teeth and clenched his fist down behind the counter where Ruby couldn't see. "Yes, that would be a good idea, I suppose." He tried to sound nonchalant.

"Working on anything new?" she asked changing the subject.

He smiled then, "Not really, I've just finished the table and now I'm getting ready to give it a varnish, for the Watsons."

"It looks great, Jake," she said running her hand over the smooth surface.

"I was just about to start the varnish," he held up the tin.

"Okay, I'll leave you to it, never did like the smell of varnish," she screwed up her nose. "See you tonight, Jake, around six?"

"I'll be there."

"Good," she squeezed his arm and smiled widely, the dimple appearing on her cheek set Jake's heart pounding just a little faster. "I'll see you then. Bye Mr. Hayes," she called cheerily to the man in the back corner of the storeroom where he was sanding a chair leg.

"Bye Miss Collins, say hi to your pa for me."

"Will do," she promised. "Bye Jake, happy varnishing!" she smiled. He nodded and reached for his paintbrush. He could not shake the foreboding feeling that he was leaving town at exactly the wrong time. Would she still want to know him when he returned? He closed his eyes and sighed. "I guess I'll just have to trust God," he muttered to himself.



Jake arrived promptly at six o'clock for one last supper before his trip. The girls pestered him with many questions, and he patiently answered them all, they wished him well and sent him on his way. First though, he asked if he might talk to Ruby alone for a few minutes. "Of course," Andrew smiled, and they decided to take a short walk in the moonlight just across to the seat outside the chapel.

Jake led her across to the seat and they sat down. "Ruby, I'm sorry I won't be here for your graduation," he said. It wasn't what he wanted to say but it was all he could think of just now.

"That's okay Jake, it isn't your fault."

“You won’t forget me while I’m gone, will you?”

“Jake, it’s only a month, why would I forget you? You’re my dear friend.” She placed her hand on his arm. “You won’t forget me, will you?” she returned.

“That’s not possible, Ruby.”

“Jake what is it? I know you didn’t bring me out here to make small talk.”

Jake swallowed hard. He had so many things he wanted to say. He wanted to tell her he loved her, to get her to promise him she’d wait for him, to be his and his alone. Oh, he wanted to say he wouldn’t go, and he’d rather stay here with her, but he didn’t, it wasn’t right, none of those things were right, at least not yet. So, he sighed.

“What is it, Jake? You can say anything to me, you know that?”

He nodded but thought to himself, *‘But I can’t say the one thing I want to say the most, not yet, not until I’m sure you want to hear it.’*

He reached for her hand, she didn’t resist him, that was a good start. “I wanted to ask you...” he gulped, “that is I wanted to know if it’d be okay if I wrote to you while I’m gone, and just maybe you’d write to me too?”

She smiled, “Of course Jake, I’d love to.”

He grinned, “That’s all I wanted to ask, now I’d best get you home.”

They both stood up and Jake gave her his arm and escorted her home. She lay her head on his shoulder and sighed, they were just approaching the driveway to the house. Ruby didn’t notice Andrew and Abigail watching from the window.

The two young people stopped at the bottom of the stairs, “I won’t come in Ruby, I’ve gotta go pack, you know I leave on the train at seven in the morning.”

“Yes, I’m really going to miss you,” and she reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Then he drew her into a warm embrace, drinking in the scent of her again, he’d miss the smell of her perfume and the silkiness of her golden hair. “Take care of yourself, Jake, and please write to me,” she said as he reluctantly released her.

He plucked up all his courage then and kissed her on the forehead, "I will, Ruby," he said. "Promise me you'll write back?"

"I will, I promise," she said and with a sigh he turned on his heels and walked off in the direction of town, the moonlight as his guide.

Ruby turned to walk back into the house, she closed the door and sighed deeply, she really was going to miss him. It surprised her how much. She knew she loved Jake, but she just wasn't sure how much she loved him, or if she loved him as more than just her best friend. She really hadn't known up to now, but now that he was leaving, her heart began to ache. She touched the spot on her head where he had kissed her and smiled. "He'll be back in less than four weeks," she said to herself as she made her way to her bedroom.

Nineteen



When The Cats Away...

Ruby rose early and left the house at a brisk walk. She was already running late and hoped to catch the train just before he left so she could wave goodbye. She made it to the platform just as Jake was about to board.

“Jake!” she called.

“Ruby, what are you doing here?” he asked turning back towards her, surprised but delighted to see her.

“I just wanted to give you something to take with you on your trip, just in case you do forget me, I want you to have a reminder.” That wasn’t why she was there, she had been drawn there, needing to see him one more time. She didn’t really know why, just that there was an ache in her heart, and she really was going to miss him, so one last opportunity to say goodbye was worth the early rise.

“What is it?”

“Mrs. Feathertail,” said Ruby, handing over the small wooden chicken to him. “This way I know you’ll come back because I love that little chicken and I want it back. If you don’t bring it back, I just might be tempted to jump on the train and come and get it.” She grinned.

His head was swirling, what did all this mean, was Ruby starting to have feelings for him? He wasn’t sure, he couldn’t work her out at all.

“Are you sure, Ruby, won’t you miss Mrs. Feathertail too much?”

“Oh yes, I expect I’ll pine for her for sometimes, but four weeks really isn’t so long and you..., ah... that is Mrs. Feathertail knows I will be here looking forward to her return.”

Jake smiled, “I’ll take great care of her, Ruby, and you have my word I shall return her to you.” She reached up to hug him and he wrapped his arms tightly around her. “Goodbye Ruby. I’ll see you in a month.” He kissed her on the cheek and then released her and climbed immediately aboard the train. She stood on the platform watching the train until it was out of sight.

Jake sat on the train seat with his thoughts whirling. *‘Did she mean what I thought she meant? Is she starting to have feelings for me? Or am I just imagining it all?’* He groaned; this would be a torturous four weeks. He hoped it would pass quickly. He vowed on his return he’d tell her how he felt about her. He looked down in his hand at the little wooden chicken. He chuckled as he thought about her love for chickens.

How his heart ached, the further the train got from her, the more the ache grew. He knew it would continue to ache every moment until he returned.



Ruby walked through town wrestling with her own feelings. She was upset that she wasn’t going to see Jake for four weeks, how she would miss the friend she had come to rely on the most. She could say anything to Jake, and he never judged her, there was no one else she could speak to so openly, not even her sisters, not even her pa. “He’ll be back soon,” she said looking at her little bracelet, then she smiled. “And so will Mrs. Feathertail.”

She was just about to step off the path to cross the road and make her way back to the college when she was greeted by Victor Hart.

“Good morning, Miss Collins, you are up bright and early.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hart, as are you I see.”

“I always get up this early. It’s my favorite time of day. I come out here to walk and pray. It’s been my practice since I was a young boy,” he lied. He’d got up because he thought she might meet the train and then maybe he could get her alone. He was simply saying what he thought would impress her.

“Really, you are a follower of Christ?” Her eyes lit up and she smiled wistfully.

“Yes of course, a far from perfect, hopelessly flawed one however,” he said with an exaggerated smile.

“Me too I’m afraid,” said Ruby and she shivered.

“Oh, are you cold?”

“A little, silly me I forgot my shawl, too busy trying not to miss the train.”

He led her into the small, covered area outside the telegraph office and they sat down. He gave her his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. “You had to meet the train?” he pretended to inquire.

“Yes,” she said sadly. “My friend Jake left today, remember you met him?”

“The carpenter, yes. Is he a special friend?” he asked trying to sound curious rather than nosy.

“Yes, I suppose so, we spend a lot of time together but no, not in the way you mean, at least not yet,” she added although unsure why. Victor noticed the shy blush to her cheeks as she said it, he nodded and vowed to make sure their relationship stayed at ‘not yet’ so that he might have his chance with her.

They sat in silence for a moment and Ruby sighed. “Hey, what is it, Miss Collins?”

“Oh, nothing really, I’m just feeling sorry for myself and wondering what I might do to pass the time until Jake comes home. I only have one week of college left and then what?”

“We shall have to find some things to take your mind off missing your friend. You graduate next week, don’t you? That’s quite an achievement.”

“That’s what Jake said,” she smiled.

"I'll bet he did," Victor muttered. "I've got three years of college under my belt. Went to the finest college in the country back in Spotswood. Perhaps you've heard of Washington College?"

"Yes, of course," said Ruby, "That's a very prestigious school. What did you study?"

"I did this and that and then finally settled on law."

"You're a lawyer?" she asked.

"Well, not quite, I've got another semester to go before I can take the bar, I thought I might go back next fall." That wasn't quite true, he hadn't made up his mind, but he could do, and he thought it might impress her.

"That's great, Mr. Hart, you really ought to finish, we have an excellent law school here and our town sure could use more good lawyers."

He smiled at her approval. '*One point for me,*' he thought, '*that's something I have on that uneducated carpenter.*'

Just then the clock on the bank chimed. "Oh no, I'm late for breakfast, I must hurry." She leapt up and motioned to return his coat.

"Keep it on, Miss Ruby, it's a chilly morning, I'll get it off you some other time."

"Thank you, Mr. Hart," she smiled. "See you around town."

"Yes, good day Miss Ruby."

Ruby made it home just in time for breakfast, hung the black coat on the hook and joined her family at the table.

"Hi Ruby, Jake get away on time?" Abigail asked.

"Yes," she smiled.

"We'll sure miss that young man around here," said Andrew. "He's a good lad." Ruby nodded sadly.

"Whose coat is that?" asked forthright Lucy, "Certainly ain't Jake's, he couldn't afford cloth like that."

"Isn't," corrected Ruby, she really didn't like it when people used poor grammar, it's one thing that really impressed her about Jake, he was always so well spoken. His teacher mother had insisted they didn't speak like 'country folk.'

“No, it belongs to Mr. Hart, he’s new to town, his family just moved here a few days ago, his pa is the new doctor.”

“Hart? His brother is Peter, he’s a new boy in my class today and he’s mean,” said Lucy. “I don’t like him one bit.”

“Lucy!” Andrew scolded.

“It’s true, Pa. He stole my slate and wouldn’t give it back until I promised to sit next to him. I did it but only so I wouldn’t get in trouble for not having my slate. Nope, I don’t like him!”

Andrew laughed at her in spite of himself, she really had no idea that Peter likely had a crush on her and that’s why he’d done it.

“I’m not sure if they are brothers, I’ve only met him just twice a few days ago and then again this morning.”

Andrew’s eyebrows went up, “How did you come to have his coat?”

She blushed a little. “I was walking home and noticed I’d forgotten my shawl, I saw Mr. Hart, he takes prayer walks early in the morning. He said hello, and noticed I was shivering and gave me his coat. He’s a nice young man, Pa. You’d like him. He’s going to be a lawyer.” Ruby was always quick to see the best in people.

Andrew frowned and then smiled, “I’m sure I will, darling. I heard there was a new doctor in town. He’s got five children I believe and yes, I imagine that Peter is one of them.” He said winking at Lucy. She rolled her eyes and Sally laughed, spitting out half the eggs from her far too large mouthful.

“Sally, take smaller bites,” her mother said then joining the conversation. “That’s nice, I’ll have to take some baking over and go and meet them. Do you suppose they’ll be in Church on Sunday?”

“I’m uncertain, Ma.”

“Didn’t you ask your new friend?” asked Emily

“He’s not my friend, I just met him,” said Ruby a slight blush to her cheeks, feeling very uncomfortable about this conversation.

“I guess you’ll be seeing him again soon, seeing as you have his coat,” the younger girl asked, swooning, “I’ll bet he’s really handsome.”

A cough and a stern look from her father brought the conversation to an end.

“Now, I’ve got to get to school, last week you know, and I want to be there early. You ready, Pa?”

“Yes, my darling. Have a wonderful day at school, girls,” Andrew said and kissed each on the cheek then turned to his wife. “And you have a wonderful day too, I’ll see you this evening, Wife,” and he kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Husband,” she said returning his kiss. He took Ruby by the arm, and they left.

The campus was already filling up with students. The final week meant last minute papers to write, grades to check up and plans to be made for the summer, it also meant exams. Ruby had three coming up this week and she wanted to get to the library to do some more study.

Just as they arrived, she ran into Victor Hart.

“Ruby? Fancy seeing you here?” Andrew’s eyebrows raised at the use of her given name; he was very familiar for someone that she’d just met.

“Good morning again, Mr. Hart. Pa this is Mr. Hart, I told you about him this morning.”

Victor smiled at that; *‘She mentioned me. Another point to me.’*

Andrew reached out his hand, “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hart. Are you enjoying our town?” He frowned slightly noticing that Victor seemed to be a lot older than Ruby’s seventeen years.

Victor smiled and gazed at Ruby with a sly grin, “Yes, it’s certainly full of very interesting people.”

Andrew smiled ruefully, “I have a meeting to get too, darling, do you need anything more?”

“No Pa, thanks, I love you.”

“I love you too, darling,” he said kissing her on the cheek as he always did, she wasn’t in the slightest bit embarrassed. She loved that her Pa was so affectionate, and not ashamed to be, even with his grown-up daughter. She turned back to Victor. “What brings you to campus today, Mr. Hart?”

“Victor, please, call me Victor, Ruby, It’s you actually.”

“Me?”

“Yes, it’s what you said this morning, I’ve come to apply for my last semester of law school next fall. I figured I should enroll now to stop myself from chickening out.”

Ruby smiled kindly, “Congratulations, Mr. Hart. I’m glad, I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“Only problem is I’m struggling to find all the places I need to go on campus, any chance you could be my tour guide?” Ruby looked up at the large clock in the common, she had two hours until her first class and she’d wanted to use every bit of that time in the library studying for her exams. But here was a person who needed her help, and she couldn’t refuse. Besides he’d been kind to her so now she should return the favor.

“Sure,” she said with a reluctant smile, “Where do you need to go?”

He grinned condescendingly, thrilled to get a chance to spend time with her. He looked at the piece of paper the receptionist had just given him and said, “To start with, I need to find Professor Malloy in F Block, Room 21.”

“Very well. Come this way,” Ruby hoped this wouldn’t take too long.

He offered her his arm and she accepted; it was only polite. The young man smiled. ‘*Another point to me*’ he thought. He was going to enjoy Ruby’s company and, he hoped, maybe even get her to marry him. He’d been alone for too long and it was high time he took a bride, Ruby was young, beautiful and sweet, she’d be the ideal person for him. He usually got what he wanted and a pretty girl like this was easy to seduce, country girls were usually very naïve, and with Jake gone he’d have no trouble convincing her that he loved her. In his mind he did love her, or at least he loved the idea of her. Having a beautiful young woman like Ruby on his arm, made him look good. He knew how to be kind and charming and, in his mind, he thought this was what love was.

Ruby noticed how tall and good looking he was. Not a broad, manly, rugged good-looking like Jake, but a more classically charming, clean-cut good looking like one would expect a city lawyer to be. He was also very wealthy, and he’d made several compliments

to her already. She blushed under his flattery and liked the way he made her feel. *'At least he is enjoyable company if I must give up my study time,'* She thought.

They walked past Andrew's office on the way to F Block and Andrew saw them through the small window. He frowned, "Be careful, little girl," he said aloud, "He's very charming and could whisk you off your feet before you know it. Have your head about you," he said hoping she would make wise choices.

Ruby found Victor's company very compelling, so much so that she uncharacteristically skipped her first class to take him to the cafeteria. He had a good sense of humor and was certainly very charming.

She'd never skipped a class before for such a frivolous reason but had already secured an A in that subject anyway and figured it wouldn't hurt, this once. They laughed over their coffee and Victor enjoyed watching her blue eyes dance.

Victor offered to walk her to her next class, and she accepted his offer. She waved him goodbye and assured him she'd meet him after school the next day to return his jacket as promised. He smiled and said he'd look forward to it.

The girls in her class swooned over the handsome young man that had dropped her off to class, but Ruby brushed off their suggestions.

Ruby and Victor saw each other often after that. The young man found many excuses to cross paths with her and ended up securing himself the spot at her graduation. Andrew frowned when she told him and Ruby said, "Oh Pa, he's just being a kind friend. It will be nice for him to meet some of the chaps that will be in his class next year too, most of the college will be there."

Andrew nodded, he couldn't fault her reasoning or her kind heart, but he began to feel uneasy about the growing friendship. Perhaps he was overreacting. Victor seemed to be a nice young man and he knew Ruby should choose who she wanted to spend her time with, but he secretly hoped that Jake would hurry home.



Jake sat at the desk in his old bedroom and slipped the letter open in the brown envelope. He pulled out the pages and held them to his nose. He grinned, *'It even smells like her,'* he thought as he unfolded the pages of Ruby's latest letter.

He drank in her words as she described her graduation and all that had happened. She had aced her exams and hoped to hear from the Olivers Grove School about whether she had the job. She was applying to several other nearby schools, too though, just in case. Jake sighed and closed his eyes. Swallowing deeply, he frowned. *'Lord I don't think I could bare it if Ruby moved away for a year, I've been away from her for two weeks and it's excruciating,'* he took a deep breath and continued to read.

He frowned at the several mentions of Victor and thumped the table with his fist when he read that it was Victor who'd earned the invitation to her graduation ceremony. *'That was quick, only a little over a week since you met her,'* he thought.

The foreboding feeling in his heart continued to grow, just when it seemed she was finally learning to love him this charming, wealthy guy swoops in while he's away. He frowned again and sighed *'Why am I here instead of there?'* he knew why, and he needed to be here for his sister, but then and there he vowed he'd leave as soon as he could. Right now, his ma and pa were enjoying having him home and it was where he was meant to be for now, but how he chaffed under it.

"I know I should trust her, and trust God," he said aloud to himself, "but I'm struggling." He looked again at Mrs. Feathertail; the little chicken sat on the desk in front of him, he reached for it and grinned. "She promised she'll be waiting for us, and I pray that she is," he said as much to God as to the chicken.

He sighed, "You gotta get out of this room, Jake," he said to himself. He decided to find his brother to go for a ride over the farm, perhaps that would get his mind off things. He'd write to Ruby about the wedding later, she'd of course want all the details. He had asked

for a small copy of their family photo to send her so she could see for herself what his sister's dress looked like, she'd want to know, and he had no idea how to describe it.



The month was like a whirlwind to Ruby, most of her spare time was spent with Victor. She enjoyed his company, very much, and even though she missed Jake she was now beginning to question her feelings. Victor was charming and kind, he often gave her gifts and told her she was beautiful. He always had his hands on her and seemed to really enjoy being with her. He never made any moves towards a romantic relationship but many of Ruby's friends considered them an item. He took her to plays, and concerts, and treated her like a prize, he paraded her all over town and made sure people saw them together as often as he could.

One day a few days after graduation, Ruby was strolling the street with Victor. They walked past the mercantile and Ruby stopped them so she could admire the beautiful jewelry box. "Isn't that pretty, Victor?"

He didn't really think so, but she liked it, so he said, "Yes, it is." He thought it looked a little cheap, it was clearly made from cheap wood and was worth around twenty-five cents. He'd seen a much nicer one in one of the catalogues from a store back east, it had a little music box inside it. He decided he'd order her one, made of beautiful expensive wood and masterfully crafted by one of the most famous craftsmen.

"I have a gift for you, Ruby," Victor said one evening as they dined in the town restaurant. He placed his hand on her elbow and gazed at her.

"Oh, Victor you don't have to get me anything." She blushed; the intensity of his admiring eyes was overwhelming to her.

"I wanted to, Ruby, I saw it and it reminded me of you, it's beautiful and very expensive," he pointed out condescendingly.

She opened the little bag, “Oh Victor,” she pulled out the little silver bracelet, “I can’t accept it.”

“Sure, you can, Ruby, I want you to have it.”

“Okay.” Ruby smiled as politely as she could. “Thank you.”

He reached out to take her hand and slipped the bracelet on, he frowned when he saw the little wooden bracelet on her wrist. “You don’t need to wear this cheap one anymore,” he scowled.

Ruby’s eyes became misty, “Oh, I couldn’t take it off, it’s Jakes.” She smiled.

Victor scowled again, “Why would you want to wear that tacky homemade bracelet when you could wear my expensive one.”

“Why can’t I wear both, Victor? They are both beautiful. Besides, Jake’s is special to me.”

“Very well.” Victor scoffed.

Letters from Jake came frequently that month, she wrote back each time as promised. Her feelings were becoming so confused, she knew her family loved Jake, but everyone else seemed think that she and Victor suited each other. It was very clear to her that Victor loved her, he’d not told her outright yet, but she could see him admiring her with his eyes, and he was always finding reasons to touch her, put his arm around her or do things and give her gifts. He flattered her all the time, regularly told her she was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen. Jake didn’t do any of that, and yet Jake made her feel so special and so safe. He’d given her gifts, two gifts. Both handmade, they weren’t worth very much, but she loved them, to her they were priceless. Jake had never told he loved her either, although she was sure he did.

Everything was happening so quickly; she wasn’t sure she how she felt. With Victor she was felt like she was on display all the time but at the same time she was swept up in the world of affluence and privilege that he showed her, frequently splashing around his money. He wasn’t rich by the world’s standards but was very affluent compared to most in this town and could offer her a comfortable life, which she had to admit, was beginning to seem strangely appealing.

Andrew watched it all unfolding before his eyes. He talked about it at length with Abigail.

“I think I should talk to her, Abigail, tell her not to get too involved with Victor,” he exclaimed.

“What exactly is wrong with Victor?”

He thought and went to speak, stopped himself and thought some more, stared into the flames and then leaned back against the soft back of the tall chair in their cozy lounge. He sighed deeply, and smirked. “He’s not Jake,” was all he could come up with.

“I like Jake too,” she told him. “But shouldn’t this be about who Ruby likes?”

He sighed, “Yes, you are right, he seems like a perfectly charming young man, and he hasn’t done anything inappropriate, he’s not even told her he loves her as far as I know, but I sure don’t like the way he’s always touching her.”

“All we can do is trust her and pray for her. She’s a smart young lady.”

He nodded and sighed, “Still, Jake can’t come home soon enough.”

Twenty



Jake's Homecoming

Jake grew more and more concerned as the letters from Ruby became more and more full of stories of Victor. She said that he was a nice friend and that she enjoyed his company. It seemed like there wasn't any more to it, but he had to be sure. He sat on the leather train seat agonizing for the miles to close more quickly between them. This had been the longest month of his life. He'd stayed because he felt obliged to, he owed his parents that much for all they'd done for him, but he'd been able to get a slightly earlier train and would arrive three days before he had originally planned, he hoped to surprise her. He hoped he would be a pleasant surprise. Now he was two days from Olivers Grove and Ruby Collins, and he dreaded what he might find.

With an hour to kill before his train he'd wandered the streets of Campbelltown and in a store window he'd seen a little shell necklace with a small steel cut out of a chicken on it. He laughed at the silly thing, but it made him think of Ruby. The sign next to it said '5c' so he went in and bought it. It was nothing but a trinket, but he hoped it would make her laugh. Oh, how he longed to hear her beautiful laugh again, to see that small dimple on her cheek bounce and watch her eyes sparkle.



Victor waited outside the post office and fumed inwardly as he waited for Ruby to post her letter to Jake. ‘*Why is she still writing to him, can’t she see I’m the better choice,*’ he thought to himself. He plastered on his smile as she exited. “All done then?” he asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “He’ll get it just before he leaves for home.” She grinned and Victor, walking slightly behind her, rolled his eyes. A maelstrom of swirling feelings churned in Ruby’s mind. She was really looking forward to Jake coming home, perhaps then she’d be able to make sense of them all.

Ruby sighed as they walked past the mercantile.

“What’s wrong?” Victor asked.

“The jewelry box is gone, somehow it makes me sad.”

“I’m sure someone bought it. Don’t worry, there’ll be others much nicer than that.” He smirked; he was expecting his order in any day now, perhaps it would even come on today’s train. He looked up at the train that had just pulled into the station at the end of the street and was now being unloaded. He gasped audibly and Ruby’s head came up. She saw what he’d seen and gasped herself, she dropped Victor’s arm and took off at a sprint down the street. She knew it wasn’t proper behavior for a young lady, but she didn’t care who saw her. Jake was home!

Jake had just stepped off the train and was walking to the baggage area to find his suitcase when he heard Ruby call his name and then she was flying to him. He smiled, ‘*She is pleased to see me, that is a good sign, perhaps I was overreacting after all.*’ She reached the platform and he walked to her, and she threw herself in his arms, “Jake, you’re home!! You’re early,” she said, “Oh, I’ve missed you.” He held her as tightly as he dared and drank in the scent and sight of her.

“I’ve missed you too, Ruby, so much.” He was just about to pour his heart out to her, but he caught himself, this wasn’t the place. But he was certain now, certain he was deeply in love with her, and the time was right to tell her how he felt.

He released her and his eyes continued to enjoy the sight of her shining eyes and glowing face. Oh, how he’d missed her. He thought that seeing her would relieve the ache in his heart, but it only

seemed to make him ache more. The sight of her exhilarated and terrified him all at once.

Victor reached them then and Jake frowned but he reached for Victor's offered hand and returned his greeting. He didn't like it that Victor stood with his hand possessively on Ruby's back as though she was his girl. She seemed very comfortable with him though and she laughed, "Jake you're three days early, I just posted you a letter."

"Oh well, Ma will send it back to me!"

"I've missed you so much," she put her hand on his arm.

He looked Victor in the eye and said in a sarcastic tone, "I can tell."

She looked at him confused, "What? Jake, Victor is my friend, that's all. He's helped me full the time, so I didn't miss you so much." Victor frowned, *'She still seems to prefer Jake, I'll have to up my game, work harder to win her now that the carpenter is back. I won't lose her to a pauper like him.'* He seethed internally, while plastering on a smile for her benefit.

Jake picked up his bag and Ruby reached out to touch his arm again, "I must let you get home; you have to be weary after your trip, we've got all the time in the world to catch up. Oh, Jake, I have so much to tell you, and I can't wait to see Mrs. Feathertail again."

"I have her safe in my bag, Ruby, and I'm most anxious to catch up with you too," Jake felt very awkward with Victor there. The older man didn't leave, he turned with Ruby to walk with Jake as he headed towards his home. Jake frowned when Victor reached for Ruby's arm to guide her over the train tracks. His fears were confirmed, it was obvious Victor loved her, although he couldn't yet tell if she loved him. He needed to talk with her alone.

"When are you going to be free Ruby? I'm most anxious to see you and I have a gift for you," he said in a low voice.

"Really? Let's see, I have things on for the next few days, I wasn't expecting you home until Thursday. So how about Thursday afternoon, say noon, we could have lunch together at the café like we did on Wednesdays. Do you go back to work right away?"

“I start back on Friday; I wasn’t supposed to be home until Wednesday, I was hoping to spend some time with you before then, but Thursday at noon will be fine.” He sighed.

“You are welcome to join us, isn’t he Victor? We are going out for another youth hayride tomorrow night and then we were going to catch a play on Wednesday.”

“A Play?”

“Yes, Victor and I have been to lots of plays, we really enjoy them. You should come, I think you’d like it.”

Jake cringed each time he heard her refer to she and Victor as ‘we’. He could see Victor’s face over Ruby’s head, and his eyes and wide scowl said he wasn’t keen on having Jake join them for anything, he had no desire to anyway, besides there was no way he could afford that. It looked like Victor had been lavishing Ruby with expensive gifts. He’d noticed the silver bracelet on her wrist, but he could not see the wooden one he had made her. Perhaps she had taken it off, perhaps she preferred Victor because he could give her expensive gifts he couldn’t, not on an apprentice’s wage.

“I need to go, Ruby. I’ll see you on Thursday, it’s good to see you again.” He smiled a little sadly.

“Okay. It’s so good to see you again too, Jake, I’ve really missed you,” She threw her arms around him again. “See you Thursday, and I’ll see Mrs. Feathertail then too, I hope.”

Jake nodded and walked towards his home and Victor led Ruby away in the opposite direction. She longed to run to Jake and talk to him about all her confused feelings, but she sensed he’d pulled away from her, he’d greeted her so lovingly but then she’d felt a darkness in him, a distance. Perhaps something had happened while he was away, perhaps he’d met someone else. She knew she’d have a hard time waiting until Thursday to really talk to him, but she wanted to wait until she had the time to dedicate to him. She had so much to tell him.



Jake tossed and turned all night; he barely got any sleep. He wrestled with his feelings, and his hurt. What was happening? A lot seemed to have changed while he was away. She'd seemed so excited to see him but at the same time she was keen to continue to spend time with Victor. He gave her things Jake could never afford; how could he compete? Victor was almost a lawyer and he, well he was a long way away from being a proper carpenter. Jake agonized long into the night about what he should do. One thing for certain, he couldn't wait until Thursday to see her.

Ruby tossed and turned all night; she barely got any sleep. She wrestled with her feelings and her hurt. What was happening? So much had taken place since he'd been away. But oh, how her heart had leapt when she'd seen him. Right at that moment her emotions had swirled, and she had been sure then that she loved him. But then this afternoon Victor had given her a jewelry box. It wasn't the one she had admired in the shop window, but it was very nice, and he'd told her he loved her, that he wanted to marry her. She was so confused because she knew she had feelings for him too. Not the way she did for Jake, but Jake had made no moves towards a courtship, "Ohhhhhhhhhh....." She groaned into the darkness. She tried to pray but she was just so confused. She needed to see Jake, to talk to him. One thing was for certain, she couldn't wait until Thursday to see him.



Ruby tried to share her thoughts and feelings with her mother, but she was too mixed up inside.

"What do you feel, child? What does your heart tell you?"

"I don't know, Ma," she wept.

"Well, do you love Victor?"

"I don't know, I think I do?"

"And Jake?"

“I think so, oh I don’t know I’m so confused. Perhaps the problem is I don’t really know what my feelings are, love, or just friendship.”

“All I can suggest is that you pray, you ask God to help you work out your feelings. You need not make any choices right now anyway.”

“I know, but it’s not fair to string two men along, I need to do some thinking I guess, and lots of praying. I need to go and speak to Jake today!” She said resolutely.

Abigail nodded.

“I’ll go right after breakfast and find him,”.

“And I’ll pray God will help you. You should talk to your father about it too, he’s very wise.”

“I don’t want to hurt him Mama; I know how he feels about his girls and losing us to some boy.”

“Yes, he does feel strongly about that, but he feels even stronger about you doing what is right for you and being happy. It would hurt him even more if you weren’t happy.”

Ruby nodded and went to have her breakfast.



Jake wandered in the direction of the campus, he stopped and turned back several times and then told himself, he needed to see her, to talk to her to find out how she felt. But how could he, he didn’t want to hear that she loved Victor and not him, that would crush him. But oh, wasn’t knowing better? He was so confused. He slumped down on the chair under the old oak on the outskirts of town, about halfway to the campus and tried to pray for wisdom.

Ruby saw Jake sitting on the bench, his head back against the old oak with his eyes tightly closed, his face screwed up. “Jake, what are you doing here?” she asked and sat down beside him.

“I was coming to see you and then I thought perhaps I shouldn’t, we said Thursday. What are you doing here?”

“I was coming to find you!”

“You were?” he asked his heart leaping, certain now it was the right thing to do. “How come?”

“You first, why did you want to see me, Jake?” her trusting blue eyes pierced his soul.

“I have a gift for you?”

“Mrs. Feathertail?”

“Well yes,” said Jake pulling the bird from his pocket, “Here she is in one piece as promised.”

“Oh, I’ve missed this bird,” she said and hugged it to herself.

“But that’s not my real gift,” he said gulping in air. “I found this silly trinket in a store in Campbelltown, and I thought of you. It isn’t much, it isn’t what I want it to be.” He said looking into her eyes trying to read her thoughts, “it’s really just a little thing but it made me think of you and I think it’ll make you laugh.”

Her eyes shone, “What is it?”

“Put your hand out and close your eyes.” She grinned and reached her hand out, he noticed the silver bracelet, he frowned a little but put the small necklace in her hand. “Open them.”

She lifted the necklace and laughed heartily, “Oh Jake, I love it.” The sound of her laugh made his heart sing, and he glimpsed the little dimple, and it made his heart beat even faster.

“Good,” he said, and they embraced, and he asked. “Do you really like it? It’s silly really.”

“I do, I think it’s very cute, the little steel chicken is lovely. Here, help me put it on.” She turned her back and lifted her hair. With shaky fingers he opened the little clasp and put it around her neck, he leaned very close to her hair and could smell the fragrance, he drank it in. “There,” he said swallowing twice.

“How does it look?”

He laughed, “It doesn’t match the locket and it’s very long, but I think it suits you.”

“I’ll tuck it down inside my blouse so I can wear Mrs. Feathertail next to my heart,” she dropped her eyes and said quietly, shyly, “And you.”

Jake heard her ‘and you’ and felt it in his heart but did not comment.

“Why did you want to see me, Ruby?” He asked softly, his dark eyes meeting hers.

“I don’t really know; I don’t know what to say or how to begin or... I’m just really confused.”

“There is nothing you can’t say to me. You know that. You know me and you must...” This was the moment, he took a deep breath, “you must know how I feel about you.” He gently touched her cheek.

“I’m, I’m not sure,” she said searching his face with her wide blue eyes, tears rimmed the corners.

“I should think you do.” He took another breath and swallowed. He closed his eyes for just a moment and then opened them again. “I, I love you Ruby, I’m in love with you, have been for a long time.”

She let go the breath she was holding. She had known he loved her, had felt it, she just didn’t know how she felt about him. She supposed she loved him too but then Victor had come along and turned everything topsy turvy.

She looked at him and her deep blue eyes pierced his very soul. Why wasn’t she saying anything, did she not love him? Had he just ruined everything?

“Ruby, say something, anything, I told you I love you, and I mean it, with every fiber of my being, I’ve loved you since the first moment I saw you. Do you love me?”

“I, I... I,” she stammered. His gaze was unnerving like he was looking deep into her soul. It was too much for her and she suddenly burst into tears.

He held her, and he chided himself. He’d rushed her, put too much pressure on her. ‘*Good one Jake, you’ve gone and put your foot right in it now, you’ve blown it,*’ he thought to himself. He held her and let her weep, he waited patiently while she regained her composure.

“Ruby, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have put that kind of pressure on you to answer me. I’m not sorry I told you I loved you, I should have said it before I left. If you don’t love me or you aren’t sure or you need more time than I can wait, I’m not going anywhere.”

She wiped her eyes, "I'm sorry too, Jake. I am so mixed up and confused right now, I just don't know what to think. I'm sorry because I know this must hurt you, I have known you've loved me for some time, I knew because I was sure I loved you too. I think that's why I came to the train, why I gave you Mrs. Feathertail, surely you knew."

He nodded, "I think I did; I was just too afraid to say."

"What changed, why now?"

"Victor," he said. "He loves you, doesn't he?"

She nodded sadly, "Yes, he told me yesterday that he loves me when he gave me a jewelry box."

"Our one, the one from the window?"

"No someone else purchased that, he gave me one from a store back east. It's not as pretty but it's lovely and made from the most beautiful mahogany." She hung her head and began to weep again. "Oh, Jake, I'm just so confused."

"Do you love him?" she didn't answer. She lowered her head and gazed at her hands in her lap. Jake reached out with his finger and gently lifted her chin so she would look him in the eye, she lifted tear-filled eyes to him. "Ruby, do you love him?" He looked deep in her eyes, there was no judgment or hurt in his eyes, just a sadness, it made Ruby ache.

"I don't know." She said in a small voice, "maybe I do but I don't know, I'm not sure about anything right now!" She began to weep again. He reached for her again and held her against his chest. He seethed inside, he wasn't angry at her, none of this was her fault it was his, he'd left without telling her how he felt, and now he might lose her. He closed his eyes while he held her and prayed.

At last, she pulled back from him. "I guess I just need time to think and pray. I'm sorry it hurts you; you don't deserve this," she said contritely.

"Look at me, Ruby," she nervously obliged and the pain in her eyes cut him to the core. "You take all the time you need. I don't want you to love me because you think you should, I want, you be sure. I love you; I will always love you, I'm sure of that and I'm not going anywhere..." he paused and closed his eyes, what he was going to say next would hurt him deeply, but he meant it all the same, because he

loved her so very much. “No matter what you decide, even if you chose Victor, I will always be here for you. I promise. So you go, pray, take your time to be sure and when you are ready you can answer me. Okay.”

She searched his eyes to be sure he meant it. He had been so kind and patient with her. She merely nodded, then asked timidly, “Will we still see each other?”

“You bet; you know where I am.”

She nodded again, “Good.”

She stood to leave and so did he. She threw her arms around him. “I’m so glad you are home; I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too, Ruby,” he said with great feeling, he prayed that this wouldn’t be the last time he got to hold her.

Twenty-One



Saving Sally

Ruby was in turmoil, her feelings like a swirling tempest inside her. One moment she was certain and then new doubts would creep into her mind. Jake was so dependable and honest, but oh, the life that Victor could give her, but Jake was always there for her, but Victor and she had such fun together. She knew she loved both men, she just couldn't work out what each love was. Was it just friendship, infatuation, was she in love with either of them? What does that even mean?

From her spot under her favorite oak tree Ruby cried out to God for wisdom, or for clarity, to sort out her jumbled thoughts. Here in this beautiful place, under this ancient tree, on the small bench, she could look out over the fast-flowing stream. She looked up stream and noticed a partially submerged branch and there some small rapids developed. She watched as leaves and small twigs floated gently towards it and then were shaken up and twisted, turned and buffeted, dragged beneath the churning water, but then when she looked further upstream, she noticed the same leaves and sticks once again gently floating on the current, unharmed.

She felt like God was telling her the tempest she felt was temporary, there were smooth waters ahead of her but first she must trust Him. Those small sticks, while buffeted around some, never actually veered off course, the river guided them and even though the way forward was out of their sight briefly and seemed to be

tumultuous it was temporary, they followed the current and it guided them.

Oh, it wasn't a perfect metaphor and she laughed at herself for the comparison, but it did calm her some. She knew that God was telling her to simply trust Him, He had given her all she needed for life and had got her through rough waters many times and would again this time. She took a deep breath and smiled. "Thank you, Lord, for showing me you care, and that this too, even though tumultuous now, will only be temporary. Please give me the wisdom to make the right choice."

It had been a week since Jake told her he loved her, and she'd been in agony ever since. She'd only seen him a few times and while he had been kind and caring to her, she could see a sadness in his eyes, it made her ache all the more. But she had to be sure, this decision would affect the rest of her life.

The opposite was true of Victor, he'd been very attentive. He'd done everything he could to show her how he felt, he'd taken her out to plays, and for meals, he'd paraded her all over town. He took every opportunity he could to be with her, and he constantly touched her. He made sure Jake could see him escorting her everywhere. Ruby knew that was why she hadn't seen Jake around much. She knew it must have hurt him.

"Ruby help, help me, Ruby!"

"Sally!" Ruby snapped out of her reverie and remembered she was supposed to be watching her younger sister swimming, she'd got so caught up in her own feelings that she'd forgotten Sally. She leapt to her feet and bounded towards the river. Sally was caught in the current and was hurtling rapidly downstream towards the churning water. "Sally!" she screamed and ran down the riverbank to try to save her sister.



Victor saw Lucy coming out of the post office, "Hey girl, have you seen Ruby?"

"Why good morning, Mr. Hart, lovely morning isn't it?"

He smirked at her, “No need for sarcasm, girl, I have to find Ruby, I have to right now! Do you know where she is or not?”

‘*Girl!*’ Lucy fumed at the way he had said that. She’d never really liked this man and hoped that Ruby would come to her senses and choose Jake. Even if she did choose Victor, Lucy was not going to make it easy for him.

“Yes, I do.”

“Please, you have to tell me, I have to see her,” he whined.

“Why do you want to see her?”

“That’s none of your business, girl,” he said becoming exasperated.

“Then I ain’t telling you,” Lucy said and stormed off to pick up her fishing pole she’d left standing against the wall. She marched away towards the fishing hole.

“Please girl, ah I mean Lucy, please tell me where she is?” he finished with exaggerated charm.

“So, it seems you do know my name after all, Mr. Hart. Ruby doesn’t want to see you right now; she’s got some thinking to do.”

“Yes, I know.” He frowned. ‘*How could she need to think?*’ He thought, ‘*I’m clearly the better choice, I can give her a wonderful, exciting life, that carpenter can’t give her that! What was there to think about? She’s had enough time to think now, I’m going to get an answer from her once and for all.*’ “I gotta talk to her, make her see sense.”

Lucy had had enough, she just wanted to get to her fishing if she hoped to catch enough for supper.

“Fine Mr. Hart, she’s down at the old oak by the swimming hole with Sally.” She turned on her heels and took off at a run to her favorite fishing spot which was some ways upstream from the swimming hole.

Victor didn’t even stop to say thank you, he just ran towards the old oak. He arrived just in time to hear Ruby screaming out to Sally.

Sally had nearly reached the submerged tree. Ruby knew it could be dangerous if she got trapped there. Just as she was about to

plunge into the water, she saw Victor approaching. “Victor, hurry, I need your help.”

He ran towards the water and stopped, “What do you want me to do?” he asked. She frowned, most of the men she knew, her pa, Tommy, Jake, they didn’t stop to ask what they should do, they just sprang into action.

“Please, Victor, you have to help me reach Sally, she’s gonna drown.” He just stood there looking confused, “Victor, do something!” she called out to him anxiously.

She didn’t wait for him, she plunged into the water and tried to swim after Sally, but the younger girl was caught in the current and was moving much too fast, soon she approached the churning water.

Victor was frozen to the spot, a look of utter helplessness on his face, he had no idea how to help. Sally hit the fallen log and Ruby screamed as she saw her sister slowly getting dragged under by the heavy current. She was screaming and trying to grab at the log, but it was much too big and smooth, and she kept slipping. Her head was dangerously teetering at the water’s edge, bobbing up and down. She cried for help. “Ruby, I’m stuck, my leg, help me.” She spluttered, her eyes filled with terror as she thrashed around trying to keep her head up above the water and beginning to panic.

Ruby swam frantically to the log. “Sally I’m coming,” she called to her sister. Ruby wished she’d had the presence of mind to discard a layer of clothing, her skirts slowed her down, and her heavy boots made it hard for her to swim but she was determined to reach her sister. Kicking wildly, she at last reached the log, she couldn’t get a firm grip on it either and felt the strong undertow threatening to pull them both under. “Sally,” said Ruby, grabbing for her sister while pushing against the log to stop herself from being pulled under. She had hoped she was a strong enough swimmer to pull them both out but when she tried to pull Sally away from the log she was stuck.

“My foot!” Sally screamed and Ruby felt around with her arm under the water and felt her foot wedged in the small branch under the log at a very precarious angle. She tried to wriggle the foot free, but she couldn’t, the little girl cried out in pain. And now she was

becoming too weak to fight and keep her head above the churning water.

Ruby screamed out to Victor, but he just stood there staring blankly. “Victor, go get some help.”



Lucy reached her fishing spot and found she was not alone. Jake was there, he wasn't fishing, he was just sitting watching the water, his mind seemingly far away.

“Hi Jake,” said Lucy and he looked up suddenly as she broke into his thoughts.

“Hi Luce,” he smiled sadly. “Fishing?” was all he said.

“Yep!” And she put her line in the water. They sat in silence for a time, and Lucy stared at her float bobbing up and down on the river's swift current. She looked up at Jake, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his head down. He sighed loudly. “Why ya so sad, Jake? Is it Ruby?” she asked, not really wanting to know.

“Yeah, she loves Victor, doesn't she?” He didn't know why he'd blurted that out, he had no interest in hearing Lucy's honest answer, but before Lucy could say anything Sally's scream pierced the air, followed by Ruby's. Both man and girl were on their feet instantly.

“Sally!” called Lucy.

“Ruby!” called Jake and they both sprinted downstream in the direction of the sound.



Ruby was treading water, rapidly beginning to weaken. She couldn't grip the branch and hold her sister's head up at the same time. The smaller girl was shivering profusely, and Ruby could feel the chill of the water penetrating her own bones, her sodden skirts wrapped around her legs and made it difficult to tread water. Sally coughed and spluttered, she whimpered and tried to cry, and was rapidly beginning to weaken. She tried time and time again to free Sally's foot, but the current was strong, and she couldn't hold the girl's head up above the water at the same time, her boots were weighing

her down and she was struggling herself. She knew the only option was for help to come and come now!

“Lord,” she called out. “Please help us, if we don’t get help soon Sally is going to die. Help me to hold on Lord, please help me.” She called out, “Victor, Victor, where are you?” But he was gone, she was all alone and Sally’s only hope. Ruby closed her eyes and said aloud, “Oh Jake, I need you.”

Ruby was going to have to make a choice soon. She was becoming weak and struggling to keep on treading water and fight the current, her strength waning rapidly, if she didn’t get help soon, they were both going to drown. A God-given determination and love for her sister kept her fighting, she tried one more time to free Sally, but it was to no avail. She felt the last of her strength starting to leave her body and knew it wasn’t long before they were both going to succumb to the icy water. She heard Jake’s voice. “Ruby, hold on, I’m coming!”

She sighed with relief and said, “Jake’s coming Sally, we have to hold on, Jake’s coming.”

Lucy was hot on his heels too and she began to scream hysterically. Jake stopped by the edge of the river and grabbed Lucy and shook her slightly. “Lucy, your screaming isn’t going to help. I can’t get them out on my own. I need your help, okay?” Lucy looked at him and nodded. They both plunged into the river. Lucy was a good swimmer and Jake was tall enough that he could walk in. He reached the girls and put his arms around Ruby from behind, so he could hold her up above the water. “Just keep holding onto Sally, I’ve got you, Ruby,” he said. “Lucy, try to free Sally’s leg.”

Sally was barely responsive now. Since Ruby no longer had to fight the current to stay afloat, she was able to hold Sally’s head above water, small puffs of steam coming from the little girl’s mouth told Ruby she was still breathing, just, but her pale face and tightly closed eyes warned her that Sally was still in grave danger. Jake was holding Ruby up with both arms around her. Lucy was a strong swimmer and, taking a deep breath, she plunged under the water and put both arms under the log and managed to slip Sally’s leg out of the branch it was

caught in. The twisted foot was obviously badly sprained and bruised but mercifully Sally was unconscious. The little girl was finally free. "Take her to shore, Lucy, I'll get Ruby," Jake said. Lucy nodded, taking hold of Sally's arm she rolled over on her back, lifted Sally up on top of her and swam backwards against the current, finally managing to get shallow enough to find her footing and waded out with the little girl in her arms.

Ruby clung to Jake, she was weak, but she was okay. She sobbed, "Jake," was all she could manage between sobs. "Oh Jake."

"It's okay, I've got you," he said, and he helped Ruby to the shore, up the riverbank to where Lucy laid Sally, barely conscious. He held Ruby for a moment. "Are you okay?" he asked her tenderly.

"Yes," she nodded. "Just cold."

"We've gotta get them warm," Jake said pulling Ruby close to his chest.

Lucy looked around. "The picnic blanket."

"Good idea." Jake wrapped Ruby in the blanket tightly, "You'll be okay," he said tenderly and brushed her cheek gently. She nodded, the intensity of the love and concern in his eyes was obvious but they were tinged with sadness and fear. "I've got to help your sister," she nodded again, pulling the blanket tightly around her shivering body.

"Lucy, I've got to get Sally to the doctor, make sure Ruby gets there, and stay warm."

She nodded, Ruby opened the blanket and let Lucy in, then wrapped it around both of them. They began to walk to town, arms around each other for warmth, they headed towards the clinic at a slower pace. Ruby was weak and struggling to walk but with Lucy's help she made it to the clinic.



Dr Price and Dr Hart hovered over Sally. Lucy and Ruby refused to leave her side and sat wrapped in blankets, shivering by the girl's bedside. Dr Price insisted they at least get out of their wet overclothes, so they left, hanging their dresses before the fireplace in the back recovery room to dry. They were both wrapped in blankets

and sipping hot cocoa, sitting in front of the stove, trying to warm up, both pairs of sodden boots standing before the stove.

Jake sat outside the clinic on the seat once again, waiting for Ruby, the doctor had insisted he go home and get warm, but he didn't. He sat and prayed. He couldn't believe the situation he'd found himself in again. Of course he was going to help Ruby, he always would, he'd promised he'd always be there for her, even though he was now certain she was going to choose Victor.

'*Victor,*' he thought. The man had frozen up the moment she needed him. But still Jake knew Ruby loved him, although he couldn't understand why. He'd seen them parading all over town, laughing and happy. He knew Victor had showered her with gifts and she'd accepted them. Jake wasn't going to stoop to that level to win her love. Of course, he wanted to win her love, more than anything he wanted Ruby to love him for him and not because he flattered her. He believed that she did love him, she just needed the fog to clear from the whirlwind this man had led her in.

Victor flattered her, made her feel special but Jake knew that would fade, that it wasn't true and lasting love. Jake wanted to shake her and talk sense into her, to help her see that in the long-term Victor, while he loved her, was going to let her down. Like today, he'd been right there but had frozen up when she needed him the most. Ruby had almost drowned, he knew that she and Sally were lucky to be alive, and why, because of Victor. If he'd only gotten to her sooner...."

But he couldn't do that, he couldn't place the blame, become bitter, that didn't help Ruby. He'd promised to trust her, to let her decide, to let her choose and he did trust her. He knew she was a smart girl, after all she hadn't even flinched, she'd just leapt in to save her sister and he admired her for that. Sally would most definitely have died if she hadn't, as it was she was still in grave danger. He knew she'd make the decision that would ultimately make her happy and wasn't that what he wanted the most? He searched his heart and found yes; it truly was. He loved her so much it physically ached inside his bones, but still her happiness was more important than his pain and if it was Victor that was going to make her happy, he'd live

with it, but he sure as heck wasn't going to sit back and watch it happen.



Andrew galloped into town on Matty's horse, Duchess. He screeched to a halt outside the clinic. Once again there sat Jake, faithful, loyal Jake. Victor hadn't told him Jake was involved, just that Ruby, Lucy and Sally were in the clinic, and they were wet. Victor had come running into campus to fetch Andrew. It baffled him that he hadn't gone to town to get help but then the man seemed like a stunned fish. Andrew hadn't stuck around to help Victor come to his senses, he'd just borrowed his friend's horse and headed to his girls. That's what you do when the ones you love need you, you get there, as soon as you can. He'd left Victor just standing in his office, he'd thought the man would follow. But he didn't have time to stop and wait.

And sitting out front, once again was Jake. Why couldn't Ruby see that it was Jake that was there for her, he hoped the headstrong girl would make up her mind soon. It seemed obvious to Andrew which of the young men was the ideal choice for his daughter.

"Jake," he said as he dismounted, "Jake, you are freezing, you need to go home."

"No Sir, not until I know that little girl is okay, and Ruby," he added looking at his boots with a deep sigh.

Andrew nodded, he admired Jake's tendency to sacrifice his own needs for her. But still he was no good to her if he got sick. "Here, at least wear my coat, you'll catch your death of cold." Andrew took off his long overcoat and handed it to Jake who didn't refuse.

"Thank you, Pastor," he mumbled wrapping the coat tightly around himself. Andrew could see the deep sadness in his eyes and knew this whole situation hurt him immensely.

He had to go to his girls, he'd talk to Jake later. Maybe have a chance to encourage him, he believed his daughter did love Jake, she just had to wait for the dust to clear so she could see it clearly.

“Pa!” called Lucy as Andrew walked in. He immediately embraced the two blanket-clad girls, “Oh my darlings, are you okay?”

“Yes Pa, we’re fine,” Ruby smiled.

“Cold but fine,” echoed Lucy. “Doc says we have to stay until at least our dresses dry and we are warm.” Andrew looked to see the two frocks hanging up in front of the fire and nodded.

“He wants to make sure we don’t have any signs of hypothermia, even a mild case can do damage,” said Ruby.

He nodded his agreement, “How’s Sally?” he asked.

Ruby nodded towards the recovery room frowning in concern, “The doctor is with her now. She has a badly sprained ankle, Pa, and almost certainly hypothermia.”

He stroked the two cheeks, “You two are really, okay?”

“Yes Pa,” they both said.

“Good,” he breathed a sigh of relief and hugged them again. “Thank the Lord!” He kissed each on the head.

He walked into the room where Sally was and saw the little girl on the bed, pale, eyes closed, he fell down by her bedside and grabbed her little hand, his face creased with concern. The doctor nodded at him, “Pastor, she has a severely sprained ankle, and mild hypothermia. We’ll need to keep her here for a few days, I’ve strapped the ankle, but she’ll need to be monitored for a while.” Andrew nodded and began to pray.

Twenty-Two



Ruby's Choice

Andrew finally got to talk to Jake later that afternoon. Abigail was inside the clinic by Sally's bedside. She still had not woken up and there was still no sign of Victor.

Andrew, now confident his girls were going to be okay, walked outside and sat beside Jake. "I owe you my debt of thanks once again, lad."

"And once again, there is no need, Pastor," he replied flatly.

Andrew could see a deep sadness in the young man and cut straight to the point.

"I know this is tough for you. I'm sorry."

"You have no need to be sorry."

"But I am, I'm sorry you are hurting."

Jake swallowed the lump in his throat, "It's okay, I want her to be sure."

Andrew nodded, "And if she decides she loves Victor?"

Jake closed his eyes, as the pain seared through him, perhaps Andrew knew something, he took a breath and opened them again. "Then I hope she finds happiness with him," there was a resigned sadness but no bitterness in his tone.

"You really mean that don't you, Jake?"

Jake looked the older man in the eye, "I really do, I want her to be happy, Pastor, and if Victor makes her happy, then so be it."

"But you love her?" Andrew asked.

“With all of my heart.” It was the first time he’d admitted that to Andrew. He didn’t see any argument in Andrew’s eyes, so he continued, “And that means putting her needs and her happiness before my own hurt.” He sighed deeply and closed his eyes.

Andrew nodded. What a strong young man.

“Son,” he placed his hand on Jake’s shoulder. “I know my daughter loves you. I’ve known it for some time. I believe she knows it too. She is just so caught up in the whirlwind of the charming romantic life Victor is promising her. I believe she will come to her senses if you give her time. I know this isn’t easy for you, but I don’t believe it’s easy for her either. Let me assure you this, you have my blessing, Jake. I’ve seen the way you have selflessly loved her; you’ve been there for her through so many situations, I’m not sure how she finds herself in these spots or how you know to be there when she needs you, but you are. I don’t want to lose my precious daughter, but if I must, I can’t think of a better man for her. I firmly believe she will see that too.”

“Thank you, Pastor!” Jake swallowed several times.

“No, it’s I who should thank you, if you hadn’t swum out to get Sally and Ruby...” he stopped “I don’t want to think about it.”

“I didn’t swim.”

“What do you mean, Lucy told me you and she went in after them.”

“We did, she swum, I walked, I can’t swim.”

“You can’t?”

He shook his head. “Nearly drowned when I was a boy, been scared of deep, flowing water since then.”

“But you went in anyway?”

He looked Andrew in the eye. “I didn’t even think about it. She needed me, if anything had happened to her, I couldn’t have lived with myself, saving her was way more important than my fear.”

Andrew merely nodded, there was nothing he could say. He knew without question this was the man for his daughter, and it no longer filled him with fear, just love. Love for this man who put her life ahead of his own, even risked drowning to save her, he’d be proud to give his daughter to Jake when the time came, he knew with Jake,

she'd always be safe and loved. He just hoped she'd hurry up and realize it.

Ruby walked out then, now back in her own dress and wrapped in her blanket. She had two steaming cups of coffee in her hand. "Pa, Sally has woken up, she's asking for you."

Andrew nodded, reached and squeezed Jake's shoulder again and walked inside.

Ruby sat down beside Jake and handed him the coffee, looking down shyly. "Thank you, Jake." She looked up at him then, "Thank you for being there for me again."

"Ruby," he said around the lump in his throat. "I'll always be there for you, I told you that." And he began to shiver.

"Oh no, Jake," she said opening the blanket and wrapping it around both of them, shuffling close to him, hoping her now warm body would help warm his. He felt her presence next to him so strongly, and even disheveled as she was, her beauty shone through. She leaned against him, and they sat drinking their hot coffee in silence.

"Well, well, isn't this a cozy little picture." Victor suddenly appeared on the scene.

"He's cold, Victor, I'm just trying to help him warm up," said Ruby.

"I bet, seems like just a ruse to get you to cuddle up to him."

"He saved my life, Victor."

"I suppose I should be grateful then," he mumbled. To Jake's credit he did not say anything, arguing and making a scene would simply be playing Victor's game, he wasn't going to stoop to his level.

"Ruby, I really need to speak to you alone," said Victor. "Now."

"Now? Why now, Victor?"

"Well, I need to explain?" he said, tilting his head and trying to signal to her he wanted to get her alone, away from Jake.

"Explain what?"

"Why I didn't help."

"So, explain."

He glanced at Jake, obviously she wasn't going to leave him just now, so he began.

"I'm sorry! I wanted to help, I really did, but I was scared, I'm a good swimmer but I've never swum in strong river currents, and besides, this is an expensive suit, I couldn't ruin it... I guess, well I was just scared, okay."

"I was scared too, Victor!" declared Ruby, "My sister was drowning."

"Well, you had your knight in shining armor to sweep in and save the day!" he said spitefully gesturing at Jake. Then he had obviously had enough and couldn't bear it anymore and in a rather whiny voice he said, "Ruby, you must decide, I want you to be mine, you know that. I told you I love you."

"Victor, I can't do this now, not here, not now, you need to let me think."

"Think about what? I can give you a life this carpenter's apprentice can't." Ruby felt Jake flinch and he hung his head. "Sure, he's the brave hero type but I can take you away from all this, give you the life you deserve. Can he give you that?"

Ruby said nothing, Jake did. "No. No, Victor, I can't give her that," he said sadly.

Victor smirked. "You love me, Ruby, I know you do."

"Victor, not now!" It was Andrew's voice; he'd caught the tail end of the conversation. "Now is not the time for this and you know it."

"When then, I'm suffering over here, can't you see the pain you're causing me?"

"I'll, I'll come see you tomorrow, Victor." She said in the hope he'd be satisfied with that and would leave her be.

"Okay," he said and walked away angrily.



Sally remained in the clinic for three days. She recovered quickly, but the ankle would take much longer to repair.

Ruby continued to agonize over her choice after the excitement died down. Victor was right, she thought, Jake couldn't give her that life, but was that the life she wanted? She wasn't sure. It had been three days since she'd sat under the blanket with Jake, and she still wasn't certain. She made her way to the post office to get the mail and sighed. Jake wasn't out the front of the shop today; she was hoping to see him. She'd been out with Victor twice and enjoyed his company very much. So, he wasn't the hero type, she doubted she'd need that type of hero if she married him, theirs would be a life of plays and drama and affluence.

She gathered the mail and as she walked out of the post office she shuffled through the brown envelopes. She gasped; one was addressed to her from Olivers Grove Public School. It seemed humorous that the school was just a stone's throw from her and yet they'd sent her a letter. She supposed it was how they were letting all the candidates for the job know, being the only way to ensure it'd reach them all.

She sat on the bench outside the post office and nervously opened the envelope. She closed her eyes tightly and prayed "Your will be done, Lord," she pulled out the letter and held her breath.

Dear Miss Collins,

We are delighted to offer you a position as grade four teacher at Olivers Grove Public School.....

She read no more, instead she leapt up off the seat and sped towards the woodshop. "Jake," she called, "Jake, I got the job, Jake! I got the job," she said bursting through the door of the shop.

"Landsakes girl, slow down!" said Mr. Hayes.

"Oh sorry, Mr. Hayes, is Jake here?"

"Sorry lass, ain't seen 'em for three days, said he was sick."

"Oh," she sighed sadly. "I'll find him, thanks Mr. Hayes." She exited the shop and began to walk towards home. "I got the job!" she said to herself. "I'm going to be a teacher!"

"You look happy, Ruby," said Victor walking towards her on the street, he had been in town, hoping he'd see her, he had to know,

it was killing him. *'Doesn't she care how unfair it is to keep me waiting,'* he thought. He knew she was going to say yes to him, he was the most logical choice. But it was torture to keep him in suspense. He wanted her to be his, so he could hold her, kiss her cherry-colored lips, they'd marry right away and then he'd be happy.

"Oh yes, Victor, I got the job, I'm going to be a teacher," she said excitedly, waving the envelope at him. It was bittersweet, he wasn't the one she'd wanted to share the news with, the one who she hoped would be the first to know.

"Well done, Ruby," he said non-committally.

"You don't seem excited, aren't you happy for me?"

"Yes, it's a good little achievement I suppose, for a woman. It just seems like a waste is all."

She seethed over the 'for a woman' comment but simply asked, "A waste?"

"A waste of time, you won't need to teach once you're with me, Ruby. I'm very wealthy you know."

"I wouldn't be teaching for the money, Victor, I love the children."

"Well once we are married you couldn't anyway."

"And why ever not?" she asked indignantly, her eyes beginning to blaze with fire.

"It's not proper, Ruby, A married woman stays home with the children and doesn't work, even before the children come it's not right for a wealthy woman to work."

"What if I wanted to?"

"No wife of mine..." he began

"I'm not your wife!" she stormed at him, her hands on her hips, a scowl on his face.

"Well, not yet but it's only a matter of time," he didn't see her frown and carried on. "Nevertheless, it's a good little achievement so let's go out and celebrate tonight. How about dinner at the restaurant. I'll pick you up at seven." There was no question there it was just an assumption. Ruby merely nodded. "Excellent, I'll see you then," and he sauntered off whistling.



“I got the job; I got the job!” It wasn’t like Ruby to barge into her father’s office, not even in the summer when there were no students around, but she was so excited she didn’t stop to think.

He smiled, “What’s this, darling?” He came around the desk to stand before her.

She thrust the piece of paper at him, “Pa, I got the job at Olivers Grove school, I’ll be teaching the fourth grade.”

Andrew glanced at it and then embraced her tightly, “Oh darling, I’m so proud of you!”

“Now why couldn’t Victor have just said that?”

“Victor?”

“Yes, I ran into him and told him, and he told me it was a waste because if I married him, I couldn’t work anyway. Is that true Pa, can married woman not work? Ma doesn’t, leastways not outside of home, neither does Mrs. Bourke, she used to be a teacher.”

“Daughter, there is no rule and if your ma wanted to work outside the house, I’d give her my blessing. It’s the man’s job to provide for his family, I believe that firmly, but if my wife wanted to get a job and that made her happy then I’d heartily accept it. Your ma has been content to be a wife and mother all these years, but that was entirely her choice.”

Ruby nodded. Then the whole situation began to overwhelm her, and she threw herself in her father’s arms and wept. “Oh Pa, I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do. Both Victor and Jake are good men and I’m just, well, I don’t know which I should choose.

Andrew was screaming in his heart, “Jake, pick Jake!” but he knew that he had guide her through this, so she made the right choice on her own, if he pushed her, she was likely to choose the opposite.

“Well daughter,” he began slowly praying silently for the wisdom to help her. “I know they are both good men, but I believe in your heart of hearts you know who you love.”

“Isn’t it possible to love both?”

Andrew stroked his chin and nodded, “Well, yes I suppose, but in different ways.”

“That’s what it’s like. I think of Jake as my best friend and I love him so much, it’s a deep quiet love, that is steady and comfortable and safe.”

“And Victor.”

She thought for the words to describe how she felt about him. “It’s like a tempest, Pa, my heart races and soars and then dips. It’s not steady like with Jake, it’s more changeable, like an ocean wave.”

“Hmmm, which of those do you think will be the most lasting and true?”

“I’ve loved Jake the longest, and when he was away, I ached for him even when I was out with Victor.”

“What does that tell you?”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know. How do you choose between two men? What do I base my choice on, Pa? Everyone tells me Victor is the more logical choice, he’s wealthy and we have fun together, but Jake is always there for me when I need him.”

“Which of those things is more important?” he asked her, carefully steering the conversation so she would see the right choice for herself.

“Oh Pa, I know Victor wanted to be there for me at the river, he was just afraid. It’s so much easier for Jake, he isn’t afraid of anything.”

“That’s not true, Jake isn’t perfect, he has fears like anyone else. He told me that he was very afraid?”

“But he plunged right in, he didn’t even hesitate.”

“Ruby, Jake can’t swim.”

“What, of course he can?”

“He told me outside the clinic, that he nearly drowned as a boy and now has a fear of deep and flowing water, and he can’t swim a lick.”

“But he just jumped right in.”

“Yes, he did!”

“Why?”

“Because you needed him and that was more important to him than his fear.”

“But he could have drowned very easily.”

“He knew that.”

Ruby gulped and tears flooded her eyes, “Oh Pa, he risked his life for me.”

“Yes, he did. Lucy told me she found him at the fishing hole. He was upset because he believed you’d made up your mind and you loved Victor.”

“And he was still prepared to help me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I don’t understand, why would he do that if he thought I was in love with someone else?”

“Because he loves you, with a deep selfless love that puts your needs before his own. He told me that even if you chose Victor, he’d still be around for you whenever you need him, because loving someone means putting their happiness first.”

“Oh Pa!” Ruby sobbed. “He’s never asked me to choose, he’s not rushed me or pestered me for an answer, not even once. He told me to take my time and be sure and that I could come to him when I was ready, and he’s not mentioned it since then.”

“And Victor?”

“He asks me every day, talks constantly about how it would make him happy, how he needs to know because he’s in agony and he can’t stand waiting.” She emphasized all the ‘he’s.’

She stopped then and Andrew just looked at her with empathy. He knew she’d just made up her mind.

“Pa, I know what I have to do,” she grinned.

“I know, darling,” she kissed his cheek and ran out the door.



Ruby flew into the house ignoring the family’s questions, she gathered up all the gifts that Victor had given her and went to find him. He was sitting on the chair outside the post office. “Hi Ruby. What are you doing with the jewelry box I gave you?”

“I need to talk to you, privately Victor, is there a place we can go to be alone?”

“Finally!” he grinned not even noticing her sad eyes. “Sure, let’s go over to that picnic table by the common.”

He led her there.

“Well, I’m listening, Ruby,” he smirked and folded his arms across his chest as he awaited her declaration of love for him, he was certain was coming.

She squared her shoulders and looked at him, her eyes brimming with tears. He frowned and sighed; his shoulders slumped. “You’ve chosen the carpenter, haven’t you?” he spat.

“His name is Jake,”

“Why him?”

“Because I love him.”

“I thought you loved me?”

“I thought I did too, Victor, and I thought you truly loved me too. But my Pa helped me see that yours is a selfish love, all about your happiness and flattery. You don’t care about my happiness at all, you are only interested in your own needs. Jake’s is a pure, deep and sacrificial love. He risked his own life for me even though he thought I’d chosen you.”

“I explained why I froze, Ruby, I was scared, I was just too scared.”

“Victor, Jake can’t swim, he’s terrified of open water, and yet he didn’t even hesitate. He jumped in even though he knew he was likely to drown, but it didn’t occur to him to preserve himself. He counted his own life of less value than mine. That’s the kind of love I need in my life, and I know that now. I love him all the more for it.”

“But Ruby, if you marry that carpenter,” he spat that word, “you’ll be stuck here forever. You’ll be poor, you’ll have to teach just to support him, and you’ll wallow away in this hick town forever. You deserve so much better.”

“I love this town Victor and I want to work. And you know what, for a love as pure and gentle as his, I’d live in a cave and wear sackcloth.”

“But a beautiful woman like you should be shown off, Ruby, you deserve a pedestal.”

“Victor that is the problem, I am not a trophy that you can show off to make you feel good. I am a woman and a person in my own right with my own feelings and my own mind. I don’t want to be loved that way, to be nothing but your display piece. I’d be miserable and I know it. Now, I’ve made up my mind. Here are all the things you gave me; I can’t accept them.”

“You’d rather that silly wooden bracelet than this expensive silver one. Why that one is worth less than ten cents. And that music box cost me ten dollars,” he exaggerated.

She pulled out the chicken necklace around her neck and said to him, “Jake gave me this, Victor. It cost him five cents and I love it, it is one of my most valued possessions and this bracelet, he made it for me with his bare hands, out of scrap wood. It isn’t worth anything at all,” she brushed it lovingly and grinned when she thought about the tender care Jake had put into carving it for her. “And despite their lack of value, they mean the most to me because they weren’t given to flatter me. This bracelet was made especially for me with love and care. This little necklace means he was thinking of me and knows I love chickens. What do you really know about me?”

“You’ll regret it, Ruby! You’ll be sorry, mark my words,” he gesticulated angrily.

“That’s my risk to take, Victor.”

“Well don’t expect to see me ever again.”

“Please don’t, Victor, I hoped we could still be friends, I do enjoy your company.”

“Friends? You want me to watch you swan around with that pauper and you expect me to be your friend? What kind of man would do that?”

“Jake.”

“What?”

“He thought I would choose you and still he remained my friend, even helped me when I needed him.”

“I’ve heard enough, Ruby, have a good life.” He turned on his heels and walked away, kicking a stone off the path in front of him.

“Victor, wait, I’m sorry I hurt you, please don’t leave like this,” she said chasing after him, but he ignored her and stormed off,

throwing the jewelry box onto the street with such force it splintered into pieces.

Twenty-Three



Finding Jake

Ruby sobbed on her bed for the third night in a row. “Where is he, Pa? Why isn’t he here?”

“I don’t know, daughter I guess he’s hurting,” Andrew replied stroking her hair.

“I love him so, Pa, it was always him, I know that now. Victor just flattered me to please his own ego. I need to find Jake and tell him but he’s nowhere around.”

Andrew was at a loss for words. “I don’t know. I’m sure he’ll turn up. It will all work out, I’m sure.”

“Oh Pa, I’ve messed everything up, haven’t I? I hurt Victor and I hurt Jake, too, do you suppose he’ll ever be able to forgive me?”

“Oh, of that I have absolutely no doubt.”

“Why? How can you be certain?” she asked sitting back to look at him.

“Because he loves you.”

“Victor hasn’t forgiven me.”

“Victor didn’t really love you.”

“Oh Pa!” was all she could say.

It broke Andrew’s heart to see her hurting so much. He ached for her and wished he could fix it.

“Get some sleep Ruby, I’m sure you’ll find him tomorrow.” She nodded.

“Thanks Pa, I love you. Thank you for listening to me.”

“Oh darling, it’s my pleasure. I’m sorry I can’t take your hurt; I love you so.”

“It’s okay Pa, I’ll see you in the morning, I love you too.”

He kissed her, “Goodnight darling.”

The next day Ruby searched the town for Jake, but no one had seen him. In the end she gave up. “I’ve lost him!” she thought. “I’ve ruined everything.” She slumped down on the seat below her favorite oak tree and buried her head in her hands. She felt like she’d been weeping for days. “Lord,” she cried out. “I need you. I’ve made a hash of this situation and I’ve lost him.”



Lucy had had enough of the sadness in the house, she picked up her fishing pole and headed for the Lake. She thought she’d try the lake today even though it was further away, good fishing there if you were patient. She had all day, she didn’t want to be around Ruby right now, it just made her sad.

She rounded the corner by the lake and there sitting under a tree was Jake. “Jake!” she said. “Where have you been? Ruby is looking everywhere for you.”

“I know, I heard she was.”

“Then why don’t you find her?”

“I’m not sure I want to hear what she has to say.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She loves Victor, I know she does.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I saw her run from the post office, eyes shining and hug him, she clearly loves him. I didn’t wanna stick around and watch so I came out here.”

“You’ve been here for three days?”

“Yeah, as good a place as any to do some thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“I dunno, maybe going home, back to the farm?” Jake sighed deeply.

“Thought you said you were gonna stick around no matter what, be there for her, isn’t that what you told her?”

“I want to Lucy, and I’m trying. I guess that’s why I didn’t get very far,” he grimaced.

“Jake, you need to go to her.”

“Why?”

“Jake McAllister!” exclaimed Lucy, throwing her pole to the ground and thrusting her hands on her hips. “Ruby was only happy that day because she got good news, she was running up the street because she was looking for you, to tell you. She just happened to see Victor because he’s always following her around. She gave him back all his gifts that night and told him she didn’t want to be with him, that she didn’t love him. I’ve heard her sobbing for three nights now because she thinks she’s lost you.”

Jake was on his feet then.

“Lucy Collins, are you telling the truth?”

“You know I never lie, Jake.”

“Where is she now, do you know?”

“Saw her under the oak tree, you know the one she goes to when she needs to think.”

He hugged Lucy and kissed her on the hair. “Thank you, Lucy!” he said with feeling and took off at a sprint.

“Bout time! Perhaps now I can get some sleep tonight,” she said aloud with a chuckle and dropped her line in the water.



Jake ran home as fast as he could, into the house and into his room.

“Where is the fire, Jake? Slow down boy,” Aunt Jo said, following him into the room.

“In my heart, Aunt Jo!” He grinned.

“Landsakes, boy ain’t seen you for three days, you stormed out in such a huff, what’s happened?”

“Just a miracle, Aunt Jo.” He stopped to hug her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “A miracle, I’ll tell you all about it later!” He reached for the box he was looking for and ran out the door.

“Ruby,” he said approaching the oak tree to see the forlorn figure leaning back against the tree, weeping. He put the box down carefully.

“Jake!” she called, immediately leaping up and running into his arms. “Oh Jake, I couldn’t find you, I wanted to tell you...” But she stopped and looked cautiously at him, what if he was angry, what if he didn’t want her anymore, what if she’d blown it? But when she looked into his eyes she saw no anger, no hate, no judgment, only love, care, and concern for her.

“Tell me what? he asked, his dark eyes probed the very depth of her soul, it made her feel giddy and nervous.

She took a deep breath, “I wanted to tell you that I love you too,” she said shyly, her eyes pleaded with him to forgive her and love her still.

“Ruby,” he said, much too overcome to say what he felt. The waves of emotion surged through him. *‘She loves me!’* He held her close, and they looked deeply into each other’s eyes, she reached up to cup his cheek and smiled shyly at him, he slowly leaned in and kissed her. She closed her eyes, slipped her arms up around his neck, her mind swirled and her knees weakened, her whole body coursed with waves of emotion as she received his gentle kiss, the first she’d ever had. Her eyes remained firmly closed for a time when he at last lifted his head back from her, when she finally opened them, they glistened brightly with love, her face radiating joy. They stood in silence, both trying to still their rapidly beating hearts. Ruby lay her head against his chest, and he leaned his down on hers, relishing holding her knowing that she at last returned his love.

He broke the trance and scooped her up in his arms, she put hers around his neck. He walked over to the small bench and put her down gently, his face close to hers, he looked into her shining eyes again. “I love you, Ruby.” He stroked her delicate cheek, “I love you so much it hurts.” He gently kissed her again just a small soft kiss this

time. He sat down next to her and then she could stand it no more and she burst into tears again as all the turmoil and sorrow, and hardship and hurt of the last few weeks came bubbling up all at once. He held her until she stopped crying. Holding her was such a privilege. Being the one to comfort her was such an honor even though he hated to see her hurt, he was overjoyed that she trusted him enough to be vulnerable with him. He would happily hold her for the rest of his life. After a time, she calmed down and leaned back away from him.

“I’m sorry Ruby, I let you down.”

“Oh no, Jake, you didn’t let me down, I let you down. I wanted to say sorry, I’ve hurt you so much and you’ve been nothing but patient and kind and loving to me. You’ve sacrificed your own life for me.” Seeing the question in his eyes she continued. “Pa told me you can’t swim and were afraid of the water but still you plunged in anyway. He told me that Lucy said you thought I loved Victor, but you saved me anyway. I’ve been selfish and heartless, making you wait, putting you through this and I’m sorry, Jake, I’m so sorry. I will understand if you can’t forgive me and don’t want to be with me.”

He listened to her, and his heart ached for her, here she had needed him, and he hadn’t been there for her.

He cupped her cheek and leaned forward to kiss her gently on the cheek and then looked deeply into her eyes, his thumb gently brushing her cheek.

“Ruby, my love, there is nothing to forgive. I would give my life for you without question, you know that. Please don’t think you’ve let me down, you needed to be sure and that’s okay. Oh, my love,” he said feeling so overwhelmed. He reached for her again then, her cheek against his heart. He spoke into her hair as he held her. “It is me that needs your forgiveness.”

She pulled back from him. “For what, Jake?”

“For not being here when you needed me, I’ve let you down and I’m sorry.”

“When Jake, you’ve always been there for me.”

“I’ve been away sulking the last few days; I couldn’t bear to watch Victor parading you through town. I saw you the other day

outside the post office, I thought you ran to him, your eyes were shining so much I was sure you loved him.”

“Oh, Jake I was running to find you, I wanted you to be the first to know my news, but I ran into Victor and then I couldn’t find you anywhere.” The hurt in her eyes made him ache.

“I know,” he hung his head. “I was hiding. You needed me and I was hiding. I’m so ashamed, Ruby, I promised you I’d always be there, but I wasn’t, can you ever forgive me.”

Ruby cupped his chin and lifted his face so she could look him in the eye. “Jake McAllister, there is nothing to forgive!” They held each other for a few moments basking in their love, both hearts knowing they’d at last found their permanent home. They released each other and Jake remembered the box.

“Hey, I have something for you.”

“You do? Oh, Jake, you’ve already given me so much. You didn’t have to get me anything. I love my bracelet and Mrs. Feathertail and this little necklace so much.”

“You are still wearing that?”

“Of course, Jake, you gave it to me!”

“I thought for sure you’d got rid of my trinkets with all the expensive gifts Victor was lavishing on you.”

“I never really wanted or liked any of his gifts, they were just flattery, none of it showed me he knew me at all, not like your gifts, each one so meaningful and heartfelt. I just got caught up in the hype of it, I’m sorry. I’ve never taken off your little necklace or your bracelet Jake, I couldn’t bear too. These are more precious to me than any bank full of gold, I much prefer your little wooden bracelet to the silver one he gave me.”

“Really?”

“Yes Jake, I learned an important lesson, I’d rather have these meaningful gifts that came from your deep heart of love than all the things that just made me into a trophy. I’m sorry Jake, sorry for being swept away in all the finery and pomp. He just liked to flatter me, and he made me feel good.”

“Stop Ruby, you don’t have to apologize you did nothing wrong. That’s all over now anyway, we are here together, and we love

each other, that's all that matters." Jake stood and fetched the box, passing it to her, he grinned. "Open it."

She reached for it and pulled off the lid, "Oh Jake," she said, her wide eyes misting over. She lifted out the large jewelry box, it was intricately carved and obviously made by the same person who made the other one they had seen in the window. It was square and made of a beautiful, polished oak. There on top was a carving of a large oak tree, beneath it a girl stood, a blonde girl looking down. Near her feet stood a small chicken. Like the other box she had seen, it had flowers and leaves wrapped around the sides and the picture on top was beautifully painted. She was amazed how much the girl looked like her.

"Oh Jake, it's so beautiful, even more beautiful than the one we saw in the window." She ran her hand over the top of it and traced the small chicken. She grinned. "How did you ever find one with a girl that looked so much like me, and with a chicken?"

"I didn't," he smiled.

Ruby tilted her head and knitted her eyebrows together, something occurred to her then and she lifted the box above her head to see the bottom of it. There on the bottom was the craftsman's mark, JAM, she recognized it instantly, she'd seen it many times before on his work he'd showed her.

Her eyebrows raised and her jaw dropped, "You made this?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded.

"Oh Jake! I'll always treasure it." She grinned at him then, "So, you made the one in the shop window?"

"Yes," he smiled.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was embarrassed."

"Why?"

"Because I hadn't told you how I felt about you and I'd carved your likeness into the box because I couldn't get your face out of my mind, I knew I'd tell you eventually. I've been working on this one since I got home."

“Oh Jake, you are so talented, how’d you get so good at carving?”

“I’ve been doing it a long time. Ma joked I held a chisel before I even held a pencil. I’ve got a lot to learn about carpentry, and house building but carving I can do. When I was ten, I couldn’t afford to buy Ma some beautifully carved wooden placemats, so I made them myself, she still uses those old things.” He grinned and she chuckled, then Jake remembered something. “Hey Ruby, what was the news you wanted to tell me.”

“Oh, Jake, you’ll never believe it,” she pulled the letter out of her pocket and gave it to him to read, with shining eyes.

He read it and then excitedly reached for her, stood up and pulled her up. “Congratulations my love!” He said dropping the letter to the ground. He whirled her around in a congratulatory dance. Then he stopped and kissed her again. His heart leapt, how amazing it was to be here, to hear her say she loved him, to hold her, to kiss her. Her eyes shone with happiness and love. “I’m so proud of you, Ruby, you are going to be a wonderful teacher. I just know you will, the students will love you, Miss Collins. Come let’s go into town and celebrate this and our love. Now that I have your heart, I shall never let it go.” He lifted her hand to his lips and looked deep into her eyes, willing her to believe it. “And that’s a promise Miss Collins!”

Hand in hand they walked towards town, Jake carried the jewelry box under one arm. He stopped part way and said suddenly. “Now I’ve got to have a chat with your pa.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. I know I have your blessing, Ruby; I can tell by the shine in your eyes, but I need to do this right. I have to have your pa’s blessing to court his lovely daughter. Let’s hope he says yes!” he winked.

“He will,” said Ruby with confidence.

“Shall we go and find him now?”

“Okay.”

They turned and walked back towards the campus instead.



“Pastor Collins, do you have a minute?” Jake said popping his head through the open door of Andrew’s office. Ruby waited outside in the reception area.

“Jake!” said Andrew a little tersely, “Where have you been, lad? My daughter is beside herself with worry! It’s she you need to talk to not me,” despite his anger at the young man he wanted to give Jake the benefit of the doubt.

“I have spoken to her, Pastor, that’s why I’m here.” Andrew noticed the shine in his eyes and the smile he couldn’t wipe off his face and knew automatically that it had been a positive encounter. He smiled and motioned for the young man to sit down and took the chair opposite him.

“What is it you wish to say?”

“Well, Pastor Collins, Ruby told me today that she loves me too.” He closed his eyes as he said it and his face beamed. Andrew just nodded, his heart a mix of emotions but, working very hard, he managed to keep a straight face, giving away nothing, and let the young man continue.

“I love your daughter with all my heart, and I am asking your permission to court her.”

Andrew swallowed the lump in his throat and the tears that he could feel bubbling up. He nodded and then in the evenest voice he could muster he asked, “And do you plan to marry my daughter?” he knew the answer, he just wanted to have a bit of fun with him.

“Yes, Sir I absolutely do, but not until the time is right.”

“And when will that be?” Andrew’s voice held a little quiver.

“When I can provide her a home,” he said evenly looking Andrew right in the eye.

Andrew could stand it no more. “Is she here?” he said.

“Yes, I’ll get her.” Jake stood and left the room, what was going on? He had been so sure Andrew would be happy for them, even told him outside the clinic that day they had his blessing. Did he change his mind because Jake had been gone these three days? Oh! He gulped, his heart in his throat.

“Ruby, come with me, he wants to see you.” Jake said nervously. She took his hand and followed him into her father’s office.

“Close the door, Jake.” Andrew said as sternly as he could. Jake obliged and then Andrew grinned and wrapped both young people in his arms and hugged them tightly. He released them and kissed his daughter. “You have my blessing,” he said with great feeling in his voice.

“You had me worried there for a moment.”

“Just having fun with you, I couldn’t deny you, not with the look of love so obvious on those faces.”

“Thank you, Pastor Collins, I’ll take good care of her.” He reached out to shake his hand.

“Put that away Jake,” he said and embraced him. “Welcome to the family.”

“Oh Pa!” said Ruby, “We aren’t getting married just yet.”

“I know, daughter,” Andrew said putting his arm around her waist. “I have a feeling Jake will be part of the family anyway, long before there is a wedding.” He kissed her on the cheek and whispered. “You made the right choice, darling, I’m so happy for you.”

“Oh Pa,”

“Come young man, you will be expected to dine with us tonight, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Then I won’t say no!” Jake grinned. Andrew opened the door for Ruby, and she walked out into to foyer, he turned back to Jake and said, “Look after her, Jake, I’m trusting you with my most precious treasure.”

“I understand, Sir. I’ll protect her with my life.”

“Good,” said Andrew patting Jake on the shoulder. “Come, let’s go talk to Abigail.”

Twenty-Four



Promising future.

Ruby was set to start her new job on the first of September. Jake was over the moon for her, and gladly helped her carry her teaching supplies to her classroom and put up posters for her. They spent time praying over the desks that the Lord would bless the little learners who would be entrusted to her for the year. They had talked at length about Ruby's teaching career and Ruby had timidly asked how he felt about her working after she's married. His response thrilled her, "If that will make you happy, my love, then it will make me happy."

On her first day of school Jake picked Ruby up and drove her to school in his wagon. He presented her with a large bunch of flowers and escorted her to her classroom. He kissed her and told her how proud he was of her and that he couldn't wait to hear about Miss Collins' first day. She promised to come by the woodshop after work and tell him.

She arrived around four o'clock and gladly received his loving embrace. He smelled of wood shavings and varnish, but she didn't mind. Mr. Hayes told him to take his time, he loved watching the young lovers as their courtship continued, it reminded him of happier times when he was a young man courting his love. Jake led her across to the café and bought them both a coffee. He sat and listened with

eyes full of love and laughter as she told him all that had happened that day, all the while he held the soft white hand in his large one.

Jake was reluctant to let her go but he had to get back to work. He walked outside with her and back to the shop, embraced her and gave her a quick kiss, not at all concerned about anyone who may see. "I'm so proud of you, Ruby. Well done on your first day, I knew you'd be a terrific teacher." She beamed under his praise. "I'll see you for supper tonight." At that she left to share with her family how her first day as teacher had gone.

Jake walked back into the shop and Mr. Hayes chuckled. "You are fairly skipping, Jake." He smiled.

"I feel like I could fly, Mr. Hayes," he grinned. "I never knew being in love could feel like this, I ache inside but at the same time I feel so light and free, like my soul is soaring high above the clouds."

The older man laughed again. "Yes Son, true love is like that."

"Mr. Hayes, I cannot believe I am blessed enough to have the love of Ruby Collins, she is beautiful, bright, so talented, and so loving. I'll never know what I did to deserve her. Loving her is beyond wonderful but having her love me back. Ahhhh. It's indescribable." The young man's eyes shone. "I plan to marry that girl, you know?"

The older man nodded, "You making plans, Son?" He really did see Jake as a son. His own family long gone and living their own lives across the country, he'd grown to really love Jake.

Jake sighed then. "I want to, but..."

"But you ain't got the money?"

"Yeah, how can I ask Ruby to marry me when I don't even have a house or land, or the money for a ring? I've been putting aside what I can but it's not much."

Mr. Hayes thought about it for a moment. "I been meaning to give you a pay raise for your hard work. Because of you I get through so much more work than before and your carving is exceptional, I'm sure I've got more customers just because of your workmanship. I know you ain't finished your apprenticeship yet, but I have a proposition for you." He laid out to Jake the plan he had been forming for the last few months since Ruby had told Jake she loved him.

“I got me a block of bare land, near the back of town out behind the common. There are several large oak trees to one side, a small river and lovely spot where I planned to build a house. But since my Ruthie has been gone, I’ve not had the heart to build there. I’d sell the place to ya for a good price. But ‘stead of paying me in money you see, you pay in extra hours, and I’ll give you a good price on the timbers to build your lady a house. Come on, we’ll shut the shop up early and I’ll take ya on out there and show ya.”

It was beautiful land, about an acre and a half, give or take, and it had a small stream and three large oak trees just as he said. The land was flat except by the stream where a gentle slope ran down to the river’s edge. Jake could picture the house over in the clearing, one of the oak trees would sit just beside it, hanging over the yard. He pictured a rope swing hanging from it and kids leaping, laughing and splashing in the river. He pictured the house with fluffy curtains in the window, a big wide verandah where they could sit in the shade and watch their children play. ‘*Ruby would love it here*’ he thought, picturing a large chicken coop off to the side.

“It’s ideal, Mr. Hayes, you sure you want to sell it?”

He nodded sadly, “Yes Son, I brought it for my Ruthie, she loved the old oaks, and I built this little seat under the oak for her. She loved to sit here and read while we planned our future, but she died afore I could build her the house she wanted. I ain’t been out here since, it just sits here waiting for someone to love it.”

“Well, you have a deal,” said Jake, after they had talked figures and timeframes. Mr. Hayes promised to bring Jake the deed the very next day and sign it over to him right away, he could work on paying it off over time as they had arranged.

“Thank you, Mr. Hayes.” Jake shook the man’s hand and grinned. “I thought it would take me years to save the money I need.”

“Nah, just one year, like we discussed, I’ll not give you the pay rise and instead put the money towards the cost, and that includes the timbers. Then you can keep your money you earn at the shop for a ring and to take your lady out on dates.”

“That is most kind of you Mr. Hayes, I appreciate it and I will work hard. It will be hard to spend more time here and less with Ruby, but she deserves it and I’m going to build her a grand house.” He then said, “Don’t mention it to Ruby, will you Sir. I want to surprise her.”

Jake was determined to pay it off sooner than a year. He wouldn’t marry her until he owned every bit of the land and had built her a house.

He worked diligently and faithfully, eagerly accepting every extra hour he could. “For Ruby.” He said every time. He knew it was a sacrifice spending less time with her, but it would all be worth it in the end. Ruby admired his work ethic and while she didn’t know his plan, she knew he worked to give them a promising future.



Their first argument was unsurprisingly about money. Ruby wanted Jake to have the savings from her teacher’s salary to put away for their future, but he resisted. They sat under the old oak tree halfway into town, “It’s my job to provide for you, Ruby. I don’t need your money for that, it’s your money, to do what you please with.”

“So, Jake are you telling me your money is our money, but my money is just my money?”

“Yes,” he grinned.

“That’s not fair,” she argued, her stubborn streak beginning to show, she was no match for Lucy but still had her fair share of spunk when her heckles got up and they were beginning to rise.

“Fair? Who said anything about fair, Ruby? It’s my job to provide and that’s what I plan to do.”

“And just what am I supposed to spend my money on, food, clothing, household supplies?”

“No, I’ll take care of all that Ruby.” He lovingly pushed a stray lock of hair off her face. “I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

“Then what am I supposed to do with the money I make? Pile it up under my mattress?”

He laughed, "If you like, wouldn't make for a very comfortable sleep though."

"Jake this isn't funny, don't make fun please," she said.

He became contrite then, "Sorry, I don't mean to. I want you to know that I plan to marry you, I plan to look after you and the family we have in the future." Ruby blushed at that thought. "I am saving the money we need for our future now; I've got a plan."

"And am I a part of this plan?"

"What are talking about, of course you are."

"Isn't it my future too?"

"Of course, my love."

"Then shouldn't I get a say in some of it, and be allowed to contribute to it? You say you love me and want to provide for me, but I love you too, why can't I do some of the providing for you? Oh, I know it's the man's responsibility to provide for his household and it's likely eventually I'll not be able to work when we..... have a family," she said shyly. Then she looked up at him. "But while I am working and earning a good salary, I want to contribute, to know that I was a part of us building a promising future too. I know it bruises a man's pride and rubs up against your values some, but have you ever considered this from a woman's point of view?"

"What are you getting at, Ruby?"

She stood up with her hands on her hips looking at him, "Well you say you respect me, value my opinion, want to hear my point of view?"

"Of course, I've always said that, Ruby." She was becoming very animated now pacing and waving her arms. Jake stood leaning against the tree, trying to understand her. Both were becoming heated, but they weren't yelling.

"Well, what if when you got married you were expected to give up your name and take your wife's name, if any land or property you had were turned over to her, any children you had were solely hers and she had the final say. What if she didn't allow you to contribute any money and you just had to sit there and let her pay for everything, do nothing towards your own future even though it was supposed to be YOUR future as much as hers. What if she shared

everything that was hers with you but wouldn't let you share any of what was yours with her. And you just had to accept that because that's the way it's always been. Wouldn't you have something to say about that? Wouldn't you protest too?" It was a long speech and Ruby was quite heated by the end. Jake just stood there listening to her and then a bemused little smile crept over his face, and he chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she asked, feeling a little miffed at his dismissal of what she had thought to be a rather convincing argument.

"You are, Ruby Collins," he said with a smile walking up and taking both her hands in his. "You are quite a woman, you know that?" He pulled her to him and kissed her tenderly. "I love you so much, and yes you are right, I would have something to say about that. I never thought of it from your point of view, I was just trying to take my responsibility as provider and protector seriously."

"I know that, Jake, and I love you for it. I'm not taking those roles from you. I love that you provide and protect me even now and I know you will in the future, but I just want a chance to contribute to that future. You keep telling me you believe in the two partners in a marriage being equals rather than the wife being subservient, and I know that as a man, you will be the head of our home. But Jake, my little salary, the little contribution I make needn't threaten all that, it will not affect how I see you as a man, in fact it makes me love you more because you let me be a part of it and share in it."

"Woow, Miss Collins, you already convinced me. I thank you for the offer of your savings, I gladly accept it and I'll keep it safe; it will contribute to our promising future."

"Thank you, Jake," she said but he knew he'd gained far, far more than he had lost in that battle. But then he thought of something. "Do you not want to take my name when we get married?"

"Don't be silly, I'd be delighted to be Mrs. Jake McAllister, just don't make me wait too long, okay."

"Well, with your help, Ruby, it'll be sooner than you think but we needn't rush, you're only seventeen."

"I know, we have plenty of time. I just love you so much, Jake McAllister, and I can't wait to live our promising future."

“Me either.” Jake kissed her again.

Twenty-Five



Gathering Rocks

“Morning Mr. Hayes,” said Ruby happily as she entered the woodshop after school. It was nearing the Thanksgiving break and Ruby had been very busy. She’d had a particularly trying day with the Morrison twins who were determined to cause havoc and Ruby was hard pressed to keep them on task, as well as teach the rest of the class. She’d been teaching a little over two months and was loving it, although it did keep her very busy and she was exhausted a lot of the time. With Jake working so hard and doing so many hours they didn’t see each other as often as she liked, so whenever she could she called in to see him at the workshop on the way home.

“Morning, Miss Collins,” Mr. Hayes smiled. “Jake’s out the back with the new apprentice.”

“Another new apprentice? You must be doing very well, Mr. Hayes.”

“Well, Jake’s ‘most learned all I can teach ‘im, I think he’ll be finished his training ‘fore Christmas, He’s a smart’n that man of yourn.”

Ruby beamed, she loved hearing people praise her Jake, “Yes, he is. Mind if I go back there?”

“Course not, love, right round the back by the woodpile, leave ya things there if ya like.”

Ruby placed her books and her small bag down on the workbench and walked around the back to find Jake.

Jake saw her coming and whistled. "Hello there, Miss Collins, you sure are a sight for sore eyes." He embraced her and she laughed.

"Oh, Jake after the day I've had I must look like I've walked through a tornado."

"Not a bit, you are a radiant beauty, my love. Let me guess, Morrison twins again?" he said slipping his arm around her waist

"Yes!" said Ruby but she smiled.

"What did those two terrors do now?"

"Mickey stole Emma Wright's hair ribbons and played 'keep away' with his brother Alex for more than twenty minutes. Then they took one each and kept them in their pocket for all of recess, poor girl was beside herself. Why do boys like to torture girls so?"

"Don't you know?" he said laughing at the antics.

"No, I don't, it's mean."

"It's 'cause boys don't know how to tell girls they love them."

"That's how you show someone you love them?"

"Is when you're nine!"

Ruby shook her head and then the new apprentice spoke, "Ah Jake, I don't mean to interrupt but where'd you say this lumber goes?"

Jake released her then but kept hold of her hand, "Sorry, uh Seth, this is my Ruby. Ruby, this is Seth Ellis, he's the new apprentice."

Ruby smiled at being referred to as, "My Ruby." That was quite fine with her, she was delighted to be Jake's Ruby. "Lovely to meet you, Seth, you just started here?"

The young boy nodded; he couldn't have been any more than fifteen years old. "First day ma'am."

Ruby smiled at the 'ma'am,' it made her feel old. "You'll love working here, Seth, Jake and Mr. Hayes do a wonderful job."

Jake beamed and squeezed her hand. "Wood goes over there, other supplies are labeled on the shelf," he said to Seth, "Just get that wagon unpacked please, we have to go for rocks tomorrow."

He pulled Ruby around the side of the building where they could be alone then he pulled her into a loving embrace and kissed her gently. "I miss you when I don't see you for a few days. You've been so busy."

“So have you, Jake, and you’re going for more rocks tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Marshall’s need a chimney for the new homestead.” Jake didn’t add that he was also getting a load for himself for the stone fireplace in the home he was building for her.

“How long will you be away this time?”

“We’ll be leaving at dawn and won’t be back till after dark, I’m afraid. We gotta get three wagon loads done tomorrow so we can get their chimney in before Thanksgiving. Even with Seth’s help it’ll still take a whole day, we’ve gotta go right down to Miller’s Creek now.”

“I’ll miss you, my love. I guess I won’t see you until Sunday then. I was hoping that tomorrow being Saturday I’d get to see you, but I understand, you have to work.”

“I wish I didn’t have to, Ruby, but you know I’m saving to buy us a place.”

“I know, for our promising future.” She grinned.

“If you just be patient with me for a while, we’ll have our own place sooner than you think and then we can get married.”

“If you ever bother to ask me!” She laughed.

“Be patient, all in good time. Besides, I have to ask your Pa first!” They both chuckled. “I have to get back to work I’m sorry, we’ve still got two orders to fill tonight.”

“Okay Jake, I’ll let you go. I’ll just go fetch my books and head home.”

He reached for her one more time, kissed her on the cheek, “I love you, Ruby Collins.”

“I love you too, Jake McAllister,” she reached up and kissed him on his stubbly cheek, her eyes shining with love.

She disappeared around the corner and Jake watched her go, his heart full of pride for his beautiful Ruby.

“She’s quite a girl, Jake,” said young Seth in admiration as Jake returned to help the young man with the supplies.

“She is not a girl, Seth, she’s a beautiful woman.”

“Yes, I can see that, just can’t understand one thing though?”

“What’s that?”

“What’s a lovely lady like that doing with a scruff like you?”
He grinned widely

“That’s enough cheek from you, Seth!” said Jake and reached for a handful of sawdust and threw it all over him. “For that you can unpack the wagon by yourself.”

“Aw no fair,” Jake chuckled and returned to his work with a whistle.



When Ruby’s turn came to share about her day at their supper table, of course she talked about the Morrison twins and their mischief but also about Jake going for rocks tomorrow. It always made them quite nervous. It was a dangerous job and they had to keep their wits about them. “Three loads you say?” Asked Andrew. “Must be a grand fireplace.”

“Apparently,” said Ruby.

“I imagine you’ll be at a loose end tomorrow then with Jake away, however will you fill your day.” Her mother teased.

“You could come fishing with me?” offered Lucy. Ruby turned up her nose, fishing was not for her.

“I thought you’d be going with Stephen Matthers,” teased Sally. “He’s got a crush on you, you know.”

“You take that back, Sally Collins, he does not!” Lucy’s eyes flashed with fire.

“I won’t, he does to. He told me so!”

“It’s not true, Sally, stop teasing.” Lucy picked up Sally’s potato and dumped it in her glass of water, causing the eleven-year-old to begin crying loudly.

“Girls!” Andrew said loudly and all the noise stopped. “Lucy, give Sally your potato.”

“No, Pa it’s my favorite, that’s why I left it to last.”

“Lucy!” That tone meant obey!

She reluctantly picked up her potato which was somewhat larger than Sally’s potato and gave it to her.

“And?”

“I’m sorry, Sally,” she said more contritely than she meant, she was still seething

“Sally.”

“Sorry for teasing you, Lucy.”

“Much better girls, now let’s have a civilized meal, shall we? Emily, we are up to you, how was your day?” Fourteen-year-old Emily regaled them with stories of which boy said what to her and who was wearing what dress, and the meal progressed with no more outbursts from Lucy, fortunately as she didn’t want to lose any more of her delicious meal.



Ruby decided to spend the Saturday being productive rather than moping around missing Jake. She’d go to the library in town and do some research for the nature studies she was doing with her class. She planned to take them for a walk on Monday and examine the local flora and fauna before the snow came. She was already praying the Morrison boys would behave in the great outdoors. She chuckled while she walked to the library. Then at lunchtime she promised her three younger sisters she’d take them for ice cream. It was a frivolous expense and it meant she’d give less to Jake that week, but he didn’t mind after all, he’d said “Whatever you can give me, even if it’s just half a penny, gets us closer to the total than yesterday.” He wouldn’t tell her what that total was, just asked her to trust him and she did.

At midday Ruby stood up from her study, she had lots of good information and had formed her lesson plan ready for Monday. She shelved the books again and went to join her sisters. They were waiting outside the ice cream store for her eagerly. Lucy held up a coin “You don’t gotta pay, Pa gave us a dime.”

“Don’t have to,” corrected Ruby. “That was nice of him. He knows Jake and I are saving for a house.”

She took the girls for ice cream and they each got two flavors and walked to the common to eat them. Ruby’s mind wandered, she thought about what it would be like to be married and in her own little house. What would their house be like? Would it be log like the

one in Oceansview or plank like the one here? She didn't know yet, she did hope that Jake would involve her in the choosing once he had enough money. She wanted to live somewhere with some tall, beautiful trees. Oaks were her favorite; they changed every season and she loved them. She wanted a river, room for chickens, somewhere quiet.... But she was getting ahead of herself. *'Home will be wherever Jake is, and that's just fine.'* She scolded herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a distant voice calling out, "Help, please help, I need help." And the four girls were on their feet and heading in the direction of the voice. Many heads in town turned towards the sound. Seth was coming up the road at breakneck speed in the empty supply wagon. Ruby's heart was instantly in her mouth. *'Jake! she feared, 'something's happened to Jake.'*

Seth pulled the two sorrels to a stop, and they could clearly see the broken and dragging boards in the back of the wagon, there was a tarp on the back and what looked like a body lying under a blanket. "Please, you gotta help," Seth called to the gathering crowd. "There's been an accident."

"Jake, is it Jake?" Ruby asked Seth fearfully. He nodded towards the back of the wagon and Ruby pushed her way past some men to see a very battered looking Jake lying under a blanket. She could see his face. He was unconscious and bleeding from a head wound. "Jake," she called out and her knees buckled beneath her. "Jake," she sobbed. "Lucy, help me up there." Lucy put her hands out for Ruby to use as a stool and hoisted her up onto the wagon, Ruby carefully sat next to Jake and tenderly touched his forehead. He groaned. She sighed with relief, "He's alive." Tears flooded her eyes and Lucy squeezed her hand.

Seth was busy telling the men around what happened, Mr. Hayes was still out there pinned under some rocks. Jake had been hit by some of the tumbling rocks as he tried to push Mr. Hayes out of the way. Mr. Hayes caught a rock to the kneecap and fell and two rocks had rolled on top of his arm. He was still there, and it didn't look good for him.

Several men jumped into action and sped off on horses to help the craftsman. Someone yelled for Seth to get Jake to the doctor.

“Hold on, Miss Ruby.” Ruby grabbed hold of the side of the broken wagon and Seth raced as quickly as he could to the clinic. “Run home, Emily, Sally, get Pa,” said Lucy. “I’m going with Ruby.” She leapt up on the back of the wagon just as Seth drove away.



Emily came barreling into Andrew’s office, it wasn’t like the delicate girl to run headlong like that. Andrew sighed, ‘*Another scrape!*’ he thought. ‘*What has Lucy gotten herself into this time?*’ He smiled ruefully. With daughters like his how was he ever supposed to get any work done? He chuckled. He was trying to get everything ready for Luke’s return at Christmas time, they were way behind. He loved his girls dearly though, and despite all the adventures and scrapes they got themselves into, he wouldn’t trade them for the world. He prepared himself to listen to some exploit as Sally puffed her way into his office too, she’d been unable to keep up with Emily.

“What is it girls?” Andrew said as the two caught their breath.

“Pa, you have to come quick, there’s been an accident.”

“Is it, Lucy?” He smiled believing them to be exaggerating, her idea of an “accident” was often not the same as his.

“No Pa, it’s Jake and it’s bad!”

“Oh no, where is Ruby?”

“With him,” said Sally.

“Lucy is too,” added Emily.

“Go home immediately, tell your ma we’ll be down the clinic, and pray. I’ll send word when I know.”

“Yes Pa,” said both girls in unison and ran to do their father’s bidding. Andrew hurried down the hallway to Matty’s office and informed him. “Take Duchess, she’s fast.”

“Thanks, Matty.”

“Of course,”

Andrew turned to leave, but stopped, grinned and said, “Who knew having four girls would bring this much adventure. Whoever said girls were less fun and less work sure didn’t know mine,” they both laughed, and Andrew hurried away.



Ruby sat over Jake's bedside and wept. He hadn't yet regained consciousness and apart from the odd groan, he'd not made much movement at all. The doctor had patched his headwound and cleaned him up some. Just above his eyebrow were four neat stitches. He had a dislocated shoulder which the doctor had put back in place and was now in a crisp white sling. There were two broken ribs which the doctor knew of, but he'd have to wait for Jake to wake up to assess any more damage. He prayed there was no internal bleeding.

Lucy couldn't bear to see her sister cry, she hugged Ruby, and told her she was going to wait outside for Pa. Four men had come in bringing Mr. Hayes with them and both doctors were now working valiantly to try to save his mangled arm. Ruby was now on her own with Jake, although occasionally a nurse popped in to see if there had been any change. Ruby told her there wasn't.

She knelt next to him, lay her head on his good shoulder and wept. "Oh Jake," she cried. Then turned to her comforter, "Lord, please help Jake. I love him so."

"Darling!" Andrew said as he entered the room with Lucy behind him.

"Pa, Oh Pa," Ruby cried and ran into his arms. She sobbed and Andrew held her for some time. When she finally stepped back from him, he asked what happened. Lucy had already told him but even Andrew knew Lucy's version was often somewhat embellished. "Pa, the wagon gave way with a whole load of rocks in it. Jake saw they were going to crush Mr. Hayes and he leapt in to push him out of the way. Seth told me he got clipped in the shoulder by one of them that bounced up and fell heavily hitting his head on the ground and his ribs on a boulder. Mr. Hayes ended up pinned under two rocks, and Oh Pa, he might lose his arm."

Ruby was sobbing again. "Ruby, darling girl, Jake is strong, he'll be fine."

She nodded in his arms willing herself to believe him. “He has to be, Pa. If anything happened to Jake, I couldn’t live. I’m not strong like Ma, I love him so. I love him so.”

Andrew stroked her back while she sobbed.



When Jake finally woke up that evening the doctor examined him and to his relief there were no signs of internal bleeding. He’d strap up the broken ribs and banish him to bedrest and in four weeks or so the young man would be right as rain. The doctor was very thankful to discover there was no brain damage. The bang to the head fortunately been minor the doctor told them, whispering a prayer of thanksgiving.

The same couldn’t be said for Mr. Hayes. The two doctors hadn’t been able to save his arm. It had been removed just above the elbow. It pained the doctor greatly to have to make the decision. This was a craftsman; his hands were his living. It was his left arm but all the same it would greatly affect his work. The doctor’s dreaded the man waking up and finding out, but they’d had no choice, they had tried everything, but the forearm and hand were mangled beyond repair. If they left it, infection would surely set in and would take his life.

Twenty-Six



Plans

Jake woke up and pain racked through his ribs. Memory of the accident came flooding back to him. He tried to sit up, but his ribs hurt. His shoulder had mostly healed now, and he'd ditched the sling some time ago. He was becoming frustrated at being stuck in bed. He could feel that his ribs were still sore, but they were certainly on the mend. Yesterday, for the first time, he'd got up and about. Aunt Jo had been looking after him and Ruby had come each evening after school. It was the highlight of each boring day to have her there. Otherwise, he just slept or stared at the ceiling or read. She brought him books to read and that helped curb the monotony some. When Ruby was there, she tenderly cared for him, she'd faithfully changed his bandages and with her delicate fingers had checked his ribs each day the way the doctor had shown her. He hated being in bed, but he loved the tender care she gave him. It certainly made the days less boring.

Now he was beginning to mend he wanted out of bed. The time spent in bed was wasted time. He should be working at the shop, and on his house. That was what he was most upset about. The house building had ground to a halt. He had a lot of work to do on it if he was going to at least have the roof on by Christmas, that possibility was now looking very slim. He knew the weather could close in any minute. So far, they'd had an unseasonably warm winter, just a few

snow flurries here and there which had barely halted his progress. He knew though, it wouldn't stay that way forever.

He couldn't afford to pay anyone, and he didn't want to let Ruby down. He'd planned to show her the new house and land on Christmas day and, with the ring he'd purchased just before the accident, he was going to propose to her. Then in six months' time, he'd have the property completely paid off and they could get married in the summer break before Ruby had to go back to school.

Jake was so thankful now that she had talked him into letting her help. She was able to give him twenty-five cents a week from her small salary and it was adding to his little nest egg. Jake tried not to use any of Ruby's money towards the house or land, most weeks he managed to scrape together enough to pay the one dollar per week goal. He sold many of his carvings and that helped towards the cost too. The money Ruby gave him he carefully stored away. He would turn this over to her later as she needed it for household purchases. He had begun to make all their furniture himself but hoped that the money he laid aside would be enough for Ruby to make their house a home.

He was building a large house. He knew he should prepare now for the future; they both had talked about wanting a large family and Jake had planned accordingly. He designed and laid out a large four-bedroom family home, with indoor plumbing! Ruby had become used to living that way and he wanted to give her that. One of the first things he was going to order for the house was a large bathtub. She had told him she loved to soak in a hot bath, and he wanted her to be able to get all of herself in the warm water.

He climbed out of bed and carefully pulled on his clothes. He wasn't going to stay there anymore. He knew the doctor said he needed to be there for a further two weeks, but he couldn't, he had to step up, he had to get the woodshop going again and continue building his house. Mr. Hayes was going to need him even more now. He had woken up a few mornings after the accident to find he had lost half of his arm. Jake had asked to see him, and the doctor helped him into a wheelchair and Ruby pushed him in to talk to the boss.

Mr. Hayes was struggling to come to terms with the injury. His hands were his livelihood. How could he do his job if he couldn't use the tools? Two apprentices couldn't be expected to run it themselves. Perhaps he'd have to sell the business, or worse still back out of the deal with Jake and sell the piece of land. No, he couldn't do it. Not to Jake or to Ruby.

Jake had been the one to come up with the solution. Mr. Hayes would still run the shop and do the ordering and work with the customers. He'd still supervise the work, but Jake insisted he was able to step up. What he couldn't do Mr. Hayes could still show him. Or Martin Turner, who had also been a carpenter, could be called in to assist. Jake told Mr. Hayes that even though he was only just nineteen, he was more than capable of stepping up. Mr. Hayes considered the plan carefully and decided he was happy to try it. Being able to work, even in a limited capacity would be much better than sitting at home feeling sorry for himself. He then came up with a counteroffer telling Jake that he'd sell him half of his business. Oh, not yet, when he'd finished paying off the property, they could keep the same arrangement and Jake could be half owner. But starting immediately Jake was to get half of the profits. Jake tried to protest but Mr. Hayes told him he'd be stepping up his work, his expectations and therefore his wages.

Jake was delighted, it would significantly cut the time down that he needed to pay for the house. Perhaps even by Ruby's birthday in February it would all be his. He couldn't wait. But none of that could happen while Jake was still in bed. They had agreed not to start the plan until Jake was well enough to take over. Seth was too inexperienced to do any work without Jake or Mr. Hayes around.

Mr. Hayes had agreed that after the Walters' order was filled his apprenticeship would also be complete. His boss assured him he was the most efficient apprentice he'd ever had, the first to complete his training within a year. He told Jake he was a natural, and because he'd come to him with so much skill and natural talent already, he'd picked up the job quickly. Seth, he wasn't so sure about. The boy was only barely sixteen and needed a lot of training. But between Jake and Mr. Hayes they'd get him there eventually.

So now Jake was anxious to get to the order. The Walters family needed a new dining table and chairs. The chairs were complete, he'd just finished them before the accident. The table was cut out, he just needed to put the legs on and finish sanding and varnishing it. It was about two days' work he estimated.



Jake left his room, and despite the protests of Aunt Jo and Uncle Robert, he left the house. Painfully he made his way to the new property and began to slowly continue his work. The first load of rocks had made it back to town and seeing as how they'd had to cancel the fireplace job, leastways for now, Jake purchased the wagon load of rocks instead and now they sat in a pile waiting for him to build his fireplace. He needed to get it completed before he could go any further.

He walked over and tried to lift a rock. Searing pain tore through his broken ribs. He dropped it; it was pointless. He kicked the rock with his work boot. This delay was costing him, and it would push back his plans. He had the ring, but he couldn't ask her to marry him without the house being done. Could he?

Perhaps he should. He knew she was getting impatient for him to propose to her, and he wanted to, oh how he wanted to. He'd brought the ring just a few days before the accident. After he told Aunt Jo and Uncle Robert that Ruby had told him she loved him too, and he planned to marry her, they had refused any of his money to help with his upkeep. The small amount he paid each week was now his to use and he added it to the money he'd already saved, a penny at a time since he'd moved here.

The ring sat in Jake's top drawer ready to give her. Could he really wait until Christmas? He knew her whole family would be home so he had wanted to wait until then so they could all celebrate together, but that was more than five weeks away. It seemed like forever.

He looked around the property he was now more than half-owner of. It really was a beautiful place. Even now with winter about to close in, it was lovely. The oak trees were bare and had a haunting quality as they extended leafless boughs to the sky. Jake noted the trees beyond their property on two sides sheltered them from the cold northerly winds and gave the illusion of living far out in the country with no nearby neighbors. In reality it was less than two miles from town, and they had two neighbors within half a mile, but the beautiful spot was very peaceful, and he instinctively knew Ruby would love it.

Jake took a somewhat painful deep breath. Somehow the tranquility of the place gave him new motivation and he formulated a plan. He would get help with the building of the stone fireplace. Once he'd done that, he was sure with Mr. Hayes limited help and a little coercion with Seth he could get the house framed in the next two weeks, broken ribs or no broken ribs, so long as the weather remained mild. This would take some careful planning. Ruby mustn't find out. He'd keep the store running the best he could but with just the one order on the books before Thanksgiving he hoped he'd have time to spend on the house during the day and evenings. It would take some careful orchestration and Jake didn't want to lie to Ruby, but he sorely hoped to keep the secret.

He restarted at the woodshop the very next day. He climbed out of bed and instructed Aunt Jo to help him strap the broken ribs up so he could work. They were both on his left side and he didn't use his left arm as much, so he would manage. She didn't seem convinced, but the boy was determined, and she added extra padding to the bandages in the hope he'd not make the injury worse.



Ruby walked to school that day as she always had, she liked to get there early so that she could get her work done and then spend time with Jake after school. Since he was confined to bed, he had been restless, so she made the effort to visit him most days. She rounded the corner into town and heard hammering. *'That's odd,'* she thought,

'the woodshop should be closed for at least two more weeks while Jake recovered.'

"Jake!" Ruby exclaimed as she peered inside the store. "What are you doing out of bed?" he put the hammer down, working hard to mask the pain in his ribs so she wouldn't see. Seth was also there, and Mr. Hayes, who sat near the back his missing limb heavily bandaged. He too, should not have back at work yet, but orders needed to be filled. Jake came to Ruby and reached for her, he visibly winced as he pulled her too him. She didn't resist his embrace even though she was angry with him. She lifted her face so she could receive his kiss. Being angry didn't mean she didn't love him.

"I've got to get this order out, Ruby,"

"Jake, you aren't well enough to be doing this," he released her.

"I've got to; besides I'm feeling much better."

"You're feeling better because you've been resting, if you don't continue to do so you'll make it worse. The doctor said the bones were beginning to mend but they'd still be fragile for some time."

"I know how you feel, but I have to." He gently brushed her cheek with his thumb and looked deep into her flashing eyes, he loved how expressive they got at times, they sparked with fire today. He could tell a lot about how she was feeling from her eyes. "It's for our promising future remember, I'm already somewhat delayed by the accident."

Ruby turned away from him to regain her composure. She was glad Mr. Hayes and Seth had left the room so they could talk. She sighed and turned to Jake; her eyes were rimmed with tears.

"Jake, there is no promising future without you," she said. He reached for her again. The broken ribs complained but he didn't care, holding her was worth every moment of the pain.

He kissed her just above her ear and said, "Ruby, I promise you I will be careful, I will not overdo it and I'll be okay, I have to get this order filled and then we have work on a house across town, but those hours can be flexible. The man just really wants to get the roof on, and the walls closed in before the weather closes in, and based on that wind, there isn't much time."

He released her from the embrace, and she smiled. "You'd better be careful, Jacob McAllister; I do not want you spending Thanksgiving and Christmas in bed. I have family arriving home I need to show you off too."

"Yes ma'am!" he teased her. "Now you'd best get to school and get the classroom warm before the children arrive, its cold out today."

"Yes!" she said, "I should have worn a heavier coat."

"Are you okay, would you like to borrow mine?"

"No," she said, "I'll be fine, the brisk walk will help, and I'll have a fire going in no time."

"If you are sure, I don't want to have to carry you to the clinic again, leastways not till these ribs heal," she blushed thinking about the first time they'd met. He continued. "Do you want me to come and light the fire for you?"

"No Jake, I can light the fire, thank you," she kissed him on the cheek and headed for the door. "Remember," she said sternly, "You promised."

He smiled, "I promise." He said and watched her leave.

Jake worked all day and his ribs ached, by the end of the day he and Seth had the table all ready for a final sand and varnish the next day. Then he'd officially not be an apprentice anymore. He couldn't wait. But for now, he had to get out to the house to work out the supplies he needed.

Twenty-Seven



Thankfulness

“What time is Jake coming for you, Ruby?”

“Eek, in ten minutes, Ma, I have to hurry. Lucy, can you take over here please,” she called to her sister. Lucy screwed up her face.

“Awwww, I hate baking,” but she slumped her way to the kitchen and finished Ruby’s work without further comment.

Ruby ran to her room and quickly slipped her apron off, pulled her school dress over her head and changed into a soft, pale green muslin dress with white daisies on it. She didn’t have time to do much with her hair, so she tied half of it back with a green ribbon and let the rest hang loose. Jake liked it like that. She applied a little perfume and examined herself in the mirror.

Just at that moment she heard a knock at the door followed by Lucy’s loud call, “Ruby, Jake’s here.”

“Lucy, no shouting in the house,” Abigail gently scolded her.

“Yes Ma,” Lucy said and went to wash her hands.

Jake grinned when he saw Ruby, his approval of her appearance clearly showing in his eyes. She still made his heart leap whenever he saw her and when she smiled at him and he saw the love in her eyes, there was just no describing that feeling.

“Hi Jake, I’m ready to go. Bye Ma,” she waved.

“Bye, darling, have a great time.”

“Have her home by ten PM, Jake,” Andrew looked up from his desk in the corner.

“I will Pastor Collins, you have my word.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” said Andrew but he had no doubt Jake would do exactly that.



Jake and Ruby were early to town as they had planned to be. They enjoyed strolling the streets, so they hitched the horse outside Jake’s home and went for a walk. Jake offered his arm, and she readily took it, she loved being on Jake’s arm, not as a trophy or possession but as his equal, his partner.

They looked in shop windows and chatted happily about their work, their dreams for the future and Thanksgiving plans.

They were very comfortable together, both in conversation and silence, and complimented each other beautifully. True soulmates it seemed. They soon reached the end of the boardwalk outside the post office and were just about to step off to continue up the side of the road towards the Simmons home when they heard a woman scream from within a house.

“What was that?” asked Ruby as the scream pierced her peaceful frame of mind.

“Sounded like a woman, someone maybe in trouble.”

Before they could even investigate where the scream had come from a woman came stumbling out of a nearby house, rough hands had pushed her out the door and she failed to get her footing and stumbled and fell in the dirt. A man’s somewhat slurred voice yelled, “And don’t come back unless you are ready to do as I say,” and the door slammed tightly shut. They could hear several locks being done up inside.

“Poor woman,” said Jake and he and Ruby ran to help her. She was trying to sit up, but she was disoriented and in a lot of pain. She had a nasty fresh gash on her cheek and a black eye that appeared to be several days old.

“Can you stand?”

She merely nodded and Jake helped her up and led her over to the seat outside the post office and helped her to sit down. Her

ribs were injured, and her swaggering steps suggested pain. Ruby followed them and sat beside the lady. Jake knelt in front of her.

“Catch your breath and we’ll get you to the doctor.”

She didn’t register at first and then she started to panic. “No please, not the doctor, I don’t want to go there. Isn’t there another place I can go?”

‘*Strange,*’ Ruby frowned, ‘*why wouldn’t you want to go to the doctor?*’

“We could take her to Aunt Jo?” Jake suggested, “It’s just right next door.”

“No please!” she shrieked. “He’ll find me there.”

Jake frowned, “Your place?” He asked Ruby. She merely nodded. “I’m afraid it will be a bit of a bumpy ride as it’s a half mile out of town but there are doctors up at the medical school clinic that can look after you.”

“That’s fine,” she said indifferently.

“What is your name?” asked Ruby kindly.

“I, I can’t tell you,”

“You must have a name we can call you?” Ruby repeated kindly.

“I suppose Rose would be okay,” Ruby smiled, she didn’t know if that was her name or not but at least they had something to call her.

“Hi Rose, I’m Ruby and this is Jake?”

“He your husband?” She said looking a little frightened.

“Not yet,” smiled Jake, “but someday soon,” he said winking at Ruby.

“Ruby, you stay here with Rose, I’ll go let Aunt Jo know the change of plans.

Jake was soon back, and they carefully helped Rose into the wagon and headed for the campus. Jake dropped Ruby off at the house, “Get your pa and meet us at the medical clinic.” Ruby ran up the stairs to do his bidding.

“She’s a good girl, ain’t she,” commented Rose. “Does as she’s told that one.”

“Yes, she’s a wonderful woman and I love her very much.” He said frowning at her comment.

“For now,” she said bitterly. Jake ignored her, she was traumatized and in dire need of medical attention.

Ruby and Andrew hurried over to the clinic, one of the young doctors was in charge that night and had already issued Jake and Rose inside. Jake was sitting in the foyer as the doctor examined Rose in the waiting room. Ruby sat by Jake, and Andrew stood and leaned against the wall.

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

“I really don’t know, we don’t know much about her, we just saw her stumble into the street from her house. She’s obviously been beaten and abused. I know where her husband lives.”

“We’ll talk to him later,” said Andrew darkly, he could not abide men who mistreated woman. “For now, she needs the doctor. Why didn’t you take her to the clinic in town?”

“We tried but she got very frightened, she seemed to not want to be in the town. I figured she worried her angry husband would come after her.”

“You did the right thing coming here, Jake, and for letting me know.”

“Thought she might feel comfortable with a good minister around,” Jake said.

“Well perhaps I’ll do instead,” Andrew chuckled in spite of the situation.

Ruby began to think about the poor woman. *‘What must it be like to be her? To be at the mercy of a vengeful abusive man, she doesn’t look to be much older than me.’* She looked at the two men she loved the most and a tear ran down her cheek.

“Hey, what is it my love?” asked Jake putting his arm around her.

Andrew sat down on the other side of her. “Ruby, what’s the matter?” he echoed Jake’s question.

“Nothing really, I’m just thinking about how thankful and blessed I am to have two such loving and gentle men in my life, neither of you would ever strike a woman or a child and I love you

both so much. I just feel so sad for that poor woman, what kind of a man would do that?"

Jake and Andrew both simultaneously clenched their teeth in anger and said, "A coward!" Ruby smiled, they were so alike, her Jake and her pa. Two great men, who valued and respected woman and encouraged them to speak up and be independent but at the same time nurtured, protected and honored them.

Jake squeezed Ruby and said in a quiet voice, as much for Andrew's benefit as hers, "You never need to worry, Ruby, I would never do that."

"I know, Jake," He put both arms around her then and pulled her close to him. "Your arms are the safest place I know." Andrew coughed. "And yours, Pa!" She smiled at him.

"If any man ever treated my daughters like that..." Andrew said, but didn't finish, his eyes flashed with fire, and he clenched his fist. Then he looked at Jake. "I know I don't have to worry about that though, Jake, I see your tender care of her." He placed his hand on Jake's shoulder. Jake smiled. Her father's vote of confidence in him was important.

"I'd never even think of it, never!" Jake said, and a look of utter disgust crossed his face at the mere thought of it. "The woman you love is meant to be treasured, guarded and protected, not to be treated like worthless trash."

Ruby smiled up at him with damp eyes so full of thankfulness and appreciation and Jake kissed her on the forehead. His words had been music to Andrew's ears, he felt the very same way.

A few moments later the door opened, and the young doctor came out into the waiting room. He sat in the seat opposite them and began to speak. "This woman has suffered abuse for some time, several months I'd say. She is very young but is battered and bruised from head to toe. She wouldn't tell me much, just that her name was Rose. I asked several questions, and she only answered a few. She's only just seventeen, and has been married for about four months, been abused that whole time, I'd guess.

“She’s only my age,” said Ruby, her eyes filling with tears, Jake squeezed her hand. He knew Ruby would feel this very deeply because of their similarities. A deep wave of thankfulness and love swept over her again.

“Will she be okay, Doctor?” Andrew asked.

“She will in time. She needs time to rest and recover from her injuries.”

“What can we do for her?” Ruby asked.

“Not let her back near that man for starters, that woman has been his punching bag.” Ruby cringed and closed her eyes. Jake held her close. “She’s got no less than thirty bruises on her body and several scars. I don’t think that’s her first black eye either. I wonder what she did to make him that angry?” said the Doctor.

“Nothing! Nothing is ever a valid reason to hit a woman, no matter how angry a man gets!” said Andrew, and Jake struggled with it too. He added to Andrew’s statement.

“It’s what HE has done to her that matters not what she did to him!” Jake stormed.

The doctor nodded, “Yes, you are right, of course. Take her somewhere safe,” said the doctor, “She has no major injuries, thank the Lord but she does need a safe place to stay to recover. Any ideas?”

“Absolutely, she can stay at my place,” said Andrew.

Ruby nodded in agreement. “She can have my room, Pa; I’ll share with Lucy!” Jake squeezed her hand, he loved how compassionate she was and how quick she was to jump to people’s aid.

They took Rose home and helped her into Ruby’s bed. Normally Lucy would protest the situation but here was a cause she could get right behind. She paced and fumed when she heard Rose’s story. “No man has the right to do that, no man! I have a good mind to go down there and do the same to him.”

“Lucy, violence does not justify more violence,” her father scolded.

“But you said it was good when Jake hit Leo, Pa?” questioned Sally.

“Defending someone you love is one thing, hitting someone who is defenseless is entirely another. I wasn’t proud of Jake for hitting a person, I was proud of Jake for sticking up for Ruby, you see the difference?”

“But I’d be sticking up for Rose!” said Lucy. A stern look from Andrew told her the discussion was over.



No one knew Rose was convalescing at the Collins house and they preferred to keep it that way. The next day school was out for Thanksgiving break. Ruby headed to town to see Jake. He was at the woodshop; his ribs were still a little sore, but he hardly mentioned it and they didn’t cause too much disruption to his work unless he stretched up very high.

She met Jake as he was just coming out of the woodshop. He grinned, “Good afternoon, beautiful,” he winked and reached out to embrace her. “Ready?”

“Yes,”

Jake took the picnic basket from her, and they headed arm in arm towards the town common, he laid the blanket on the grass, and they sat down on it for their picnic lunch, making the most of the fact the snow still hadn’t come. It was cold but not unpleasant.

“I can’t believe it’s Thanksgiving in two days,” Ruby commented as they ate their lunch. They chatted easily and when they finished eating, they packed the basket up and leaned against the trunk of the tree. Ruby shivered, “Oh, that’s a cold breeze, I wonder if it will be a snowy Thanksgiving,” she commented.

Jake stood up and lifted Ruby with him, took off his jacket and laid it down. “Sit there, my love, we’ll use the blanket for warmth.” She smiled and sat down, she loved how he cared about small things that mattered to a woman, like her dress staying clean. Jake took the seat next to her and placed the blanket around both of them and they leaned against the tree.

“My, my, isn’t this a cozy little picture,” said a male voice, they looked up to see a man strutting towards them.

“Victor?” Ruby’s mouth hung open and she and Jake shared surprised glances at each other, “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for my wife,”

“Your wife?” Ruby’s eyes were huge with surprise, “You’re married, congratulations.”

“Yeah,” he said without much feeling. “Wasn’t who I wanted to marry of course.”

“Victor don’t start that,” said Ruby.

“You made your choice obvious, you two married yet?”

“Nope not yet, gotta save some money first, do things right,” said Jake.

“You should have chosen me, Ruby. We’d have been married right away; I wouldn’t have made you wait.” Ruby turned her eyes to Jake, expressing with her eyes that she wasn’t sorry, not even for a moment.

“What brings you back to town Victor? I haven’t seen you since, well you know,” said Ruby hanging her head.

“Since you ripped my heart out and stamped on it, Ruby?” he sneered “Me and my wife are here for Thanksgiving”

“That’s enough Victor! If you can’t be civil than walk away.”

“It’s a free country and a public place, I can say what I like.”

“Then we will leave,” Jake stood up and pulled Ruby up with him and they made to leave.

“Good to see you got her trained to obey ya, Jake. Gotta make sure she obeys you now, from the beginning or she’ll never obey ya when she’s married to ya.” Jake cringed. He wasn’t even going to dignify that vile idea with a response.

He looked at Ruby, she was smiling at him with such love in her eyes he knew she was thinking she was thankful for a man who didn’t treat woman like that. Then something occurred to Jake.

“How long have you been married Victor?”

“Bout four months.”

Ruby gasped.

“Where are you staying while you are in town?”

“That old house next to the post office, no room for us at Ma’s anymore, ‘sides I need my privacy.”

Ruby's eyes were as big as saucers, and she fought back tears of horror and of gratefulness.

"You guys seen my wife around here? I'm looking for her. She left last night and hasn't come back."

"What does she look like and what is her name?"

"Name's Sylvia Rose, 'bout her size," he looked at Ruby's face which couldn't hide her surprise. "You seen her, ain't ya?"

Jake could see Ruby was about to cave and tell him. So, he spoke instead.

"We haven't seen her, Victor. I know where you live now so I'll tell you if I do."

"Okay, shoulda' tied her up so she can't run away again. Always running away, she is. Ya gotta discipline them from the start, Jake, mark my..."

"That's enough, Victor," said Ruby.

"You gonna let her speak for you like that, Jake, or ain't you a man?" Victor sneered. Before Jake could respond Ruby stepped forward and slapped him square in the face. She just couldn't stand to hear him anymore and her anger had bubbled over.

"I speak for myself," she said forcefully. "And Jake is more of a man than you'll ever be," Jake grinned, he loved her spunk.

"What'd you do that for?" he asked holding his jaw, she hadn't hit him very hard, but it had shocked him. "Jake control your woman."

"She isn't my woman, I don't own her Victor, she is her own person."

"That's your problem I guess, she's not gonna respect ya if ya don't control her. Don't say I didn't warn ya.' Ruby you are lucky I don't sue you for assault." He staggered off then and when he was finally out of sight, Ruby collapsed onto the ground and began to sob.

"It could have been me, Jake, it could've been me!"

He sat next to her and held her, "Shhh Ruby, you're safe, it's okay."

She shook as waves of deep thankfulness overwhelmed her, realizing she had certainly made the right choice putting her heart in Jake's care and not choosing Victor. "It could've been me!"



“Pa,” called Ruby, from across campus. She’d just arrived and saw him exiting his building headed for the cafeteria. He was planning to meet Matty there so they could pray and encourage each other over coffee. But his daughter needed him, so he stopped. She ran headlong towards him, clearly distressed.

“What’s happened, Ruby?” he asked as she threw herself into his arms.

“Pa, it could have been me!” she wept again; she had thought she had her feelings under control and Jake had gone back to work. He hated to leave her if she was upset but she had reassured him she would be just fine. But as she’d walked towards the campus it all came flooding back, how close she had come to being in Rose’s shoes, and she knew she needed to talk to her pa.

Some men don’t want to deal with a woman’s tears, but Andrew had no such qualms. He loved to be there to comfort his girls when they needed him. He knew well by now that he needed to let her cry, until all the emotion was spent and then she would speak.

He walked with her over to the cafeteria and Matty saw them and, with a nod to Andrew, he excused himself. Right now, Ruby needed Andrew more. He’d come back later. They sat down at one of the outside tables and Ruby dried her eyes. “Pa! It could have been me.”

“What could have been you, darling?”

“Rose.”

“Rose? What do you mean, has someone hurt you?” He couldn’t even bring himself to suggest it would be Jake, couldn’t fathom it and would never believe it if someone told him.

“No,” she replied. “I mean I could have been in the situation Rose was in, Pa. No one has hurt me and certainly not Jake.”

“I wasn’t suggesting Jake, you just caught me off guard. What are you talking about?”

“It was Victor.”

“What was Victor?” He was becoming exasperated, “Please explain Ruby, in full sentences!”

She smiled slightly, “Sorry Pa, I’ve been around Lucy too long.”

“I was just thinking that very same thing,” he smiled. “Now, just like I say to you sister, start from the beginning please.”

“You remember I was meeting Jake for lunch today and we were planning to have a picnic in the common?”

“Yes.”

“While we were there, Victor strolled over, he told us he’s back in town for Thanksgiving with his family and that he has a wife now. He started saying hideous things to Jake about controlling women and then it occurred to Jake to ask how long he’d been married, and he said four months.”

Andrews eyes blazed with fire, he worked out right away what she meant by ‘It could have been me.’

“Go on darling,” he said tersely, clenching his teeth.

“I had enough of him belittling woman and then he insulted Jake so..., well I...,” She looked very sheepish and stopped.

“You what Ruby?”

“I slapped him.”

“You have been around Lucy too long!” he grinned.

“Oh Pa, I remembered your words about not hitting people today but all I could think about was that poor woman in my bed who is battered and bruised and how horrid he’d been to her, and then I realized how close I had come to that being me and I just couldn’t bear it anymore and I slapped him clean across the cheek. I can’t hit very hard though, so I doubt he even really felt it.”

“Remind me later to warn Jake to never get on your bad side,” he said trying to use humor to lighten his mood.

“Pa that’s not funny, I’d never hit Jake.”

“I know darling, I was only joking.”

“To think how close I came to marrying him. I wonder what made him snap and change into a violent person, he was always so charming.”

“That’s often the way they are. I bet Rose would have the same story, that he was charming, escorted her to plays, showered her gifts at first. It’s just unfortunate for Rose she didn’t have a Jake there to save her from him.”

“I’m so thankful, Pa, oh to think how close...” she closed her eyes and shuddered.

“I’d never have let him hit you twice Ruby, mark my words.” Andrew said with gritted teeth.

“But Pa, he was going to marry me straight away and move away from here, you might never have known.”

Andrew closed his eyes, the thought of Ruby sitting in fear and danger in another city far away from his protection flashed before him. A wave of thankfulness and love for Jake washed over him. He reached for her and held her, “I’m so very thankful to God, Ruby, for protecting you from him, for giving you a caring man like Jake instead.”

Ruby nodded her agreement and embraced her Pa.

Twenty-Eight



Just Desserts

Jake was just locking up the shop for the night and planned to head out to their land to do some work on the house, when Victor forced his way in the door. “Where is she, Jake? I know you know where she is.”

“Who? Ruby?” asked Jake momentarily confused.

“No, not her,” he spat. “My wife, Sylvia Rose.”

“Oh, I told you this morning Victor, I don’t know.”

“I think you do. The look on your woman’s face said you do.”

“I told you, Ruby is not my possession.”

“Thought you’d only say that when she was around, she’s not here now, it’s just men, say what you really believe.”

“I always say what I really believe, whether Ruby is around or not.”

“Where’s my wife?”

“I don’t know,” which was true, Ruby told him they were hoping to take a walk today with Rose so they really could be anywhere. “Now if you don’t mind, I’ve got some place to be.”

“Off to see the little woman are you? Well at least one of us can. Dunno where mine is. You gotta keep tabs on ‘em Jake or they run away.”

“No, I’m not going to see Ruby tonight and I don’t keep tabs on her because I trust her.”

“Huh, that won’t last, wait till you get married.”

“I don’t expect much will change.”

“You get ‘em in your house, and they start wanting to run things, don’t wanna listen to ya, don’t wanna obey ya, it’s all fun and games while you’re courting but when you just want a housewife, they don’t wanna be one. Your woman, she’s working, you gotta watch that, she’ll get used to it and then she won’t wanna stay home.”

“Victor, I haven’t got time for this.”

“Fine go, tell that woman of yours if she comes near me again, I’ll sue her, hitting out like that, who does she think she is?”

“She doesn’t hit hard; it didn’t hurt you one bit. You ought to be lucky she did it before I did.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“Take it as you will,” said Jake and walked away to head to the new house.



Victor pounded on the door, “Rose, Rose, you’re in there, ain’t ya?”

Sally screamed, he sounded so venomous. “Shh Sally, it’s okay,” Abigail said, “you girls get in the bedroom and shut the door, Ruby, sneak out the back door and fetch your pa, I’ll make sure Rose is safe.”

“I’ll get the door, Ma,” Lucy offered

“No Lucy, wait for Pa.”

“Rose, Rose I know you’re in there,” Victor bellowed.

Soon Ruby was back with Andrew, they snuck into the house via the back door, Victor hadn’t seen either of them. Andrew opened the door to the angry and slightly intoxicated man.

“Victor, go away.” Andrew said strongly. “You aren’t welcome here.” He gritted his teeth and tried desperately not to let his anger overtake him.

“She’s in here, Ruby knows she’s here I could tell by her face she knows.”

He barged past Andrew. Ruby and Abigail stepped back, this man was clearly dangerous and angry, that was a bad combination.

He walked right past them and towards the bedrooms pounding on the doors and calling out for Rose. Fortunately Sally and Emily were locked in their room, but they screamed in fear. Abigail huddled with Ruby and Lucy, and Andrew came to stand with them. Just then Jake came running in. Ruby ran to him. "What are you doing here?" she asked, relieved to see him, he had this uncanny knack of always turning up right when Ruby needed him.

"He came around the shop all angry, I figured he might head this way."

"Thank God you are here," said Andrew, "This might take both of us. Ladies go in the kitchen and stay there; we'll make sure Rose is safe."

"Rose, Rose, where are you?" Victor continued. But wisely the woman did not speak or unlock her door.

"Victor, get out of my house, before I call the sheriff," Andrew demanded.

Victor spun around to look at him, "While you are there tell him about that daughter of yours, she assaulted me," he staggered back towards the lounge and pointed at Jake, "And he threatened me. I'm going to sue you, the both of you," he sneered, "if you don't give me back my wife."

"How can you be sure she wants to see you?" asked Jake.

"She's my wife."

"So," said Jake, "that doesn't mean she wants to see you."

"She's my property," he was getting closer and closer to Jake now, but Jake stood his ground. "Perhaps if you understood that, your brazen little woman wouldn't have assaulted me. But that's okay, I'll give her just desserts." His eyes flashed and so did Jake's. It looked like he was going to punch Victor clean in the nose, or Andrew would. But Lucy intervened, before either man could react, she tore from the kitchen and stood in front of Victor unafraid, eye ablaze, ready for battle.

"Get out of our house and leave our family alone," Lucy scowled at him with her hands on her hips. David challenged Goliath! Andrew was startled, watching the much smaller woman scold the

large angry man. "I mean it Victor, I warn you, I can hit twice as hard as my sister." She shook her fists at him.

For some reason Goliath turned on his heels and ran out the door, "You'll be sorry," he called as he ran away.

How Lucy pulled that off they would never know. "Aww I really wanted to slug him!" she exclaimed, breaking the tension and Ruby hugged Jake.

"I'm glad you didn't hit him, Jake, I know you wanted to."

"I was just worried I'd not be able to hit as hard as you," he grinned, and Ruby blushed.

Andrew stood gazing at Lucy, a strange grin on his face. He hugged her and laughed. "My Wild Horse!" he said lovingly, "My girl, you certainly have some gumption." He kissed her on the head, "I'm glad you didn't hit him, but you sure gave him something to think about."

"Why did he run, Pa, I'm a lot smaller than him?" she asked as Emily and Sally timidly crept into the room and ran to Andrew. He picked Sally up and hugged Emily close. "My darlings, are you okay?"

"Yes, just frightened." Emily replied. Sally lay her head on her father's shoulder and put her arms around his neck.

He turned to answer Lucy's question, "I believe he's afraid of strong woman, they intimidate him. Your sister first breaking up with him and then confronting him today, you challenging him, he can't abide it. I imagine he picked Rose because he thinks she's weak, he wanted someone he could order around. There are a lot of men like that, girls, be on your lookout for them."

"How do we spot them, Pa?" asked Sally.

"They are usually very charming, at least to begin with," said Rose entering the room quietly. "He treated me like a princess, at first. We had a whirlwind romance; it took my breath away. Plays, fancy restaurants, gifts, it was all so fast, and I was so in love when we got married, a month after we met." Ruby shivered; Rose had just described exactly what she had experienced. Jake put his arm around her supportively. "Then a few days after the honeymoon everything changed, any time I tried to have an opinion or disagree with him he'd hit me."

“Why do you stay?” asked Ruby.

“Got nowhere else to go, I’m an orphan, he met me when I was waiting tables. This way I get food and shelter, at least,” she shrugged resignedly.

Ruby shuddered again.

“Told me if I leave him, he’ll hunt me down and kill me,” Rose said matter-of-factly.

“What will you do now?” asked Lucy ready to jump into battle for her.

“Dunno, guess I’ll have to go back to him, don’t wanna go back to waiting tables and begging on the street, where would I live? I got no money.”

“We could find you somewhere to live and a job,” offered Lucy, “Couldn’t we, Pa?”

“We’ll certainly do whatever we can to help you if that’s what you want.”

“There’s no point, Victor says he’ll never sign divorce papers and since I belong to him, he’ll find me wherever I go,” she shrugged and sat down on the sofa. “I’m stuck.” There was no sadness in her voice just a resigned acceptance that this was her lot in life.



“Miss Ruby Collins?” asked the sheriff as he walked through the door less than an hour later.

“Yes, I’m she,” replied Ruby, standing up from the table where she’d been sitting drinking coffee with Jake, her parents and sisters.

The Sheriff raised his eyebrows and toyed with his hat in his hands, “I’m sorry to hafta say, you are under arrest, ma’am.” He swallowed twice and sighed.

Everyone gasped. Jake stepped in front of Ruby. “There must be some mistake, what is this all about?”

The sheriff pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, frowned and passed it to Jake to see. “Got it all right here, charged with assault and battery. It’s signed by a barrister Mr. Victor Hart.”

“But he’s not even qualified,” argued Jake. “Didn’t even sit the bar.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not my department, I just serve the warrants and I’m afraid I hafta take ya to the jailhouse, ma’am. You people can make all the inquiries you like but until I know differently I gotta take you in, it’s the law.” His contrite eyes said he really was sorry.

“No!” said Lucy. “It’s not fair, he’s a wife beater, Sir, he beat up his own wife, how is that not assault?”

“Doesn’t matter Miss, the warrant is for her, don’t say anything about him. Sides your wife belongs to ya in the eyes of the law, just like ya children do. Law can’t touch him, legally he ain’t done nothing wrong. Come on, ma’am, I gotta take ya in,” he said reaching for his handcuffs.

“Are they really necessary, sheriff?” asked Jake.

“Not if she don’t give me no trouble.”

“It’s okay, Jake, I’ll go with him,” Ruby said resolutely.

“I’m coming with you,” Jake said.

“Very well,” the sheriff nodded.

“Me too!” said Lucy.

“No, you’re not,” Andrew frowned at Lucy. He stepped forward to Ruby, “Don’t worry, my darling, this is just a misunderstanding, we’ll get you out,” he said embracing his oldest daughter and kissing her hair.

“I know Pa. I’ll be fine.”

“This is as far as you can go,” the sheriff raised his hand to stop Jake when they reached the cell. “You can wait out here.”

“I’ll sit right here until you are out,” he said taking a seat just next to the cell.

“No Jake, I’ll be fine, I’m not going anywhere. Go, Pa needs your help,”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes Jake, I’m quite sure.”

“I love you,” he held her hand that was on the vertical bar of the cell and kissed her through the bars.

“I love you, too.”

“We’ll get this sorted in no time, I promise,” Jake asserted, squeezed her arm and left.



Ruby was in the cell overnight. Jake and Andrew, with the help of Professor Abe Ferguson from the legal college consulted every law school in the east via telegram. It took time, but by noon the following day, the day before thanksgiving, they finally got the response they were after. Victor had never even attended Washington College, but had instead attended Spotswood College, a far less prestigious institution. It turns out he didn’t have half a legal degree; he didn’t even have quarter. He’d attended law school, for a year and a half but hadn’t passed even one subject. They sent the documentation through, and Jake dashed to town and showed the sheriff. He released Ruby immediately. “Really am sorry Miss, it’s the law you know,” he said as he fumbled for the right key.

Ruby smiled at the sheriff and reached out to put her hand on his arm reassuringly. “That’s quite okay, Sheriff, you were just doing your job. You’ve been most kind to me.”

At last, the door was open, and Jake reached for her and held her tightly. “My love. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” He kissed her firmly.

“I’m quite okay, Jake.” Ruby assured him, seemingly far less effected by the ordeal than Jake had been, holding her hand, he led her outside, into the warm sunshine.

Andrew tried to locate Doctor Hart, but he was nowhere to be found. His family had left town in the night, and no one knew where they were. Later they found out Victor had pulled these kinds of stunts before. They had left several towns because of him. In Olivers Grove the Hart’s had always laid low, made few friends and, apart from school, attended few functions. Dr Hart was nice enough but apart from the clinic he didn’t get involved in the town at all. Ruby hadn’t even stepped foot in their house or met anyone from the family other than Victor and Dr Hart in the few months they’d

known each other. It was likely the family was now gone for good. But Victor remained. As long as Rose was in town he'd remain, he finally found someone he could control, and he was reluctant to lose that power.



“What are we gonna do?” asked Lucy for the tenth time after she'd ascertained that Ruby was okay after having been a victim of the 'long arm of the law.' Ruby assured her she was fine, and the sheriff had treated her kindly despite being in lock up overnight. “Good!” Lucy fumed. “Now we gotta help Rose, how we gonna help her?”

“Got to and going to!” Ruby corrected.

Jake was still seething, he was sure he'd hit Victor, too, if he saw him again after what he put Ruby through. He stood by Ruby's side. “He used the law, why can't we? Can we have him charged for assault?”

“Have to have a pretty cunning lawyer. According to the law she's his property,” said Andrew, angrily. He disagreed with that law entirely. Too many good women's lives had been ruined by tyrannical men because of that law.

“What do you think, Rose?” Jake asked.

“If you are willing to help me, then I'll go along with it,” she shrugged.

“Yes!” said Lucy, punching the air like the case was already won. “Hey, Tommy's looking for a house girl,” she suddenly remembered.

“Yeah,” Abigail responded, “that's right, that would be a good job, greeting people, showing them to their rooms, cooking, cleaning, pays well and comes with a room and food, you'd be safe there.”

“Sure,” Rose shrugged indifferently again, and Lucy dashed out the door to wire Tommy to make sure the job was still available.

“Now to find a good lawyer who'll work for free,” Abigail commented.

“He'd better,” said Andrew, “I pay them to work for me.”



Professor Ferguson wired the circuit court judge and had a subpoena made up charging Victor with assault. “First things first,” he said, “That’ll get him a few nights in a cell, while we make our case, assault isn’t going to be easy to prove, what with a marriage license and all.” The man addressed Rose and the family, sitting around the table in the college meeting room.

“Marriage license?” asked Rose. “What marriage license?”

Ferguson’s rather bushy eyebrows shot up, “You didn’t sign a marriage license?”

Rose shrugged, “Didn’t know I needed to, we just got married at the courthouse.”

“You didn’t sign anything at all?”

“No,” Rose shook her head and leaned back in her seat.

Ferguson smiled. “This could be over before it starts, if she didn’t sign it, she’s not legally his wife. Then it’s a straight assault case and we can petition for life in prison.”

“Really?” asked Rose, a slight shine in her eyes, the first real sign of emotion they’d seen from her for a time. “He can really never hit me again?”

Professor Ferguson grinned, he reached across and squeezed Rose’s hand. “If there really isn’t a marriage license, ma’am, then there isn’t a judge in this nation that would acquit him,” he said confidently. “I need to know what city you got married in so I can check the records for a marriage license, if it isn’t there, it’s basically a done deal,” he smiled reassuringly.

Tears pooled in Rose’s eyes, but she wiped them away and squared her jaw again. “Spotswood,” she said resolutely.

“Very well. I’ll make some enquiries.”



“Barrister Ferguson, did you find a marriage license or not?” asked the circuit court judge.

“Yes Sir, I did.”

“Then they are legally married, and no law has been broken, why are you wasting the courts time with a domestic squabble?” Victor grinned in delight, leaning back on two legs on his chair triumphantly as though he’d just won. Murmurs and titters began to ripple through the crowd watching on.

“Silence in the court.” The judge pounded his gravel against the table he sat behind. “What say you, Barrister?”

Professor Ferguson lifted the piece of paper before him and held it up to the judge. “You can clearly see, your honor, this marriage license is a fraud, here we have the birth records for this woman, obtained from Spotswood Hospital where she was born, and you can see her name is spelled incorrectly on the marriage license and both signatures are clearly in the same hand,” Ferguson stated his case.

The judge nodded and stroked his long beard. He turned to Rose, seated on the other side of the Professor Ferguson. “Can you write, Mrs. Hart?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Sign your name five times please.” Professor Ferguson found a blank piece of paper from amongst his notes, he passed her the quill pen and there was silence in the crowd as they watched her dip the quill in the ink pot, write on the paper and repeat the process four more times. She returned the quill back to Professor Ferguson who then took the paper and passed it to the judge.

The judge took the paper, peered over his spectacles at it and placed it down. He stroked his long beard again and then addressed the court.

“No matter how many times a person signs their name they are always ever so slightly different, however they are consistently alike, and it is obvious they are from the same hand.” He lifted the paper with the signatures on it so the court could see. “Here you’ll see that all five Mrs. Hart has signed today are consistent with each other, each has small differences, length, height, spacing or different sizing in the letters, but they are consistent.” He reached for the marriage license and held it up so the two were side by side. “It is obvious that the name on the marriage license was not signed by the same hand, you can see it is not consistent with these five, the letters slope

differently and are formed differently, consistent with Mr. Hart's signature on the other side of the license." He pointed to it and paused for a moment. The judge put both pieces of paper down in front of him and glanced at them again. He then looked up and peered at Victor, and then at Rose.

"I thereby accept that the license is a fraud, and as a result the marriage is invalid. Miss Stone." He smiled at Rose and raised his eyebrows.

Victor pounded the table, "No, she's my wife, she can't do this to me!".

"Therefore," continued the judge ignoring Victor's outburst, "Miss Stone is not legally your wife Mr. Hart," he said with heavily furrowed brow, his stern eyes burrowing into Victor's brow. "I hereby charge you with assault in the first degree and sentence you to life in prison at the Springsdale Penitentiary beginning immediately. Case closed; court adjourned."

Victor pounded his fists and cried out angrily while the marshal stood, cuffed his hands behind his back and lead him from the courtroom.

"Yahoo," called Lucy as they turned to walk past the rows. "Now who's getting their just desserts Victor!" Andrew frowned at her but the flinch from Victor at Lucy's confrontation turned his frown into a wide grin instead.

"It's not very often I see such a straightforward case. I think it was a matter of a young man much to cocksure and certain of himself. He's the type of man who believes he has ultimate power, and nothing can ever hinder him," said the Judge to the crowd.

"Those are very dangerous men," added Professor Ferguson.

"Yes, I agree, councilor, that is why he needed to be put away. I believe all women are much safer when men like that are off the streets. I pity any other poor girl who might have been enticed by him."

Ruby closed her eyes and breathed a prayer of thankfulness. She squeezed Jake's hand tightly. "Thank you, Jake."

“What for?”

“For saving me from Victor!”

“I didn’t do anything, just sat back and watched like a dummy while he paraded you around.”

“Don’t you see, if I hadn’t had you there, waiting, watching and loving me, I wouldn’t have made the choice, I would have known no better and I would have married Victor.” She shuddered. “Thank you, Jake, I’m ever so grateful to you and I love you so very much. Thank you for making me feel so safe and loved,” she said again. He put his arm around her and leaned over and kissed her hair.

Rose was happily accepted by Tommy as his house girl. He met her at the train, and she moved into the convalescent home and right away fitted in well with the rest of the staff. She had time to heal and convalesce herself and found a home for herself there.



Through all the turmoil and strife, the Collins family had postponed their thanksgiving celebration so they would really have something to celebrate. Each family member took turns saying what we were thankful for. Ruby smiled as she shared, although her eyes were fill with unshed tears, she gratefully squeezed Jake’s hand. “I have so much to be thankful for today. I’m thankful for wonderful men in my life who I know would never hurt me or any other woman. Thankful that my younger sisters and I have been raised in a home where we are valued and honored and our opinion matters.”

“Yahoo,” said Lucy with feeling, this brought much laughter and then Ruby continued.

“And I am so thankful to my Lord for saving me from ending up in a horrible, violent marriage.”

“Amen,” said everyone around the table, and Andrew closed his eyes and sighed in overwhelming thankfulness.

“Thank you, my love,” Ruby said to Jake when she sat back down, and she kissed him gently.

She sincerely hoped she didn't have to wait too long to marry this wonderful man who loved her so tenderly and so purely.

Twenty-Nine



Secrets

Ruby sighed as she walked away from her practice for the school Christmas pageant. Jake had been working at the house out of town all day again. She appreciated his work ethic and knew Jake was trying to get the job done for the clients, but she missed him. She strolled through town just as the stores were closing and she was surprised to see Jake across the road coming out of the hardware store. Then the door opened, and Molly Brooks called to him. “Jake,” she said, “You forgot your nails,” strolled up to him and passed him the large box and he thanked her. “The rest will be delivered to you tomorrow.”

“Jake,” called Ruby and walked over to him. “What are you doing here?”

“Hi, my love,” he smiled a little sheepishly, reaching out his spare arm to embrace her. He looked at her and back at Molly and gulped. Molly blushed and headed quickly back inside the store.

“What are you doing here Jake? You told me you’d be home early for Aunt Jo’s birthday, I finished early so I was coming to surprise you.”

When he didn’t answer she tried again.

“Jake, why aren’t you home with Aunt Jo?”

“Um, I ah, had some last-minute work to do on the house outside of town,” it wasn’t really a lie, in fact he’d been working there all day and had just come back to order some more supplies.

“What about Aunt Jo?” asked Ruby.

“She’ll understand. She knew you weren’t going to be there anyway, so it was just going to be a quiet dinner.”

“Jake! You should be there, surely this house isn’t so important it can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“I guess you are right,” he said, he couldn’t now think of a viable reason why he’d be working on a client’s house in the evening instead of celebrating his aunt’s birthday. He gave Ruby his arm and lead her back to the Simmons house.



“What’s eating you tonight, Daughter?” Andrew asked. Lucy was up finishing her homework at the dining table and Ruby, Andrew and Abigail sat in the lounge room drinking coffee. The younger girls were asleep.

Ruby sighed. “I’m not sure, Pa, I’ve just got this nagging feeling that Jake is hiding something from me, but I can’t be sure.”

“What makes you say that darling?” he asked.

“He’s off working all the time on some house out of town, doing huge hours and when I ask him about it, I get vague responses, which is strange because he usually tells me all about his projects in great detail. He even takes me to see his work, but not this one. When I ask, he just says he’ll show me when it’s finished. I’ve seen him at the hardware store several times after hours when I’ve come home late from practices at school, and then when I asked him what he did that evening the next day, he tells me he turned in early.”

“Hmm,” Andrew frowned. “That is a little strange, I bet it’s nothing, Ruby, you are both working such long hours and you just miss each other. It’ll be Christmas soon and he’ll stop working and you’ll have plenty of time to spend together.” He sincerely hoped he was right, something strange was certainly going on but he knew Jake to be trustworthy and honest, he hoped it was just a misunderstanding.

Ruby nodded, “I guess you’re right Pa. I trust Jake, I should give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Yes darling.”

She dropped it then and took herself off to bed. But the uneasy feeling did not leave her. She couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with Molly. She worked at the hardware shop, Ruby knew that it was normal and reasonable that Jake would be talking to her, given that the store provided the workshop with most of its tools, hardware and lumber. She also knew, though, that Molly had eyes for Jake, she was a shameless flirt, and it didn't seem to matter that Jake was engaged to her, or at least would be when he got around to asking. *'You don't suppose she's the reason he hasn't asked?'* Her tired mind thought. *'Don't be silly, Jake loves you, you need to trust him'* she counteracted.

Several times that week Ruby was given reasons to doubt Jake. She didn't want to; she'd never ever had any reason before to not trust him. He was trustworthy, faithful and true. These were the things that she loved about him. He was always there for her and never faltered but now he seemed to be slipping away from her. She prayed and prayed that she was wrong, that it was not possible, not her Jake, it couldn't be. But still things just weren't adding up.

During the last week of school, she barely saw him at all. She'd stop by the store in the morning where Jake would be finishing up some small projects and she knew he'd be heading out to the house for the rest of the day, and she'd not see him in the evening because of her rehearsals. He promised her they'd have more time to spend together over Christmas, and he assured her, he would be at the pageant no matter what. He was so proud of her and wanted to see what she'd put so much time and effort into.

But when the Friday of the pageant arrived, he wasn't there. The show was set to begin promptly at 1pm. Jake had insisted he'd arrive early so he could get a good seat. She saved him one right in the front row next to her pa. Her whole family was there, and the Bourkes and her cousins. All her sisters were in the pageant, of course, and Sally had the lead role. But Jake wasn't there. Ruby, from her spot behind stage with the other teachers, looked out across the chapel hall

and Jake's seat was empty. She caught her pa's eye and he just shrugged and shook his head.

Ruby blinked back the threatening tears, forced her emotions deep down and continued with the pageant. She stayed afterwards for the refreshments and chatted to her students and their families and then when everyone had been dismissed for their Christmas break, she told her father she needed to tidy up. She'd walk home afterwards; it wasn't too cold. She ran to her classroom, slumped down at her desk, buried her head in her arms and cried.



Jake missing the pageant was the last straw for Andrew. He'd dried Ruby's tears more than once in the last few weeks. He'd been noticing a change in Jake's behavior too. He didn't have any reason to doubt Jake loved Ruby, none of that had changed, but it did seem some things weren't adding up. He was spending a ridiculous amount of time on this house and that wasn't like him. He'd never put a client before Ruby before. What was it about this house? And now he had missed the pageant that Ruby had worked so hard on. He knew she liked to fight her own battles, but he was going to find out what was happening once and for all.

Andrew dropped his family at home and headed for the woodshop and found Mr. Hayes. Although his arm was far from healed the craftsman had been able, with the help of morphine, to spend several hours a week in the store going over paperwork and invoices. "Pastor Collins, what brings you here on a chilly Friday afternoon?" asked the man.

"Hi Eli, not a social call I'm afraid. I'm looking for Jake, have you seen him?" Andrew asked tersely.

"He's working on the house, Pastor."

"Yes, I understand that, where exactly is this house, I need to speak with Jake, I'm afraid it's rather important."

"It's on the north side of the common, 'bout a mile past the Porter place, there are three big oaks out front, house with a gable roof, can't miss it."

“Thanks Eli.”

Andrew soon found the house. He dismounted from the wagon and looked around. It was a beautiful place, and a rather amazing house was taking shape. It looked to be complete, leastways on the outside. Some snow lay in patches on the ground, but he could see that this little piece of land was a beautiful, tranquil spot. Andrew couldn't help but admire the quality of the workmanship, but that wasn't the point and he meant to have a word with the young man.

“Jake!” Andrew called loudly, “Jake, are you here?”

Jake jerked his head up from the bedframe he was sanding. ‘*Pastor Collins*’ he thought ‘*what is he doing here?*’ Then something occurred to him, and he looked at the clock. Four PM. “Oh no!” he said aloud, he'd completely lost track of time. His heart sank, he'd let her down.

“Jake, where are you?”

Jake put down the sandpaper and leapt out of the room and towards the door. He opened it and told Andrew to come in out of the cold.

“This isn't a social call, Jake.”

“I know,” he said looking dejected.

“You missed the pageant.”

“I know,” Jake lowered his eyes and sighed deeply.

“My daughter is very upset.”

“Yes, she has every right to be,” his misty eyes and shaky voice spoke of his deep sadness at the hurt he had caused.

“Jake she's been upset for a while now. What is going on?”

“Upset about what?”

“She thinks you've been hiding something from her, that you've been spending more time at this house than her and sneaking around, and frankly we tend to agree with her.”

“I have nothing to hide, Pastor...” Jake began to say but Andrew continued.

“I can see the fine work you have put into this house Jake, and I admire your work ethic.”

“I do it all for her, Pastor, every bit of it is for her.”

“That’s all well and good Jake but it seems this house has become more important than her. It’s very beautiful but why is it so consuming to you? What is so special about this house that you would risk hurting her?”

Jake smiled then; he knew it was time to let Andrew know the truth.

“Truth is Pastor Collins, I meant what I said when I said every bit of it is for her, I’m building this house for her.” Seeing the confused look on Andrew’s face he continued, “Pastor, this is my land, leastways most of it is, I’m still paying it off, but I bought it for her, for us, for our future. I wanted it to be finished by Christmas to surprise her so I could...” he gulped nervously and grinned wryly “ask her to marry me. I was going to come and talk to you in the next few days. The accident put me back some, but you can see it’s almost done and I’m working on the furniture. I didn’t mean to be sneaky or secretive and it kills me that I missed the pageant and hurt her, but I’ve done every bit of this for Ruby.”

Andrew listened intently to his words and then reached for the young man to embrace him. When he released him, Jake could see tears in the pastor’s eyes.

“Jake,” he finally said. “I’m sorry, I misjudged you. I had no idea. This is really yours? How did you manage it?”

“Land belonged to Mr. Hayes, he sold it to me for a good price, I’m still paying it off in extra hours and the money I make from my carvings, I told you its why I’ve been working so hard.”

“Jake, I don’t know what to say. You are going to need to do some explaining to Ruby but lad, this will more than make up for it!” Andrew was truly impressed; this really was a remarkable young man. “May I see it?”

“Yes of course, but don’t breathe a word to Ruby.”

“I won’t.”

Jake proudly showed Andrew through each room. In some places it wasn’t yet fully finished but now that it was closed in, he’d be able to get to it when he could no matter what the weather.

When they arrived in what would be their bedroom, Jake showed him the large four poster bed he was working on, “And I’m

just working on the bed, it's the biggest piece of furniture and easier to construct inside the house, the rest is in the workshop ready to be varnished."

Andrew ran his hand down the smooth wood, there was an elaborate design carved into the headboard that was yet to be finished. "It's exquisite, you are very talented. I'm proud that you are building such a fine home for my daughter. I don't think that other chap could ever have offered her anything near this beautiful, let alone have crafted it with his own hands."

"She's worth every penny of it, I'm still only a young carpenter but I'm proud to say I did it mostly myself."

"Your age has nothing to do with it, your workmanship speaks for itself. And this land, you've done well here. My daughter will love it."

"Speaking of which. Might I have a word?"

Andrew grimaced, "Certainly Jake."

"Pastor Collins, I want to ask your permission to marry Ruby."

Andrew cleared his throat and with misty eyes he hugged the young man. "Of course, Jake, I'd be most proud to give you my daughter."

Jake grinned, "Thank you, you've just made me the happiest man on earth."

"Course you gotta ask her first, and I think you have some damage control to do. How long were you planning to keep this secret?"

"Was gonna ask her at Christmas, but I think I'll go to her now."

"I believe she's still at school, they were just having refreshments when I left, might try her classroom, she told me she was going to tidy up first and then come home."

"Thanks Pastor Collins, I'm sorry I kept secrets."

"Not at all Jake, this is one I understand completely. I came here to give you a piece of mind, but I find instead I've given you a piece of my heart, a precious piece. Love her Jake, honor her and protect her."

“I will! With the Lord’s help I will.”

“Good luck, come by the house tonight won’t you. I can only keep this to myself for so long.” He hugged Jake again, wiped a tear from his eye and left.

Andrew was passed on the road by a galloping horse and Jake waved to him. “Good luck,” he called again and laughed. Andrew shed a quiet tear; his beautiful daughter would soon be an engaged woman. He sighed, “And so it begins!”

Thirty



The Reveal

Ruby slumped down at her desk, “Why didn’t he come? Where is he? What is going on?” she asked herself. She put her head in her hands and cried. “Oh Jake,” she said out loud. “I feel like I’m losing you.” She didn’t hear the door open and Jake creep in. He didn’t have any flowers with him, it was the wrong time of year, but he had the ring safely in his pocket.

“I’m sorry, Ruby,” Jake said contritely.

“Jake, where were you?” she asked as he knelt beside her and took her in his arms. “You missed the pageant.”

“I know, Ruby and I’m sorry. I know I can’t make it up to you and I know you’ve been feeling like I’ve been keeping secrets. I’m sorry I’ve hurt you, that was never my intention.” He closed his eyes and hung his head, pain burning in his heart.

“How do you know?”

“Your pa came to see me,” He looked like a scolded child.

“Oh Pa, He knows I like to fight my own battles.”

“Actually, I’m glad he did.”

“Where were you, Jake?”

“Working on the house.”

“That was more important than my pageant?” The hurt in her eyes cut him to the core.

He reached for her again, holding her close to him. “No Ruby, it wasn’t, there are no excuses for missing your pageant or worrying

you by sneaking around. I'm sorry, I can't fix it, I know that, and I ask for your forgiveness."

"What is so special about this house anyway?"

"You should see it Ruby, it's spectacular. I'm doing it for our future remember?" His eyes lit up and she had to admire his passion for his work.

"I know but I still prefer to see you from time to time, you know."

"I know, I'm going to remedy that, do you want to see the house?"

"Oh yes Jake, you know I love to see your projects," She blew her nose and dried her eyes on his offered handkerchief. Jake waited patiently and then took her hand

"Come on then, I can't wait for you to see it."

They rode the two miles out of town and Jake helped Ruby down off the horse, hitched it to the rail and then took her hand to give her the customary guided tour. His palms began to sweat, and his heart raced as his nervousness tried to overwhelm him, Ruby's opinion of the house mattered very much.

"Jake!" she said, her eyes wide as saucers. "This is the most beautiful property I've ever seen.

His heart leapt in overwhelming relief at her reaction. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"Pretty? That's an understatement, it's... it's... it's," she searched for the word. "It's divine, absolutely divine. Look at those oak trees. I love oaks, and there's a little river. Oh, Jake I wish I could live in a place like this someday."

Jake's heart soared; he was thrilled that it pleased her. After all it would soon be all hers.

"This property is just over an acre and a half and it's so private and secure, wouldn't it make the best family home?"

"Oh yes," she said, her eyes shimmering. He often got excited like this at properties he'd shown her that he worked on, but none had been as beautiful as this little spot. "What heaven it would be to sit out on that little seat under the oak and read or knit or sew in the

summertime,” she said. Then Jake turned her attention to the house, at first glance she’d thought it beautiful but now she really paid attention to every detail. “Jake,” she said, her eyes wide, “this is the grandest house you’ve built yet, did you do it alone?”

“No, I’ve had some help, Seth has been a great help, he’s still learning but he’s handy.”

She loved the wrap around deck and plant boxes at the windows, she loved the high gabled roof and the small window that peeked out from it. The shingle roof, the wood paneling on the front. “Jake, it really is your best work, it quite takes my breath away.”

“I’m glad you like it, I did it all for us, my love,” she nodded still not even remotely aware of his meaning.

“Can we see inside?” She asked.

“Of course,” he grabbed her by the hand and led her up the few stairs to the door. “Are you ready?”

“Yes Jake,” and he swung open the door and led her inside.

Ruby looked around. She couldn’t find any words, it was beautiful. It had high ceilings with large timber crossbeams, the room was spacious and open.

“It isn’t finished yet, but this will be the lounge and dining and kitchen area. Then through here are four bedrooms and a bathroom, with indoor plumbing.”

He took her and showed her the three empty bedrooms that were not yet complete, then he showed her the bathroom with its clawfoot bathtub. She ran her hand down it and sighed, “Jake this is amazing, it all seems so expensive.”

“Not too bad, I’ve been able to make good deals and some products that weren’t able to be sold because of mild damage. This bathtub had a big chip out of it, near the feet on the far side but you’d never know once it was in place.”

She nodded. “What’s that other room like?”

He took her into what would be their bedroom, and she gushed over the second smaller stone fireplace and the beautiful bed he was making. “Jake” and she blushed while she said it. “I’d love to have beautiful furniture like this one day.” She ran her hand over the partially finished headboard.

“And one day you shall, my love.”

He led her back outside and over to sit under the oak tree so they could just look at it for a moment, it was chilly out but not unpleasant. Ruby sighed. “What is it, my love?” Jake asked.

“Nothing really, it’s all just so beautiful it makes my heart hurt a little. I can’t help thinking I wish it was all mine,” then seeing the look on his face she thought she’d hurt his feelings. “But Jake, I know we can’t afford it and I’ll be happy wherever we live, but someday, someday I’d love to live in a place just like this and raise a family with you.”

“How about exactly like this?” he asked her.

She frowned. “Don’t be silly, Jake, we couldn’t afford a place like this.”

“Yes, we can, my love, already did,” he smiled.

She looked at him puzzled, “What are you saying? You’ve brought a place?”

“I told you Ruby, I did all this for us, for our future and I meant it, this place, its ours, I’ve bought it. I built this house for you.”

“Jake are you serious?” Ruby’s eyes grew wide, and tears pooled in the corners of her eyes.

“Yes, my love, completely serious, all this is ours, for our promising future.”

“But how did you afford it?” She asked still not quite believing it to be true.

“All those extra hours I did was to purchase the land off Mr. Hayes. I haven’t quite finished paying it off yet, but your money is helping, and I’ve done deals and helped people for favors. I meant what I said, Ruby, every hour I’ve worked and had to spend away from you, it was for this, for us,” he said standing up and gesturing to the vista before him.

“Oh Jake!” was all she could manage. She stood up and embraced him, she released him and began looking around misty eyed as she imagined her future here.

Jake took his chance then, he knelt in front of her while she was still looking around and pulled the ring out of his pocket. “Ruby Collins,” he said with much emotion and love in his voice. She looked

at him and gasped. He took her hand and prepared to give his well-rehearsed speech, he'd proposed to his mirror at least thirty times he estimated, and he hadn't been refused yet. But this was the real thing and suddenly he became very nervous.

He swallowed and began again. Ruby's free hand flew to her mouth, and tears to her eyes. "Ruby Samantha Anna Young Collins, I have loved you from the first moment I saw you, you have my heart all twisted up in knots. You make me ache, you make me feel like I can fly, you are everything I need and so, so much more. I love you more than I can ever put into words and if you let me, I will spend every moment of every day for the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you make me." He stood up then, so he could look her in the eye. "Ruby, my heart's dearest love," he wiped away the lone tear that ran down her cheek and then said in a voice very heavy with emotion, "Would you do me the great honor of being my wife?" He looked deeply into her eyes and for just a moment she was lost for words. She never imagined she could feel this way. Her eyes welled up with tears and she nodded, biting her lip.

"Yes, oh Yes Jake of course!" She finally managed, throwing herself into his arms. She pulled back and let him slide the ring on her finger. "Jake," she said, "It's stunning."

"Not nearly as stunning as you, my love," he said and then he leaned into a gentle kiss. For that moment standing under their oak trees in front of their new house nothing else existed except them. At last, he lifted his head, "You have no idea how happy you have just made me, Ruby Collins."

"If it's nearly as happy as you've made me, I'll be amazed, Oh Jake, I can't wait to start my life here with you. I can't believe what you've been able to do."

"Your praise and your happiness made all the sacrifices worth it, Ruby. I've worked hard for this, and I promise I will continue to do so all my days to give you the home and the life you deserve," then he whispered in her ear, "And our family," and she blushed.

"Do you want to stay here for a while, Ruby, or go home to your pa?"

“Can we just savor this for a few moments longer, I want to drink it all in.”

“Sure,” he said. “Can I show you something you didn’t notice.”

“Okay,” she grinned and tipped her head to the side. He led her to the gate. There was a small sign saying “McAllister House,” and underneath “A promising future.”

“Oh, Jake, I love it.”

“You didn’t see it when you came in and neither did your pa!”

“Pa was here?”

“Yes, he came to tell me off for missing the pageant. He was wild when he entered, Ruby, told me how much you’d been hurting. I’m sorry I didn’t know, I should have been aware, I was just so fixated on doing this for you.”

“It’s okay, I understand. So, what did Pa think?”

“He cried almost as much as you did,” they both laughed. “I asked him for his permission to marry you and he gave his blessing wholeheartedly.”

“I knew he would,” she said. “Let’s go and see them now, Jake, oh, I’m so happy!”

“Your eyes give you away, darling,” he lifted the hand he was holding to his lips, the one that bore his ring. “Let’s go.”

Thirty-One



Decisions of the Heart

Andrew had been fidgety since he got home, he paced in front of the fireplace, regularly stopping to sigh wistfully, he'd walk over and look out the window for a minute and then begin his pacing again. "Did you see Jake?" Abigail asked him, unable to work out what was causing his strange mood.

"Yes." He stopped pacing and walked over to her.

"Did you confront him about all Ruby has been concerned about?"

"Yes."

"Well, what did he say?"

"I'll tell you in due course, Wife," he said.

"You are acting awful strange," she said. The girls were all preparing for supper and finishing up the last of their chores.

"I've got a lot on my mind is all, don't worry, Abby I'll be fine. Ruby and Jake will be fine. I told him to come for supper once he'd apologized to Ruby, if she accepts..." But he was interrupted by hoofbeats, and he gulped and said in a rather husky voice. "They're here." He stood motionless by the fireplace with a faraway look on his face while Abigail walked to the door to let them in.

Jake leapt of the horse and reached up for Ruby, she fell into his arms and for a moment they locked eyes and smiled. Abigail welcomed them in, both young people's eyes were shining, and their faces were glowing their love oozed out of their every pore.

Jake looked from Andrew to Abigail and then cleared his throat. "Pastor and Mrs. Collins. I asked your daughter to be my wife, and she has accepted."

"Mama we're engaged," Ruby gushed.

"Oh Ruby!" Her mother threw her arms around Ruby. "I'm so happy for you,"

Andrew stood transfixed in his spot and nodded quietly. A single tear ran down his cheek and then Abigail turned to hug Jake. "Welcome to the family, Son."

Ruby ran to her Pa and threw herself in his arms. "Oh Pa, I'm so happy."

Andrew clung to her tightly, he was openly weeping. "Oh, my baby, oh my darling, I'm so happy for you," he choked out.

Lucy entered the room, and said in the way that only Lucy could, "What's with all the hugging and crying?"

Andrew let go of Ruby, "Go and get your sisters, Ruby has something to tell you all."

Lucy gasped and a light gleamed in her eye, she grinned. "I'll get 'em."

She was soon back with Emily and Sally. Ruby and Jake were holding hands again and Jake cleared his throat, speaking for them again. "Girls, your sister has agreed to marry me!"

"About time you got around to asking, Jake!" said Lucy grinning in glee and running to hug Ruby. Then the usually jovial girl became serious and whispered in her sister's ear while she held her, "I'm so happy for you Ruby, you are so blessed, he's a good man!" Ruby was touched; Lucy so seldom gave such compliments.

At last Lucy released her and the old honest Lucy was back. "You look all shiny and glistening."

Ruby laughed. "Thanks, Lucy, I think."

"You are, Ruby, and you've never looked more beautiful," Her pa said to her again, giving her another embrace. "This is the toughest day of my life to date," he grimaced. "But I couldn't be more proud of you, Ruby, and you Jake. The house you have built for my daughter is beautiful and I know you've worked tirelessly to give her a future and

I love you for it. Just gonna take me some time to adjust to is all," he said as tears flowed down his cheeks.



Jake made it just in time to meet the train, he slipped in beside Ruby still smelling of sawdust and held her hand. "Sorry I didn't have time to change!" he said contritely.

She smiled and squeezed his hand, "You are perfect just the way you are," she said, and he let go of her hand and put his arm around her waist, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Tommy, Oh Tommy!" Abigail gushed when the young man finally stepped down off the train. He did the rounds giving everyone on the platform warm embraces. He stopped before Ruby and Jake "So this the Jake I've read so much about. I dunno Ruby, he doesn't seem all that 'dreamy' to me!" He grinned.

Ruby blushed and swatted at him, and Jake laughed, "I'm glad of that, Tommy, welcome home," he reached out to shake his hand. But Tommy reached to embrace him instead.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Jake, you make my sister very happy and for that I thank you."

Jake swallowed, "She makes me happy, too." They released each other.

Tommy hugged Ruby then. "Tommy we're engaged."

"Oh Ruby!" he said and hugged her again, "I'm so happy for you, big sister!" Then he looked back at Jake and affected a stern tone, "You and I will need to have a little chat later, it's my duty as the brother!" they both grinned and laughed.

They turned back to the train, all the other passengers had disembarked except Luke and Lydia, they were the last off. The family expected to see Lydia pushing a wheelchair, instead Luke walked out of that train on his own two feet. He needed a cane to steady himself and he was somewhat awkward, his face a little lopsided but he was

their Luke, and Abigail shrieked, so overwhelmed and delighted to see her brother again.

“Hello everyone,” he said with a slight slur, but it was him. Abigail didn’t care how he looked or sounded; he was home! She smiled and embraced him. “Oh, Luke it’s so good to see you.” He reached for his children then and his grandson.

“Oh Lydia,” Abigail gushed when she held her sister-in-law, “Luke is doing well.”

“Yes, and it’s so good to be home, I’ve missed you all very much. Especially my children,” she’d already hugged them all several times each.

“So much has happened since you’ve been gone, Lydia.”

“Yes, I know,” she beamed. “Ruby is engaged, how did that happen? She was still in college when I left.”

“I know, it’s been quite the whirlwind adventure. I will tell you all about over coffee.”

“I expect we’ll need a lot more than one.”



Two days before Christmas the family celebrated Ruby and Jake’s engagement. Ruby hung a large J & R from the archway outside McAllister house and they met everyone at the gate. Jake waited until all the family, Luke’s family and the Bourkes were assembled and then he raised his hand to silence the rabble.

“Hi everyone,” he could already see eyes traveling the property and hear many gasps as they saw the beautiful house. “My fiancée and I would like to welcome you to what will be our home.” At the word fiancée he flashed his smile at Ruby, and she beamed at him. Ruby spoke then.

“Jake built this home almost by himself and we are only months away from paying it off completely. He’s worked so hard to secure this future for us, and we want to show it off to you today. It isn’t finished, and I haven’t yet had time to hang curtains or add...”

She couldn’t think of the word, but Jake finished it for her. “Feminine charm,” he said, and they all smiled.

“Well, are you gonna let us in? I’m dying to see inside!” called out Lucy.

“Yes, of course,” said Ruby and the two stepped aside to let everyone in. There was some snow on the ground and the day was rather crisp but not unpleasant and no one seemed to mind a bit.

Abigail took her time and drank it all in, she and Andrew walked hand in hand following Ruby and Jake, they described their property and their plans with animated faces and excitement in their voices.

Leaving the men to their talk of gables and cladding, Ruby lead her mother from room to room and shyly showed her around what would be their bedroom. She blushed as she showed her mother the grand four poster bed that Jake had lovingly created.

“Oh Ruby, this is all so beautiful. This man truly has built you a lovely home. Your pa tried to describe it to me, but he couldn’t put this beauty into words.” The carving on the headboard was a large oak tree, its branches spreading wide and covered in leaves. Abigail ran her hand over the polished wood.



The celebration lasted until late in the night and Andrew finally finished off with a special word to his daughter. He gulped back his tears and cleared his throat. Inviting the two young people up to stand before their family and friends, he stood for a moment, tears threatening to overflow, and just gazed at his beautiful daughter. Andrew cleared his throat again.

“Ruby,” he started his voice thick with emotion. “My darling. I clearly remember the first time I held you in my arms. You were just a day old and had already faced more tragedy than most do in a lifetime. I sat in the chair and Martha put you in my arms. You opened your eyes wide and looked at me, deep into my soul, willing me to love you. At that moment, a huge wave of love swept over me, and you reached inside my heart and buried yourself there and never

left. You had me from that moment on, I'd have gladly given up my life for your happiness.

"I remember clearly the first time you called me Pa on the train to our honeymoon and I wept that day, too. I have wept many times for you and with you since then, including now," he said brushing away a tear that escaped down his cheek. "I've watched you grow from that little pixie faced girl who loved chickens, to a beautiful, strong and capable young woman. I have been so privileged and so honored all those years to have you love me and call me 'Pa,' to be the one you came to when you were sad, overjoyed or hurting. I know I could never replace Rueben, that man loved you with a fierce love long before you were even born, but I have tried my utmost in his absence to raise you and teach you the way you deserve to be loved, and even though I dreaded it actually happening, I hoped you'd find a man who was truly special, worthy of your heart and able to be your soulmate and your equal.

"I never truly believed anyone would ever meet that expectation, would ever be good enough for you, could love you the way I know you deserve, but Jake, you have proved me wrong time and time again. This house and this property are evidence of just what you are prepared to do for her. I have seen the love you had for my daughter since you first met her, you've been there for her and even sacrificially risked your life for her. You waited for her patiently without judgment when she was uncertain, and you are more than I could ever have hoped for my daughter. If I must give her up, I'm delighted it would be to you. I'm even willing to admit that it just might be possible that you love her even more than I do." Jake nodded and choked back the tears. "Ruby, your tender heart has had to make a lot of decisions over the years, some painful, some lessons to learn and some growing and nourishing you. Loving me was one I'll always be thankful for, but the best decision your heart ever made, apart from the one to accept Jesus as your savior, was to love this man here."

"Jake lead her, love her, cherish her and honor her, never see her as less than yourself, value what she brings to your home and to your life and never ever take for granted the exceptional blessing you've been given. Tell her everyday how you feel about her and pray

for her and with her daily and yours will be a truly happy and blessed home and family.

“Ruby, my darling girl, love him, respect him and honor him as the head of your home. Make such a home for him that he never wants to be anywhere else and longs to come home. But most of all, Daughter, pray for him daily for strength and courage, for you see God made woman to be our helpmeets and to give us the strength we lack on our own. It’s true, we are weak, and it is our wives who give us the courage to be the men we know we can be. Do this my daughter and you will make him a truly happy home.” He stopped then too overwhelmed to say more.

Ruby wept and she threw her arms around him and said, “Oh Pa!”

He held her close and kissed her. Then he turned to Jake and to lighten the mood he said, “She’s still mine for six more months, Jake!” they laughed.

“Pa, I’ll always be your daughter and I’ll always love you.”

“And I, you, Daughter, but you will no longer belong to me, you’ll belong to Jake, and he’ll belong to you. You’ve both made the best decision your hearts could ever make.”

About the Author



Jo Dawson grew up on a dairy farm in Wellsford, a small town in the North Island of New Zealand. She spent fifteen years as a teacher in New Zealand and abroad, before becoming a stay-at-home Mum and completing her graduate degree in theology.

She has lived in Australia and the USA for a time and these experiences have added to her love of people and history. Blessed with a vivid imagination and the love of classical literature and historical fiction, Jo virtually grew up bosom friends with Anne Shirley, romping with Jo March and her sisters, sailing a raft down the Mississippi with Huckleberry Finn or living in the 'little house' with Laura Ingalls.

Born and raised in a strong Christian family Jo's faith is at the center of who she is, with a lifetime of being involved in churches and Christian camps. These two loves, literature and the Lord have inevitably converged into writing compelling stories of strong Christian women, courageously facing the hardships of life on the frontier. It is her hope that women of all ages would find encouragement from her heroine's experiences, that while fiction, so often mirror even our modern lives.

Jo currently resides in the small North Island town of Waipu in New Zealand, where she lives with her Husband, son, father-in-law and two very lazy cats.

