

DAUGHTER OF THE BRIDE

a novel

by

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Chapter One

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She had always been a Daddy's girl, but now that he was gone what was she? Her sweet father's face floated through her memories, blocking out the scenery flashing past the window. A hint of a smile hid beneath his dark bushy mustache. With her palm on the cool glass, she bit her lip to keep from crying. The train's loud whistle blasted his ghostly image away, making Ellen jump in her seat. Her flailing elbow jabbed the cameo on top of her mother's chest.

"Oh my goodness, child!" Startled awake, Lenore gasped and winced as she clutched her breast. "What has gotten into you?"

"I'm sorry, Momma. I wasn't expecting the whistle. Does that mean we're there now?" Ellen had never been on a train, nor even close enough to hear its shrill horn.

Lenore took a deep breath, smoothed her white high-collared shirtwaist, straightened her brooch and relaxed her hands in her lap. "Not yet, honey. We still have a few more hours to go. Try to get some rest." Patting her upsweep hairdo, making sure everything was still in place, she leaned her head back on the gray velvet seat and closed her eyes.

Ellen glanced around at all the people in the passenger car. Her mother said they couldn't afford a parlor car and warned Ellen of the rough characters they might encounter on the train, seeing how she was only twelve, had lived a fairly sheltered life and was unaccustomed to such large and various groups of people. So far, she hadn't seen anyone as distasteful as her mother had hinted at and, though the nine hour train ride seemed to last forever, Ellen was too distraught to sleep and didn't understand how her mother could.

Particles of spring light sparkled through the train window and danced on her mother's smooth resting face. Frank Cook, Ellen's father, used to say Lenore was the prettiest woman in

Texas. He also used to say Ellen had Lenore's good looks: her mother's light brown eyes with long brown hair to match. She prayed her body wouldn't grow into her father's stocky build; she wanted heads to turn for her like they did for her mother. Lenore celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday two months ago and, for her age, she still had a slender, girlish figure.

Ellen's own body was being swallowed by a brand new white linen butcher dress. Did the ruffles parading across her shoulders and the V shaped waist make her look childish? Straightening her collar and smoothing the wrinkles from her dress, she ran her hand covertly down her newly-formed and tender breasts. Would they grow any bigger? When she became old enough to wear a corset, would she have an hourglass figure like her mother?

With a sigh, Ellen thought if only she was older, she could somehow stop the direction of their lives. She turned back to the window to watch the landscape rush past. The flat land's brown grass and mesquite bushes looked like it would roll on endlessly like a nightmare she couldn't awaken from until the train rattled across a bridge. It seemed to Ellen the dark, rolling river below marked the ending of her old life. She dreaded what awaited them—a new life with a stranger in a strange part of the country. If they hadn't had to leave behind her only friends, Ada and David, she would have felt safer. No one could save them if they needed saving.

Ellen missed the Polish housekeeper. Her full name was Adelaide Janowski; Ellen liked how the syllables rolled off her tongue. The housekeeper's combed up hair shone so pale, the color could have been blonde or gray, and her face was full, no wrinkles showed anywhere. Ellen could not guess the woman's age, and Ada wasn't about to tell. When Ellen did ask, Ada replied, "Now don't go asking a woman of her age. Tis not polite."

Ada's husband Ludwik had been dead for years. Her eldest son, Jarek, worked on a nearby ranch. Ellen played with Ada's youngest son Dawid, and called him by his English name

David because they both agreed it sounded better. Ellen smiled as she thought of the fun she and David always had. He often larked about at the children's table in the kitchen when Lenore was hosting dinner parties. Once he stuck noodles up his nose and blew them out while Ada was serving the guest in the dining room. Then there was the time he showed Ellen how to shoot cicadas with his slingshot and she accidentally shot out the kitchen window. David took the blame, and Ada took the slingshot away, but not before swatting his behind with it. Daddy wouldn't accept the money Ada offered to replace the glass.

Ellen often wished she was David's sister and Ada was her mother. Ada always took care of Ellen, whether it was making her chicken soup when she had a cold or a poultice when she scraped a knee. Many of Ellen's childhood memories of Lenore were hazy and vague. It seemed her mother was always attending to more pressing issues, engagements or illnesses, Ellen was never sure. If Ellen were with her friends now she wouldn't feel so alone. She could take comfort in Ada's loving embrace and David's his silly antics. Only the strangers on the train kept Ellen from crying.

Outside, the mesquite bushes bloomed into trees and brown earth grew into a green carpet scattered with a few patches of yellow wild flowers. With a few blinks of her eyes, Ellen watched rugged hills emerge, green hills covered with red, purple and blue flowers, some she knew to be Indian paintbrushes and bluebonnets, mixed in with a few of the yellow ones she saw earlier. Her mother said this was called the Hill Country and now she could see why. At least she knew one thing for certain; the countryside looked much prettier than her old town of Salt Flat.

The train whistle blew again and the conductor called out, "Next stop, Brady!"

Her mother stirred, stretched her arms, covered her mouth and yawned. Ellen nudged her arm. "Are we there?"

The woman laughed. "Not yet. It'll be a while."

"Oh well, not that I'm in a hurry," Ellen said with a sigh and sank back into her seat.

Lenore patted Ellen's shoulder. "Why don't you get some sleep? You don't want to be exhausted when we get there."

"I don't see why it matters. I'm not the one who's getting married."

"You'd think you were by the way you keep fidgeting. I'm the one who should be nervous."

"So why aren't you?" Ellen said.

"Oh, I am, believe me, I am. But I want to look my best and rest is the finest beauty formula around. So I take deep breaths, release them slowly, close my eyes, and think pretty thoughts, like buying new dresses and dancing like the queen of the ball."

Normally, Ellen would have laughed at her mother's dreamy nonsense, because the woman always acted like she lived in a fairy tale, but now with the uncertainties in her life Ellen wasn't sure if she could ever laugh again. "Tell me about this Mr. Turner."

Lenore giggled like a girl. "His first name is Calvin, but you're going to have to learn to call him Daddy."

Ellen's face flushed with anger. "I don't think I can." She only had one Daddy and he was dead. No stranger could take his place. She couldn't believe her mother could replace him so easily. He had treated both of them as if they were royalty; there was nothing he wouldn't do to make them happy. Everything her mother ever wanted he had given her; it was no wonder she had been delirious with happiness. The most extravagant gift he gave Ellen was a beautiful white pony for her eighth birthday. Ellen named the pony Ivory and rode her almost every day until some man came and took her away. Momma said Daddy owed the man money.

“Oh Honey.” Her mother reached around Ellen’s shoulder as if to hug her, but retracted her arm and took her hand instead. Ellen couldn’t remember the last time she held her mother’s hand; it was soft unlike Ada’s or her father’s. “Well, let’s see what another day brings, shall we? Just give it some time, that’s all I ask. Now, do you want to know what he looks like or are you going to sit there and pout?” Lenore didn’t wait for an answer. “Granted, I only met him that one time during our arranged meeting in Brady, but my memory serves me well. He’s tall, a little too skinny, but I’ll fix that.”

“With *your* cooking?” Ellen interrupted. Her mother might be a charmer but she sure wasn’t a cook. Ada prepared all their meals until a month after Daddy died when her mother could no longer afford to pay her; that had been four months ago.

Lenore ignored Ellen’s comment about her cooking and continued talking about Mr. Turner. “He’s got hair as light as hay and his eyes are sky blue. I think he’s handsome. I bet you will, too. Besides, he seems nice, a bit shy maybe. He makes a good living off his farm selling eggs, apples, peaches, and corn. He’s going to take good care of us.”

“I thought he wanted you to take care of him. That’s what the advertisement said.”

“We’ll take care of each other. He’ll provide a roof over our heads, food in our bellies, and clothes on our bodies. We can’t ask for more than that.” With nothing left to say, Lenore went back to sleep.

Ellen wanted to ask, “Why not?” She shook her head, astonished her mother was going through with this nonsense. Momma said there wasn’t anybody in Salt Flat worth marrying, though she hadn’t stayed long enough to receive any offers after Daddy died.

“Why do you even have to get married?” she asked her mother a few days ago as they packed a few of their belongings. Everything else was being sold or put up for auction to pay off

her father's debt. Ellen was allowed to pack half her wardrobe and a few of her treasured books such as her beloved *Jane Eyre* and a book she hadn't had a chance to read yet, something her father bought her before he died, and a Bible Ada gave her.

Lenore explained in her offhanded way. "We'd starve to death. I mean, what could I possibly do? I couldn't take in enough laundry and ironing to feed two people. With my parents long dead and your Daddy's people, well, we won't talk about them. We don't have anybody to rely on."

All Ellen knew of her mother's family was their last name, Higgins, and they died from some illness, one after the other. She tried to get her mother to explain why they never saw the Cooks, but the subject was closed with a snap of a lock on the suitcase. "I'm tired," her mother said. "Someday, I'll tell you all about them. Now go to bed and stop pestering me with all your questions. Just trust me, for goodness sake."

Ellen had always trusted her father to take care of everything. Whenever her tutor, Miss Helena, couldn't bring her books, he did. Since the small town library's selections were limited, he ordered Ellen books for her birthday and Christmas. They read together often. He helped her with the difficult vocabulary and they discussed the stories when they finished. He was the one who had taught her how to read. Without him she wasn't sure what to do.

When the train pulled into the Hartridge station, Ellen looked out the window one last time and saw fireflies glowing and flitting about in the growing darkness. She and her mother were the only people getting off the train. As they shuffled down the aisle, she heard snoring and saw many passengers sleeping. It didn't take but a second to find the person snoring, an old man, his brown waistcoat unbuttoned and his plump hands resting on a huge ball of a belly and his

head flung back. If only she had something to drop in his wide open pit of a mouth. It's something David would have done. The thought made her want to grin, but she didn't.

Once on the wooden platform, she saw him. He stood tall, thin, and scraggly like a scarecrow, wearing denim working pants held up by red suspenders. She couldn't see his face at first, hidden by the shadow of his straw hat. He helped the porter with the few bags and trunks they owned, loaded them on a cart, and approached them. Lenore held out her hand and he shook it. Taking off his hat and smoothing back his hair with long fingers, he bowed his head and said, "Hello, you must be Ellen. Why, you two could pass for sisters."

Ellen saw her mother smile, but said nothing.

Lenore turned to her and scolded, "Where are your manners?" She turned back to him and said, "I have taught her better."

"No matter." He shrugged. "The wagon's over this way."

Ellen wasn't sure what to say to the man. Could she ask him how old he was? He looked younger than her mother. Was he ill? He had dark circles under his eyes. She wondered what he would say if she asked why he wanted to marry her mother.

They each grabbed a bag and followed him as he pulled the cart along the dimly lit walkway. Their footsteps clicking on the wood, followed by squeaky wheels and crickets chirping, vibrated through the cool night air. The moment reminded her of her father's funeral and the long walk to his grave. During the wake her mother wouldn't let Ellen open his casket to say one last goodbye. It was the worst day of her life.

Not many people had showed for the funeral, only Ada and her two boys, her mother's friend Mary, and a couple from her father's bank. Ellen thought for sure her father's family would have, and then she could finally meet them, but they didn't. Ellen knew nothing about her

grandparents, the Cooks. Neither her mother nor her father would ever tell her why the Cooks never contacted them. “They wanted me to marry someone else,” her father told her once. Her parents didn’t seem too concerned about it, so Ellen let it be.

Silence followed Ellen, Lenore, and Mr. Turner until they reached two horses harnessed to a coverless wagon with a long green wooden bed, yellow side-boards and high, narrow-tired wheels. Ellen threw her bag in the wagon box and went back to the horses. They snorted as she petted them. “What are their names?”

Mr. Turner walked up beside her and stroked one of the horse’s chestnut manes. “This one is Lily and this one is Pumpkin.”

“Why’d you name them that?”

“Lily was my mother’s name and Pumpkin likes to eat pumpkins.”

“Oh. I had a pony named Ivory.”

“Come on honey, hop on up. I’m sure Mr. Turner is tired and would like to hurry home,” Lenore called from her seat on the wagon.

“Are you going to call him Mr. Turner after you two are married?” Ellen asked.

Lenore frowned. Mr. Turner laughed.

“Come on, Ellen. I’ll help you.” Mr. Turner held his hand out to her. Though he looked skinny, she could tell he was strong by how easily he lifted her into the wagon.

Once Ellen was settled in the back with all the baggage, Mr. Turner sat next to Lenore and grabbed the reins. He turned back and smiled at Ellen. “You can call me Cal.”

* * * * *

Ellen couldn’t tell what the outside of his house looked like; the moonless night had blacked it out. He unhooked the lantern from the wagon, led them through the dark, and held the

front door open for them. Inside the house, after Cal lit another lantern, she saw a cramped sitting room with a sooty fireplace, a davenport sofa covered in green velvet, two high back rocking chairs, a rosy braided rug, a short round table, and a hutch. The kitchen, small compared to the one back home, needed a good cleaning; it looked and smelled of old grease, soot, and dirt.

Lenore must have thought the same thing because she ran her fingers across the dusty dinner table with its splotchy oil cloth, then rubbed them on the side of her dress. She gasped when she ran into a spider web as she poked her head into the small pantry, but quickly regained her composure and brushed the sticky strings away from her face. Ellen peeked in after her, seeing only a basket of potatoes and a braided rope of onions and a wreath of red peppers hanging on the wall, before her mother pulled her by the arm. Two doors stood off the kitchen, one led outside and the other into a bedroom with a single wooden bed, night stand, dresser, and a small wardrobe. A few wooden pegs poked out of one wall and another had a window looking out into deep blackness. “The pastures are out that way. This’ll be your room, Ellen,” Cal said. “It used to be mine when I was a boy.”

Ellen poked her head further inside and glanced at the faded red and white quilt on the bed. It wasn’t pretty like her old bedroom with its pink hues and white lace. This room looked as if she could stand in the middle, stretch out her arms and touch both sides of the walls like an oversized coffin.

Then he led them upstairs. To the right of the landing was a closed door. “What’s in there?” she asked.

“Just a storage room,” Cal said.

“Can I see?”

“Ellen?” Lenore gasped.

“It’s okay,” Cal said and opened the door. Inside, the small room was stuffed with so many dusty things Ellen only had time to recognize some old trunks. It looked like the attic in their old house. She wrinkled her nose at the musty smell. To the left of the attic was Cal’s bedroom. It was as large as the kitchen, the pantry, and her room put together. An iron bed big enough for two sat in the middle of the room, with a good-sized wooden wardrobe to the right, and to the left, a dresser with a mirror reflecting Ellen’s pale, passive face.

“Lenore, you can stay here tonight and I’ll sleep on the sofa; it folds out into a bed.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” she replied. Ellen thought her mother looked somewhat relieved.

They walked back down the stairs with Ellen leading and Cal bringing up the rear. Ellen ran her hand along the banister and whispered, “Looks like everything needs a good cleaning.”

“Hush!” Lenore’s soft voice sounded threatening.

Cal chuckled. “The girl’s right about that. A man doesn’t have much time for cleaning with all the work to be done on a farm. You two can do whatever you like in fixing up this place. It could use a woman’s touch.”

Thinking out loud, Ellen murmured, “I’ll say.”

Her mother didn’t say anything this time; instead, she tugged Ellen’s braid hard enough to hurt.

Chapter Two

In the muted morning sunshine, with a breakfast of bland lumpy oatmeal sitting in her stomach like a rock, Ellen visited the outhouse before walking about surveying her new home. Not only did the inside of the house look a mess, but also the outside. The once white house peeled like a giant gray blister; rotting wood and shingles cried for attention. The barn looked its painful twin. Cal would have been better off ordering a house from Sears, Roebuck and Company and just clamping it together.

A wagon pathway circled the front of the house and disappeared into the woods. The grounds surrounding the house were worn to dirt by the chickens pecking every blade of grass to death. The coop, its door hanging by a hinge, stood near the barn not far from a windmill. Ellen had never seen so many chickens, in so many different colors: white, orange, and brown, mixed with reds and a glittering green. For such a large group, they made little noise until she walked among them. They scattered, wings flapping, rousing dust and feathers, clucking loud enough to disturb wild birds off in the fields.

Ellen sneezed, backed away from the birds, nearly tripping over her own black boots into a small garden declining in tall weeds. In one pasture out behind the barn a cluster of cows and a mean-looking bull grazed. The bull glanced in her direction, snorted, and continued grazing.

The neighboring countryside loomed lush and green with rolling hills and wooded areas. Dark trees encircled Mr. Turner's land like a fence. Beyond the clumps of trees, light green hills rose from behind as if sneaking a peek at the farm. It looked like what she had read about Ireland. She itched to explore. One thing she knew for sure: Hartridge was prettier than Salt Flat.

Salt Flat didn't have many trees, let alone woods. Their old house had stood on the outskirts—not too far into the country, but not smack dab in the small town. They'd had plenty

of land, but only an undersized brown pasture for Ellen to keep her pony and ride around in.

David would like it here. Every time she thought of him a hard knot formed in her stomach and knocked around her insides as if trying to break free. He was the brother she never had.

David once told Ellen his mother had had other children, all girls, but they died when they were babies. Ellen wanted to ask why, but knew that would be rude. She waited awhile before he volunteered the answers.

“Heavens,” Lenore told Ada the first time she missed work because David was ill. “Bring the boy. He can stay in the guest room. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” From there on out, Ada brought David over when he was too sick to go to school and during the summer break.

David was two years younger than Ellen and her only childhood friend. He had thin blonde hair, pale skin, and powdery blue eyes. He looked scrawny, but acted tough. The two played circus for hours on Ivory, and David could stand on the pony’s back, holding on with his bare feet as she pranced. Ellen tried once and flipped into the air like an acrobat when the pony came to a sudden stop; Ivory was known for being a bit stubborn at times. Ada ran out of the house into the back pasture. “What in heaven’s name were you two a thinking?” she shouted at them.

David helped Ellen stand. “She’s fine, mother.” He tried to brush the dust off her dress.

Ada grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. “No more turns in the air. Inside with you both.” She put David to work hauling ashes from the stove and sent Ellen to her room to read. “I fail to see the need in telling your mother or father about this.”

When they were allowed back outside and told not to stand on the pony, David mentioned his dead sisters again. “Mother worries I’m going to die or something. I’m not a weak baby like my sisters.”

“How *did* they die?” Ellen whispered.

David picked up a white, chalky rock and threw it across the yard. “I wasn’t even born then. Jarek said one was stillborn.” He wiped his hands on the seat of his pants.

“Stillborn? What does that mean?”

“Born still, I guess. You know, not moving.” He shrugged. “The other two got sick. Anyways, then I was born. And here I am!” He opened his arms wide and grinned. “I’ll race ya.” He took off running, with Ellen following right behind. They never spoke of the dead baby girls again.

As if she could still see David running away from her, Ellen stopped in the middle of Mr. Turner’s yard. The tamed part of the countryside, Mr. Turner’s corn fields, orchards and pastures, were groomed row by row, to form a dazzling pattern of gold and greenery, untangled by brambly vines and shrubs. “He must love his cash crops,” she mumbled. She learned about ‘cash crops’ from her daddy. Daddy’s bank loaned plenty of money to area farmers who hadn’t much luck with them. Ellen blamed the bank for having him work himself into a heart attack.

Ellen drew closer to the barn. On the way, she passed a cellar door latched shut. Though Ada never acted afraid, the thought of cellars made Ellen shiver. She always stood to the side of their old cellar whenever Ada had to go down there, worrying about the woman’s safety. Too many spiders hid in the clammy darkness of the moldy-smelling underground storage room.

When Ellen came closer to the barn, hay and manure overpowered her, but after she rubbed the itchiness from her nose, she grew accustomed to the smell and noticed the familiar odor of leather. In the barn, she saw several stalls to her right; Pumpkin and Lily occupied two. Sneering and snorting mules occupied two more. She craned her neck to see the rafters as a few feeble shreds of hay sprinkled down. To her left, one larger stall contained farming equipment.

As she kicked up dust, she watched the tiny specks drift through shafts of sunlight seeping through cracks in the siding. In the third stall, with its hind end sticking out toward her, stood a big black cow, busy chomping on hay while its calf lay sleeping nearby. In the stall next to it, Mr. Turner sat on a short wooden stool, squeezing milk from a cream-colored cow's teats into a large tin bucket.

The sound of the milk striking the edge of metal had a nice strong ring to it, a little more commanding than the lulling sound of rain on a tin roof. She stopped near the opening and watched the man at work. After several moments, he looked up and grinned.

"What? You never seen a cow milked before?"

"Not up close." She thought of adding, "*What business is it of yours?*" But not wanting to be rude, she rested her tongue.

"Don't be afraid. Come a little closer and I'll show you how to do it."

"I'm not afraid," she said and moved next to him. He didn't know a thing about her. Her daddy used to say, "Ellen, you're tougher than Momma's bacon and grits."

Mr. Turner's grin widened and he turned his head back to his business. "Just grab gently, squeeze, and pull. Grab, squeeze, and pull. It has a rhythm all its own." He stood and stretched. With a flourish of his long arms, he bowed and said, "It's all yours."

She sat on the stool, pushed her braid behind her shoulder, took a deep breath, and reached for the cow's teat. Once she had it in her hands, she grimaced. "Ugh! It feels strange!"

He chuckled as he stood behind her. "That's good. I think you've got it. I guess this could be your job from now on, if you'd like."

Ellen stood abruptly, knocking over the stool, and said, "My mother already has plans for me to help her clean *your* house."

The man shrugged. “Once that’s done, the daily upkeep won’t be so bad. How about you take over milking when everything settles down?”

“Eventually I’ll have to cook, too. Somebody’s going to have to or we’ll starve. Mr. Turner, before we came here, we had a housekeeper who did the cooking and the cleaning.” She turned away from him. She couldn’t let him see the anger rolling through her stomach and speeding to her head like a hot windy sand storm. She wanted to scream, “*You’re not my father. You can’t tell me what to do. You may have bought my mother, but you can’t buy me.*” She said nothing and started to leave.

“I’m sorry if I caused any offense.” He sounded hesitant. Ellen stopped and looked back at him. “I thought you looked interested in working with the animals, that’s all. You can do the milking, but only if you want. And call me Cal.”

Had her temper gotten the better of her? Mr. Turner . . . Cal . . . he seemed nice enough. Maybe she wasn’t being fair to him. In the filtered light the dark circles under his eyes had disappeared. His cheeks still looked a bit sunken only because he had high cheek bones, kind of like her.

“I’m sorry if I was being rude,” she managed to whisper before she bit her lower lip. “I guess I need time to get used to all this.”

He took a step back. “I understand.” With his hands by his side, he stood with his head bowed.

Hating the sudden silence, she said, “I guess it’s almost time to go.”

Cal lifted his head, looking surer now of what would happen next. “Yep, I guess it is.” He turned to grab the pail of milk. Ellen made her way out, strangely aware of his presence walking next to her.

He coughed and asked, "So, how old are you?"

"Twelve, soon to be thirteen."

"Thirteen, huh? That's a good age."

* * * * *

"Ellen, will you come here, please?" Lenore called from the room upstairs. Ellen took her time as she headed up. Her mother sat on the bed near the mirror; she wore a new pink flowered dress for the occasion, a mail-order dress for a mail-order bride. According to the catalog, the dress was one of those fancy uncorseted tea gowns so popular in Europe.

"I need you to help me with my hair." She gave Ellen a handful of hair pins and coiled a mass of brown hair. "My hands are so shaky; I've never felt this nervous before. I'm leaving part of my hair dangling to curl into little ringlets. So pin just around the bun."

Once her hair was in place Lenore handed Ellen a pearl necklace, the one Frank had given as a wedding gift. "Will you secure the clasp?" Ellen's hands felt numb as she placed it around her mother's slender neck. Her mother had always worn it for her father on their wedding anniversaries and other special occasions. It didn't seem right she wore it now. Ellen said nothing, trying not to look at it. Instead, she concentrated on her mother's face. Lenore looked flushed, yet fresh, with her sheer pink scarf flowing around her slim shoulders.

Ellen wore the white linen butcher dress she had on the day before. "There isn't enough money to buy two new dresses," her mother had said. At least Ellen's boots were newly polished, all black and shiny. She tried not to fidget while her mother weaved a white ribbon through her light brown braid. When they finished dressing, Ellen and her mother waited on the front porch while Cal went upstairs to change.

Minutes later, Cal walked out of the house in a starched brown suit, his blonde hair parted down the middle and combed back from his face. He looked like a gentleman.

Ellen felt gritty and covered in dust by the time the wagon clip-clopped down the main road of town. She glanced at the people strolling along the wooden walkways. The townspeople looked their way: the men examining her mother, and the women eyeing Cal. By the time they reached the court house Ellen realized why Cal had sent off for a bride; the women in Hartridge were just plain ugly.

The ceremony took only minutes as the County judge said his words while two witnesses, a clerk and his wife, looked on. No rings exchanged. No one said anything about kissing the bride. What a relief. It wasn't something Ellen wanted to see.

The newlyweds signed some papers and then Cal said, "Let's go shopping."

Lenore clapped her hands and smiled. "Oh, won't that be fun!"

Ellen wanted to tell her mother to act like a grown woman; she wasn't a queen or even a princess.

They went to the only general store in town, Horton and Sons. Cal introduced them to a man with a shiny bald head, Mr. Horton, the proprietor. "It's a pleasure to meet you two fine young ladies. Welcome to Hartridge." Mr. Horton winked at Cal. "Let me know if I can help you with anything."

Cal asked for flour, sugar, coffee beans, and salt. He turned to Lenore and said, "Pick out some fabric. I'm sure you and Ellen could use new dresses, and curtains and such would be nice, too."

Lenore didn't have to be told twice. She hurried to the other side of the store and started thumbing through bolts of fabric and bins of thread. Though there wasn't as much to choose

from as there would be from a catalog, she managed to pick the prettiest the store had. One dark blue bolt had sprigs of red flowers and green leaves; another was a wine-colored calico. She even picked some yellow and white gingham.

Ellen strolled around the store and stopped in front of the candy jars. All the sweets sparkled like jewels, some white as diamonds, others red as rubies. Her mouth started watering. She licked her lips, wishing she had her own money.

“You all done?” Cal asked her mother.

Lenore giggled. “I better be, before I put you in the poor house. I do hope I didn’t get carried away. If you want me to put some back . . . ?”

“Heavens, no. Here, let me help you carry it.” He took the cloth wrapped in brown paper and hauled it out.

Lenore followed with a lighter load. “Come on, Ellen. It’s time to go.”

Ellen glanced one more time at the candy before following. Cal took the load from Lenore and helped her on the wagon. When he finished he turned to Ellen.

She waved him away. “I can get up all by myself, thank you very much.”

He chuckled, reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. “Here, Ellen. You go back in there and get yourself something sweet.”

She pushed his hand away. “Oh no, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Really?”

He continued to smile. “Yes, really.”

“Thanks!”

She took the money and ran back to the store, nearly running into two women ahead of her. "Excuse me," she said, waiting for them to open the door and enter first.

They had the owner's full attention the moment they strutted in with their long skirts sweeping the floor behind them. Ellen figured the bald-headed man didn't see her, so she waited by the candy jars and deliberated on what she would buy. As she waited, she heard the women's voices lower.

The older gray-haired woman wearing spectacles muttered, "Pretty woman, yes she is, but I heard she's almost thirty!"

"Cal just turned twenty earlier this year," said the younger woman, whose plump pink lips took over her fat pastel face. "He could have found a bride closer to his own age here."

The man behind the counter laughed, tweaked his moustache with thin fingers, and added, "Perhaps, Mrs. Leah, he wanted a woman with a little more experience."

"Mr. Horton," the older woman gasped, her glasses sliding an inch down her nose. She pushed them back in place. "Whom do you think you are speaking to?"

Mr. Horton stopped laughing, blushed, and rested his hands on his bulging white apron. "I'm sorry, ladies. I don't know what got into me."

"The devil, I'd say."

"Yes ma'am. I'm sorry. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, this'll do. Put it on our bill, please." Like roosters, the women puffed their ruffled chests and strutted toward the door.

Then they noticed Ellen. The older woman stopped and looked down her long, pointy nose. "You must be new to town."

"Yes." Ellen wasn't about to offer any more information.

“Who are your parents?”

“My mother is Mr. Turner’s new wife. You know, you were just talking about her.”

“Oh,” the woman gasped and her face turned red. “What’s your name, child?”

“Ellen Cook.”

“Well, I am Mrs. Leah and this here is my daughter, Virginia. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Welcome to Hartridge.” She grabbed her daughter’s arm and they scurried away.

On the ride to the house, Ellen sucked on her lollipop and stared at Cal Turner’s back. She did her math in her head. If Cal was twenty, then he was a little more than seven years older than her and nine years younger than her mother. Why did mother have to marry such a young man? Ellen’s father was fifteen years older than her mother, but that was different. Husbands were supposed to be older.

Ellen finished her lollipop about a mile away from the house. Crouched on her knees, she pulled herself to where her head bounced between Cal and Lenore’s shoulders.

“I’ve been thinking.” They looked at her, but said nothing. “I should start looking for a husband in about two years.”

“What?” Lenore said.

Cal leaned back and laughed, shaking his head as he did so.

“What’s so funny?” She almost nudged him in the ribs with her elbow, but stopped herself in time.

“Honey, you don’t need to be thinking about such things yet.”

“But you got married to Daddy when you were fifteen!”

Lenore frowned. “I was a bit more mature than you. We can discuss this later.”

Ellen scowled at her.

“Don’t look at me like that, I don’t mean it in a bad way. Some people mature faster than others. You’re a late bloomer.”

Ellen sat and folded her arms across her chest. “I’m blooming.”

She didn’t realize she’d spoken out loud until Cal howled with laughter. She looked to see her mother turn pale as Cal shook his head with a grin on his face.

After Lenore cooked a dinner of leathery pork chops and soggy green beans, she made Ellen wash the dishes, wipe the kitchen table, and sweep and mop the kitchen floor. Ellen was thankful Cal scraped out all the ashes from the stove and didn’t make her do it. Even after she finished, Ellen knew the kitchen would need a more thorough scrubbing before the week was over.

Ada kept a spotless kitchen; sometimes Ellen would help her or read to her while she cooked. Ada especially enjoyed listening to her read *Jane Eyre*. “That’s just not right,” she said after hearing about Jane’s mistreatment by the cruel headmaster at Lowood School. She wondered what Ada would think about Ellen’s living conditions now. Ellen sighed and fought back her tears.

After Ellen dried the last dish and put it away, Lenore placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and spoke softly. “There are certain ways a girl should conduct herself. You know better than to talk back. And there are certainly subjects that should not be discussed in the presence of men. So behave yourself, for heaven’s sake. Now young lady, it’s time for you to go to bed.”

“I’m not sleepy yet,” Ellen said.

“Regardless, you will go to bed now.”

Cal walked into the kitchen, no longer smiling. She wondered why he was so solemn; he wasn't the one being treated like a small child.

Ellen stormed into her room and shut the door. As she undressed, she heard them whispering. She put her ear against the door and heard Cal say, "She has a lot of spunk."

Their footsteps echoed up the stairs. If only she had unpacked her books, she could at least read until she became sleepy. Ellen slipped into her night gown, blew out the bedside candle, and lay listening to the house settle and creak.

Sleep finally came, filled with dreams riding on a wagon. She was enjoying her new sense of freedom when the wagon began making a loud banging noise, as if it were about to fall apart. The noise jolted her out of her sleep.

She blinked in the darkness, trying to remember where she was. Then she heard the noise again. The sound came from above, like furniture scrapping across the floor. Straining her ears, she could hear other low murmuring sounds. It reminded her of the time when she was seven and walked in on her parents. She'd had a nightmare and wanted to crawl in bed with them. When she opened their bedroom door, her mother squealed. Though the room was dark, the moon's gray dim light shone through the window. Her father was on top of her mother, his white butt exposed to the air. Ellen slammed the door and ran back to her room, jumped in bed, and threw the covers over her head.

Her mother came to her room moments later, removed the cover from her head, and kissed her cheek. "What's the matter, baby?"

"I had a bad dream."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, it was just a dream."

"What were you and daddy doing?"

“It’s nothing to worry about. Go to sleep now and we’ll talk in the morning.”

The next day, after she asked her mother again, Lenore’s face grew pink as she explained, “It’s something mommies and daddies do.”

“But why wasn’t Daddy wearing any clothes?” Ellen couldn’t shake the vision of her father’s white butt and hairy legs.

“We were trying to make you a baby brother or sister.”

Ellen prodded her with more questions until her mother explained the birds and the bees. It took her two more years of questioning to get enough details to truly understand.

So, what she was hearing now, *this* was a honeymoon of sorts, not exactly as portrayed in the novels she read. Ellen punched a fist into her pillow a few times. She flipped onto her back and crushed the pillow on top of her head.

Chapter Three

April 1895

Ellen couldn't look at them the next morning. Images of her father's butt and animals mating kept flashing through her mind. She and David threw rocks at a couple of dogs once. It hadn't stopped them. David laughed. "Jarek said you can separate them with water. Too bad we don't have any handy."

Embarrassed by the dogs, Ellen tried to distract David by punching him in the arm. "You're so bad." Then she ran off laughing. She knew she shouldn't be watching animals in the act, but curiosity got the better of her.

She had seen a baby boy's penis before, too. Her mother's friend Mary let Ellen change her son's diaper once. The moment she peeled back the cloth he expelled an arc of urine. If she hadn't ducked it would have hit her smack dab in the face.

As these thoughts raced through her mind Ellen kept her face down throughout breakfast, only looking at her mother when Lenore announced in a singsong voice, "Time to start cleaning."

Lenore looked radiant, brown eyes sparkling, skin glowing pink and fresh, even her lips seemed redder and fuller. "Help me fill these buckets. We're going to need plenty of water to clean this place. And try not to spill any."

They lugged water back from the pump twice, carrying two buckets apiece. Lenore filled a large pot and placed it on the already hot stove. "Go make your bed while we wait for this to heat. I'll find some scrubbing brushes and rags."

While Ellen made her bed, folded her white gown and placed it under her pillow, she heard clanging upstairs. She walked back into the kitchen and asked, "What's going on?"

Lenore smiled. “Cal’s fixing the bed.” She tossed a rag to Ellen. “Here, help me pour some of this hot water into that bucket over there. We’re going to start at the top and work our way down.”

After they mixed in the soap Ellen kept an eye on her mother’s swaying gray skirt, angry with her for what she participated in. How could she be with another man so soon after Daddy died? Even though they were married, Cal was still a stranger. On their way up the stairs, they passed Cal with his hammer and screwdriver. “Here.” He stopped and took hold of Lenore’s bucket. “Let me get that for you.”

Ellen snorted.

Cal looked at her. “Here,” he continued and tried to hand her his tools. “I’ll get that for you, too.”

“I can carry it myself, thank you.” She thought of adding, *“I’m not a weakling or a princess.”*

He left Lenore’s bucket by the door and started back down the stairs. Lenore followed him. Ellen heard her say, “Nothing but a good thrashing won’t take care of.”

“No,” he replied. “That’s not a good idea. Give her some time. This is difficult for her.”

“Oh, you are too kind.” Her mother’s voice oozed charm and sweetness. It made Ellen cringe.

Neither mother nor daughter spoke as they went about their work, except when Lenore told Ellen what to do next. “Cal doesn’t want us worrying about the storage room, so we’ll start in here.” Lenore smiled, gazing at her new bedroom. They swept a broom across the ceiling, knocking down cobwebs before washing the walls and wiping off the furniture. Kneeling, they scrubbed the floor, working their way from the corners and backing out onto the stairs. Ellen

scoured the stair steps while Lenore polished the banister. By the time they reached the first floor, the water in their buckets was black.

They dumped the buckets out back and refilled with more warm sudsy water. Then they went to work on the parlor. Ellen tried to wash away the image of Cal kissing her mother. She caught her parents smooching many times. That hadn't bothered her, but this was different.

Halfway through scrubbing the parlor, Lenore stopped. "You finish in here while I make lunch."

Ellen stood and rubbed her aching knees. She tried to stop her spinning mind that would surely lead her to hell. If only she could prepare lunch rather than continue cleaning. Even though she had done little cooking, she knew she could do better than her mother. Daddy spoiled Momma when he'd hired Ada. Her mother never had to cook or do much housework. Momma probably believed she *was* a princess of some sorts or at least related to one. Poor Ada, she didn't have a husband to spoil her. How did the housekeeper manage to work and support her boys, but Lenore had to get married again?

When Cal came in from the fields for lunch they sat at the table in silence, though Lenore tried to make small talk. Ellen wanted to tell her to be quiet. After they ate, Lenore shooed him out with a wave of her hand. "Don't come back in until we're finished." She wanted to surprise him with a house that sparkled as much as she did.

"Go clean your room while I wash the dishes," Lenore ordered Ellen after Cal left.

When Ellen finished her room, she no longer thought about Cal and her mother mating like animals. All she could think about was how her back ached as much as her knees and fingers. She found Lenore sitting at the table, her hands turning black from polishing a pair of silver candlesticks. The smell of ammonia stung her eyes. Were those Momma's old

candlesticks? Hadn't everything valuable been auctioned off before they moved? She didn't bother asking, instead she groaned. "Can't we finish this tomorrow?"

"Nope, I want to surprise Cal. Besides, we're fast workers. All we have left is this kitchen. Then tomorrow we'll polish the furniture and floors, make them shine."

"Isn't scrubbing the dirt off enough?"

"Ellen honey, you know nothing about keeping a proper house."

"How do you know so much? Did Ada show you?"

Lenore's hand froze on the candlestick. She frowned and said, "You don't know everything about me." She looked down for a second as if lost in thought, then continued. "Once we're through with the inside, we'll help Cal paint the outside. It's going to be a beautiful home. I'm going to get some seeds and plant flowers everywhere."

Ellen perked up a bit. She liked being outdoors. "Why don't I do all the planting while you work inside?"

Lenore stopped polishing. "We'll see. But for now, I need your help with the inside of this place."

Ellen's shoulders sagged. Now, not only would she help her mother with household chores, but also end up doing all the gardening. It should have dawned on her she never saw her mother plant anything, let alone work out in the dirt. It was surprising her mother knew so much about cleaning.

"I'm going to check on Cal. You get started on the kitchen." Lenore put white candles in the silver candlesticks and placed them on the table. Wiping her hands on her apron, leaving smeared black handprints, she untied the apron, tossed it on the chair and walked outside. She

didn't return until later in the day when Ellen finished scrubbing the kitchen, including the soot-covered stove and the blackened wall behind it.

Lenore found Ellen on her bed asleep. "Wake up, honey. It's time to get dinner ready."

"I'm not hungry." Ellen moaned.

"I want you to help me. It's about time you learned how to cook. I should have had Ada teach you; she was a good cook. Oh, and by the way, you did a good job today."

Ellen, still groggy, knew she should say "Thank you" and feel pleased, but she didn't. She rolled out of bed and walked into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes, trying to get the sleep out. "What have you been doing all this time?" she said.

Lenore turned from the stove and smiled at Cal, who sat at the table, shelling peas. "Cal took me back into town to get some of that new wood oil I've heard so much about. It's supposed to make everything shine. Plus we bought some flower and vegetable seeds. Aren't you excited? You can start on the gardens as soon as we get the furniture and floors looking like new."

Cal glanced at Ellen and caught her eye. She looked away. "I'm overflowing with joy."

Lenore threw a hand towel on the table and sighed. "Young lady, the more disrespect you show, the more work you're going to do. So keep it up and see what chores we find for you. There's plenty, you can count on that."

Sadness swept through her so suddenly, Ellen ran out the back door. Her mother called to her, "Where are you going?" She couldn't stay in there; she didn't want them to see her cry.

Twilight set in and Ellen wandered about the barn, sobbing and kicking at the ground. Before it got too dark to see, she went to the horses' stall and laid her head against Pumpkin's

neck. He snorted, but didn't seem bothered by her crying. "I hate it here," she said. "Momma's become a witch. I miss Daddy. He wouldn't have treated me this way. I should've been a boy."

She stayed with the horses until her legs and back began aching from standing. The inside of the barn grew gloomy with shadows. With her hands outstretched, she felt along the stall until she moved safely away from any animals' hooves, and slid to the ground into a pile of hay.

She must have dozed off, because she didn't notice the light until it hung right above her. Sitting and blinking, she saw a tall silhouette stretched to the roof. It moved. She gasped. It sat next to her and became Cal. "Are you all right?"

"I guess so," she said. She didn't know what to say to him, so she stared at the ground.

"Your mother's worried about you."

"Let her worry."

He chuckled. "You sure are headstrong. Why do you have to make it so hard on yourself? Is it difficult to find something nice to say?"

Lifting her head, she stared at his face. "I say what's on my mind."

He pulled a piece of hay out of her hair. "You need to think a bit before you say it, that's all."

"Why are you being so nice?" she asked.

"I guess my parents raised me this way. You would have liked them. My mother, Lily—remember I named my horse after her—she was a kind and gentle spirit. She worked hard, lived a rough life, but that never changed her. My daddy, his name was Wade, was the same way. We had great times together. Then he died of heart troubles . . . "

"—like my daddy?" Ellen interrupted.

“Yeah, I guess so. Well, I took over the place then. When my momma died of pneumonia I stayed on, doing what I’ve always done.” He looked at the rafters as if he could see his parents. “I haven’t laughed in a long time, not until you came.” He patted her knee. “You remind me of my little sister, God rest her soul.”

“You had a sister?”

“Yep. Carrie Ann died of the fever when she was ten and I was close to your age.” He paused as if he was finished, but then continued. “After she passed on, I didn’t have anybody but my folks. We were close. Hope someday we all will be, too.” He started to stand. “Well, we better get back. It isn’t right to keep your mother waiting and worrying.” With one hand, he lifted her off the floor as if she weighed nothing.

They stood facing one another, Ellen’s head barely to his chest, followed by a moment of silence. “Was that storage room your sister’s bedroom?”

“Yep.” Cal cleared his throat and took a step back. “Let’s go in now.” He began to walk away.

She was curious about his sister, but knew better than to press him for more information. He obviously didn’t want to talk about her, but Ellen didn’t want to go back inside either, so she asked, “Why did you marry my mother, why not someone from Hartridge, someone your own age?”

He arched his eyebrows before he looked at the ground as if to keep her from seeing his thoughts. He cleared his throat again and glanced back at her. “I almost married a girl from around here, but she ran off with a fellow who came into town selling goods to Mr. Horton’s store. After she left, there wasn’t anyone else I was interested in.”

“She broke your heart?”

Cal smiled but no humor showed in his eyes. "I suppose she did." He lifted the lantern and headed toward the barn door.

Ellen grabbed his elbow. "Wait! You haven't finished answering my question. Why did you put an advertisement in the newspaper? Why marry my mother?"

He shrugged. "Well, I read about another fellow who did the same so I decided to give it a try. I needed someone to help me around the farm. And I guess I was a little lonely. People around here aren't always friendly. Anyway, I put in an advertisement, met a few ladies, but none were as pretty and nice as your mother."

"Oh!" What else could she say?

He smiled and said, "Come on. Let's go eat."

Lenore didn't speak to Ellen when she came in. After dinner, Ellen heard her mother and Cal whispering as they went upstairs. She went straight to her room and grabbed her stationery and pencil from beneath her bed. With angry strokes she wrote a scathing letter to David, telling him how horrible her mother was becoming. "At least your mother got paid for all the hard work she did around our house," she wrote. "I miss you both and wish you were here. Please write to me often so I don't die from sheer loneliness." She would have to ask Cal to mail her letter for her, but she didn't want to ask him for anything.

That night she heard more moaning, but no boards creaking this time. She covered her head with her pillow, thought of her father, of Ada and David, and cried herself to sleep.

The next day started out the same. After Ellen, eyes all swollen and red, washed and put away the breakfast dishes, Lenore handed her more rags and a bottle of yellow oil. "I'll oil my room, while you do yours. Then I'll do the parlor, while you do the kitchen."

Ellen's room didn't take long, seeing how there were only three small pieces of furniture to oil and not much floor space. She worked swiftly, trying to get done as soon as possible so she could explore outdoors. This time she wrapped some rags around her knees to give them some padding. The polish *did* work wonders. After she wiped the paneled walls they shone like new and smelled fresh and lemony. When she finished the dinner table, all she had left was the kitchen floor. She started in one corner and worked her way toward the back door for a quick getaway. The floor soaked up the oil without ever taking on a shine.

"Great," she muttered. Her mother would probably make her redo the whole room. Still, she kept working and pouring as much oil as she could without using it all in one spot. Halfway through, the back door opened, and she saw Cal's muddy boots. Without thinking, she yelled, "Don't come in here!"

Cal froze with one foot on the floor, looking too stunned to move. "Sorry, I didn't realize . . ." He removed his foot and with his bare hand swept away the small amount of dirt he had left behind. "There," he said and wiped his hands on his pants. He turned to leave, but hesitated and looked back at her. "You're doing a fine job, Ellen, a mighty fine job." He smiled and shut the door.

She sighed and went back to work.

Moments later, Lenore stormed into the kitchen, her skirt swishing loudly with her movements. She shook her finger at Ellen. "Do you want him to kick you out of this house? He could if he wanted. It is his house. Don't ever talk to him like that again."

"I didn't want him to dirty up the floor. I was still polishing it."

"It doesn't matter. There is no excuse for being disrespectful. You're just being lazy."

“Why are you being so mean?” Ellen screamed and broke into tears. “Ever since we got here, you’ve been picking on me.”

Lenore folded her arms across her chest and huffed. “That is not true. You’re the one who’s been hateful to me.”

Ellen tried to stop crying so she could prove her point. “You snap at everything I say. And now you’re treating me like a slave.”

Lenore looked like she might cry, too; instead, she brushed back a few stray strands of hair. “You’ve been insolent from the moment you met Cal. I’m so embarrassed. You’ve never acted like this before. I don’t want him to get a bad impression, like I’m a bad mother or something.”

“Oh goodness, Momma! All you worry about is what he thinks.”

“And why shouldn’t I? He’s my new husband. It’s important to start a marriage out right.”

“Why did you marry him? What about Daddy? What about me?” Ellen said through fresh tears.

Lenore held her hands in the air as if speaking to God. “I married him to support us. That doesn’t mean I don’t love your Daddy. But Daddy’s dead, honey, and life goes on. I did this for you, too. Don’t you see?”

Ellen did see, and she didn’t. Something happened when her father died, something that caused them to lose everything. Her mother couldn’t take care of herself, but why did she have to marry someone so young? She didn’t want him for a father. She wrote these feelings in her letter to David, but everything was too strange to explain to her mother, so she said nothing.

Lenore must have taken her silence for more insolence, because she said with a sigh, “I guess you don’t see or you don’t care. Go outside. Get started gardening. I’ll holler when it’s lunch time. Now get. I’ve got sewing to do.”

Ellen stormed out the back door without a word. She held her breath, lifted a hoe she found leaning against a shed alongside a shovel, and slammed it into the ground. It hardly made a dent. She dropped the hoe, grabbed the shovel and started digging holes all over the small plot. She jerked weeds out of the broken sod and threw them over the barbed wire fence, the entire time imagining pulling her mother’s hair out. Once the weeds were gone, she seized the hoe and tore into the ground, again and again, swinging the blade high over her shoulders, flinging dirt everywhere. Sweat dripped down her face. She stopped for a second and wiped her brow, pushing back sticky strands of hair fallen loose from her braid. Then she felt it. Someone was watching her.

She looked past the clothes’ lines and toward the pasture and there stood Cal, leaning against a fence post, scratching his head. She expected him to be laughing, but he wasn’t. When he realized he had been spotted, he raised his hand and waved. Ellen turned her back and slammed the hoe into the ground again.

She heard his boots crunching on the ground and saw his shadow approaching, but she didn’t look up.

“Why don’t you let me use my mules and plow in here? It sure would be easier.”

Without looking at him, she grunted and said, “Do whatever you like.” She threw the hoe on the ground and stomped away.

Chapter Four

April – August 1895

Cal rose before the rooster crowed. He always lit three lanterns before he shaved and rinsed himself from the porcelain water basin in the kitchen: a routine, Ellen noted after spying on him when she awoke to his rumblings, that became regular about two weeks after the arrival of his new bride. Did her mother say something about his hygiene? He did come in smelling like cow manure on occasion.

Having stoked the fire in the stove, Cal then woke Lenore and Ellen with a gentle call of, “Time to rise and shine.” He grabbed a lantern and went to the barn before they were fully conscious. Ellen slipped into her dress, apron and work boots, braided her sun-streaked hair, and sluggishly followed his footsteps out into the gray morning to milk the cow. The routine became so ingrained she could do it with her eyes closed. Once she finished milking, Cal would hand her a basket of eggs. When Ellen returned to the kitchen with the pail and basket, Lenore, with her hair tied back in her usual bun, would have either bacon or sausage frying, and a bowl of flour waiting for the eggs and milk. Ellen became skilled at making soft, flaky biscuits, unlike her mother’s biscuits. Even when doused in gravy they were only good for throwing to the pigs.

After breakfast Ellen went outside to work, watering plants with leftover dishwater and pulling weeds. The gardens were beginning to flourish. Flower beds bloomed in patches around the edges of the front and back porches, and green shoots of vegetables grew in the small fenced in plot. When matured, the garden would boast yellow and white daisies, purple four o’clocks, and orange marigolds. Tendrils of morning glories were beginning to creep up a trellis Cal made for Ellen. Other flowers grew, but Ellen didn’t know their names yet. Wild bluebonnets were sprouting everywhere, but would be gone by the time the other flowers blossomed.

“Why, I do believe you’ve planted a rainbow, Ellen,” Cal said one bright sunny morning. After his comment, Ellen looked at her gardening in a different way, imagining how it looked through someone else’s eyes. She was pleased with what her hard work produced and it took her mind off her troubles. The vegetables were in bud in the fenced garden displaying baby watermelon, yellow and green squash, green beans, black-eyed peas, tomatoes, green bell peppers, and okra. In the orchard, tiny paper-thin pink and white flowers were popping up all over the limbs of the peach, plum, and apple trees.

When Ellen finished her chores she had a little spare time to roam the countryside. “Just keep your eyes peeled for rattlesnakes and your ears open for wild hogs. You might want to carry a sturdy stick, just in case,” Cal warned. Ellen found a broken tree limb, still green and large enough to work as a cane. She smacked it against a tree trunk to test its strength. It sent a sharp pain, lightening quick, through her hand and up her arm. There wasn’t even a dent on the stick; it would do. With the stick as her staff, she used it to balance over large rocks and fallen trees, thrashing the high grass around her to pave way through the maze of tall, strong oak and cottonwood trees. Wild honeysuckle perfumed the air with its sweetness as birds chirped high among the trees. Sparrows, crows, and doves chased each other, while mockingbirds squawked at Ellen for trespassing near their nests. When she wasn’t climbing trees with low-lying limbs or picking flowers to make chains for necklaces and crowns, Ellen danced after orange and yellow butterflies, not really wanting to catch them, but just to watch their graceful fluttering and see the flowers they preferred.

At a clear creek where she could see the muddy bottom all scattered with white rocks, she skipped smooth stones across the surface, counting the times they bounced. As the days heated

up, she stripped to her petticoat and waded in the water, trying to catch minnows with her hands. When she got out, it took awhile to scrape the mud from between her toes.

One day, while waiting for her undergarments to dry, she discovered a trail woven through an awning of trees. She followed the trail, picking wildflowers as she went, and came upon an opening leading to a cliff. Looking over the edge, she caught her breath. Spread out before her, a wide green valley stretched forever surrounded by hills and low-lying clouds. She never realized how ugly her hometown was until she came here. This spot was a bit of heaven, a secret place she could go often to read and to dream. As she lay in the cool tall grass, she imagined a house on a hill overlooking the valley. That is where she wanted to live when she had a house of her own.

All this time, when she was on the farm, Cal wasn't as talkative as he had been earlier. She caught him watching her several times, but she could tell by his expression he had no idea how to be her friend, let alone her stepfather. Of course, she hadn't made it easy on him either.

One day, while milking one of the cows, she whispered, "I can't wait until I get married and move away." In her resentment about being her mother's servant, Ellen tugged harder than usual at the cow's teats. Mabel shuffled her hooves and let out a loud moo.

Ellen lightened her touch. "Sorry. I wouldn't want anybody pulling on me like that neither." She stopped ranting when she saw a dusty boot on the other side of Mabel's hoof. She looked up. There Cal stood, grinning like a fool.

"So, you and Mabel have become friends, I see?"

Ellen didn't know how long he'd been standing there. She kept milking the cow, trying hard to figure out what to say.

Cal slapped the cow's rump. "She's a good old girl, isn't she?"

Saying nothing, Ellen shrugged. She glanced up as he was walking away. He was no longer grinning.

One time, she tried to explain to the horses how she felt about him. “I don’t know what it is, but I can’t help but like him. I just wish Momma didn’t act so giddy over him. He tries hard, I can tell, but there is no way he can take my daddy’s place.”

Ellen turned to the other horse and brushed his mane, thinking of how she liked it when she made Cal laugh. “Oh Pumpkin, I don’t know what to think or feel anymore.” She continued talking to the horses as they munched on hay.

When she finished grooming Pumpkin, she went to put the brush away and nearly ran into Cal. “How long have you been standing there?” She clenched the brush tight in her hand, struggling to control her embarrassment.

Cal’s face turned red and he stuttered. “I . . . I just came in. I’m bringing in some more hay.”

“Oh.” She said, “Next time, make your presence better known so you don’t scare the wits out of me.” Why is it, every time she turned around, Cal was there? She wondered who felt more awkward, Cal or her?

As fast as she could, she ran out of the barn and spent the rest of the day running through the woods to her secret valley. She stayed there until the white clouds rolled into gray wispy swirls and floated away through the pink and orange sky, signaling the sun to set.

A week later, Cal showed Ellen out to the pig pen without telling her what to expect. “I’ve got a surprise,” is all he would say.

Inside the pen, nestled close to the sow on a bed of straw, were pink piglets, no bigger than newborn puppies. Ellen clapped her hands together, but not too loudly for she didn't want to disturb them as they suckled their mother. "Oh, they're so cute. Can I hold one?"

Cal chuckled. "Not yet, but pretty soon you can. I wouldn't try to get near them for a while. Porky may attack you if you do."

The day came when she got to hold the runt of the litter, a little female, whose siblings wouldn't let her nurse. The piglet glowed bright pink with fluffs of thin white fur all over her tiny body. Cal found a bottle with a rubber nipple and showed Ellen how to feed the piglet. He watched her as she cradled it in her arms. "You'll make a fine mother someday," he said.

"You think so?" She looked away from the piglet long enough to see the smile in Cal's eyes. Was he proud of her?

She spent less time overlooking the valley and more time overseeing the piglet. She gave it a name—Ruby. Ruby became her baby and followed her all over the farm. Lenore often shook her head and laughed at the sight. "That pig thinks you're her mother, Ellen. Why, she follows you around like a dog. Next thing you know, you'll want her to sleep with you."

Ellen got her hopes up. "Can she, Momma?"

Lenore laughed and waved her hand. "Heavens no, child. Pigs don't belong inside a house."

The rainy season flew by with the passing clouds and left in its wake a muddy countryside, all hot and humid. Cal sold all the piglets, all except Porky, a male and little Ruby. Ellen felt sad at seeing the others go. Why did everything have to be taken away? It didn't seem fair to divide a family.

* * * * *

Five months after they arrived in Hartridge, they finally had visitors. Ellen, busy rubbing one of Cal's shirts on a scrub board, recognized them the moment their buggy pulled into the yard. She dropped the shirt back into the sudsy water, wiped her hands on her apron, and ran into the house. "Momma," she yelled. "We have company."

Lenore pulled the iron from the steaming sheet and placed it back on the stove. She ran to the open window. "Oh my," she whispered. She yanked her apron off and used it to wipe sweat from her face. Running her hands across her hair, she asked Ellen, "How do I look?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "You look fine, Momma, just fine."

A knock sounded. Lenore took a deep breath, smoothed her skirt, and walked to the front door with her head held high. She had not met these women before as Ellen had. Ellen didn't care to meet them again, so she hid behind the kitchen door, peeked through the crack, and listened to their introductions.

"Why hello, I'm Mrs. Ester Leah, and this here is my daughter Virginia. We would have come sooner to greet you, but we thought you might need some time to settle in." Mrs. Leah spoke quickly.

"I'm Lenore." Lenore reached out her hand in greeting.

Instead of shaking hands, Mrs. Leah handed Lenore a jar. "These are my very own special pickled quail eggs. Everyone in Hartridge loves them. I hope you will, too."

"That is so kind of you. Won't you come in for tea?" Lenore held the door open wider.

Mrs. Leah glanced at her daughter and hesitated. "We hate to interrupt you. I know you must be busy, but . . . well, just for a moment. The tea isn't necessary."

The ladies surveyed the parlor and eyed Lenore as she shut the door. "I have some tea already brewed, so it wouldn't be any trouble."

“Oh, iced tea?” Mrs. Leah’s eyes grew wide behind her glasses.

“No, but it’s cool enough to be refreshing.”

Mrs. Leah and her daughter exchanged glances again. “A little sip would be nice. The ride here does make one a bit parched.”

“Have a seat, please.” Lenore gestured toward the sofa and called behind her. “Ellen? Would you get tea for our guests, please? And one for me, too.”

Ellen moved from her hiding spot and felt her face flush. Her mother sounded as if she were speaking to a servant. Her hands shook with anger as she poured the tea from the large glass jar into short glasses and placed them on a wooden serving tray. How dare her mother treat her this way in front of these two busybodies! She walked slowly in order to not spill any tea.

She entered the parlor without a glance at the women. She did not look at them until she placed the tray on the small round table in front of the sofa. She stood still, watching the women’s eyes dart between her mother and her. For a moment, Lenore sat in her rocker, waiting for Ellen to serve them, but when realizing Ellen wouldn’t, she did so herself. “Would you like any sugar?”

“Oh no, no. This is fine.” The women took sips of their tea. With what looked more like a sneer than a smile on her fat face, Virginia said, “We met at the store, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did. Nice to see you again,” Ellen replied. She had enough sense to know these women were not here to make friends, only to gather tittle-tattle for the other gossipmongers in town. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have laundry to finish.” She left her mother alone to fend for herself.

After the Leah’s carriage vanished down the road, Lenore stormed outside, slamming the back door behind her. Ellen had finished scrubbing the clothes and now had them soaking in the

rinse water. “Thank you very much for leaving me alone in there. You were so rude! You just gave those ole bats more to talk about.”

Ellen, still angry with the way her mother had treated her, felt no fear of punishment. “They didn’t want to visit with me. Besides, they would have found something to talk about anyway. Maybe now they’ll talk more about me and less about you, but I doubt it.”

“What do you mean by that?” The flush in Lenore’s face began turning white and splotchy.

“They were talking about you the day you got married; I overheard them at the store. They know how old you are. The whole town knows. You’re the talk of the town and this marriage is a scandal.”

Lenore put her hands to her face as if Ellen had slapped her. “Oh, my goodness. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t see what difference it would have made. We never had too many friends in Salt Flat. We probably won’t here either. But aren’t you just dying to taste those quail eggs?”

Lenore’s hands dropped to her sides in defeat. She headed back into the house, muttering as she went. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

They did not see the Leahs again that summer. By summer’s end, they were too busy to care about the outside world. Ellen and Lenore canned most of the fruits and vegetables, and sun dried a few, too. Ellen helped her mother store the jars on shelves in the cool cellar. Before entering, she peered down the wooden steps and saw with the light of a lantern a small room supported by four rough wooden beams in each corner. She was afraid if she touched them she’d get splinters. The walls and floor were made out of uneven dirt-colored bricks. Spider webs draped like gauze curtains from the wooden beams of the ceiling and sand spilled from the high

shelves. “My father fired those bricks himself and carved those beams. He had some help with the digging,” Cal said with pride shining in his eyes.

“Well, we’re not going down there until you clean it out. No telling what critters might be crawling around,” Lenore said and marched back into the house. She didn’t like spiders anymore than Ellen. So Cal swept out the accumulated dirt and webs.

Lenore and Ellen waited for the dust to settle and the breathing easier before they went. Across from the full wall of shelves sat a wooden bench with shelves above it. “What’s a bench doing in here?” Ellen wondered out loud as she sat her crate of jars on it.

“In case of a tornado, which, according to Cal, this part of Texas seems to get a lot of, this is where we’ll camp out,” Lenore replied as she lifted jars out of her crate.

“I hope that never happens.”

“As do I.”

Ellen noticed a large steel bucket in a corner. “What about the bucket? Why’s it here?”

Lenore chuckled. “My, so many questions. If we’re ever stuck in here during a storm for a long period of time, I imagine it’ll serve as a chamber pot.”

Ellen nearly dropped a jar of canned tomatoes. Chamber pots were one thing, but having no privacy was another. “Ugh! That would be horrible.” She heard more of her mother’s quiet laughter. “Please God,” she prayed silently. “Don’t let a tornado hit Hartridge.”

* * * * *

On Ellen’s thirteenth birthday, her mother baked a cake and gave her a cookbook. “You’re almost a woman now. It’s time to learn all you can about cooking.”

“I already know quite a bit,” Ellen said aloud, and mentally added, “*more than you.*” She was learning to keep her thoughts to herself.

“Yes, you do,” Lenore said, smiled and kissed her daughter’s forehead. “You’ve grown quite a bit since we’ve been here. Why you’re almost as tall as I am.”

Ellen wrapped her arms around her mother’s waist and squeezed, nuzzling in close to her neck, breathing in her sweet lavender smell. It seemed forever since they had hugged. She would have stayed there longer, but Lenore pulled away. “Let’s get dinner started.”

Ellen helped her mother prepare dinner—fried chicken, fried okra, steamed green beans, mashed potatoes, white gravy, and fresh baked bread. Birthdays always called for a big dinner.

Cal came into the house whistling. “Smells mighty good in here.” He dropped into his chair with a satisfied grin on his face.

Ellen glanced at him as she set the table. “What are you smiling about?”

His grin widened. “Why, I’m just happy to be eating such delicious food with such wonderful women. I am a happy man, yes, indeed.”

“Did you wash your hands?” Lenore asked.

“Oops! Best do that.” Cal blushed as he went to the wash basin.

Lenore and Ellen laughed as they took their seats. They grew silent for a while, except for a few murmurs of pleasure as they savored the tender juicy chicken and dipped their buttery bread into the smooth cream gravy.

Halfway through the meal, Cal spoke. “I hear someone has a birthday today.”

Ellen smiled and raised her hand. “That would be me.”

“So you’re how old today?”

“Thirteen.” Ellen figured he already knew the answer. Hadn’t she told him six months ago?

Cal folded his hands together as if to pray. “Thirteen is a special age,” he began. “A crossroad’s age: you’re no longer a child, and yet you’re not completely grown. I think this calls for a special gift.”

Ellen gulped a mouthful of potatoes and nearly choked. “What kind of gift?” Her heart pumped faster.

“Finish your supper and you’ll find out.” Cal winked at Lenore. Lenore smiled in return.

“You shouldn’t have said anything until I was finished eating because now I’m too excited to eat.” Ellen put her fork down, wiped her mouth with her napkin, and placed it beside her near empty plate. “Besides, I’m full. So what did you get me?”

Cal swallowed his last bite, leaned back in his chair and smiled. “We’re going to have to blindfold you first.” He glanced at Lenore. She went and stood behind Ellen’s chair.

Ellen closed her eyes as her mother used a napkin for a blindfold. Then they led her outside. “Where are we going?” She was so excited she could hardly walk.

“You’ll see,” Lenore and Cal said in unison, standing on either side of her, holding her arms to keep her from tripping on rocks along the way.

Ellen strained her ears and listened. She heard the ringing sound of crickets and cicadas in the trees, sniffed the warm night air, and recognized smells associated with the barn. Horses were whinnying.

“Okay,” her mother said. “Now don’t move.”

The barn door creaked open followed by the sound of horses’ hooves. Dust tickled her nose. A horse snorted so close Ellen could feel its warm breath on her face. Reaching out her hands, she touched the velvety smoothness of a horse’s nose. She ripped off the blindfold. There, standing before her in the light of a full moon and a hanging lantern, stood a spotted chestnut and

white horse. “It’s a Paint!” She gasped and wrapped her arms around its neck. It shook its head as if in greeting.

“And it’s a gelding,” Cal said as he stood beside the horse, holding the lead rope. “He’s twelve years old and even-tempered. Your mother and I thought you might like to start riding again.”

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you.” Ellen left the horse long enough to give Cal a quick awkward hug. She hugged her mother harder and planted a kiss on her cheek. “What should I name him?”

“I guess that’s something you’ll need to put some thought into. But for now, let’s put him back in the barn and let him finish eating his oats. Then we can go eat some of that birthday cake your mother baked.”

They did and were pleasantly surprised to find the cake not only edible but also delicious. After they finished the dishes, Ellen wanted to go back to the barn. “Not tonight,” her mother said. “Tomorrow is another day.”

Reluctantly, Ellen went to her room and busied herself thumbing through her books, looking for the perfect character with the perfect name for her horse.

Chapter Five

September 1895 - May 1896

Ellen's thirteenth summer burned itself out into fall. It seemed her life was floating away with the falling leaves, each day buried on top of the next, slowly decomposing and returning to the earth as if never existing. She named her horse Fairfax after Jane Eyre's love interest Edward Fairfax Rochester and doted on him as if he were her lover. Every day she brushed Fairfax's silky coat and practiced braiding his mane and tail. She rode him in the pasture among the handful of milk cows grazing. The other horses, Lily and Pumpkin, snorted their greetings but kept their distance and watched. Ellen wished she could jump Fairfax over the fence and trot off to her hiding place. Surely, the horse felt caged in as she did.

"School opens next Monday. You need to attend." Cal told Ellen one Saturday afternoon while they were in the orchard, picking apples. The trees ran in diagonal lines, close enough the leaves from one almost touched the other, forming a canopy of shade.

Ellen had only read about school, having had a tutor all her life. She called from her spot on the ladder. "I'm happy helping out on the farm. I don't want to go."

Her mother didn't seem to care if Ellen attended, especially the way the town folks acted toward them at Hartridge's small white church with the stained glass windows of Mary and Jesus. Every time they walked through the door a few people sitting in the pews inadvertently turned around. Upon seeing Lenore and Ellen, they would nudge the person sitting next to them, and then that person turned around. This chain reaction continued until the entire congregation had a chance to spy their arrival. The women would hold their white-gloved hands to their mouths and whisper in their fellow parishioner's ear. Mrs. Leah, forever dressed in black to display her widowhood—her late husband, a rancher, had been a major land owner in Hartridge,

second to Mr. Horton—was always there as if she owned the church. Her eyes squinted through her glasses as she looked down her nose at them, while Virginia puckered her fat lips like she had tasted something bitter.

After these experiences Ellen wasn't certain she wanted to go to school, not if the students acted anything like their parents. "I already know how to read and write. I know my arithmetic, too. I want to stay home and help Momma, I mean Mother." Now she was thirteen, Ellen figured she was too mature to call her Momma anymore.

Cal glanced at her and shook his head. "You have the rest of your life to work yourself to death."

"But I need to be here for Ruby and Fairfax, too." Ruby, big and heavy, was no longer allowed in the house. The pig followed Ellen around the farm, even when she rode her horse.

"Go to school and get yourself educated, make some friends," Cal said and lifted a barrel of apples.

"No one's going to want to be my friend, not in this town. Why, all those women were downright rude to mother when we attended church. They smiled all nice, but you could see in their eyes they don't like us. Every time Mother's back was turned, I noticed them eyeing her and whispering to one another. Their children won't be any different."

The last time she attended church Ellen thumbed through her Bible and read Matthew 6:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are:
for they love to pray standing in the synagogues . . . that they may
be seen of men . . . when thy prayest, enter into thy closet, and
when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret;
and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

After reading the verse, later that Sunday evening after dinner, Ellen read it to Cal and Lenore. “It also says not to use ‘vain repetitions, as the heathen do’ because they think God will hear them better, but He won’t. So I don’t think it matters if we ever go back to that church again. I don’t think God will mind. Those people seem like a bunch of heathens and hypocrites to me.”

Lenore, who was smiling less since their new life began, laughed. “Why Ellen, I agree with you there. That settles it! We won’t step one foot in that church of hypocrites ever again. You can read to us on Sundays. That’ll be enough preaching.”

Cal had not laughed and never broached the subject of church again, but now, days later, he held firm his decision about school. “You don’t know how the other children will act,” he said. “Nobody has anything against you or your mother. Most people around these parts are good, hard-working folks. Give them a chance. Who knows? You get smart enough, maybe you won’t have to work this hard again.” All the time Cal spoke, he hauled short wooden barrels full of apples onto the wagon, while Ellen continued filling the burlap sack strapped across her shoulder. Ruby, having eaten a few fallen apples, found a spot in the shade to sleep.

Ellen climbed down the ladder, dumped her full sack into an empty barrel, and sat on the edge of the loaded wagon, rubbing her aching shoulder. “You think I could find a rich husband if I were smarter?”

Cal laughed, took off his hat, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “That’s always possible, especially with how pretty you are.”

Her face grew warm. Before she could reply to Cal’s compliment, he said, “You know, you could also become a teacher.”

Jane Eyre had been a teacher. It seemed like all the women she ever read about were teachers. But women were authors, too. She loved the Bronte sisters and read about Nellie Bly, the reporter for the *New York World*. She wouldn't mind being a writer someday especially since she enjoyed reading so much.

The idea of being a teacher sounded appealing until Ellen started school in Hartridge. Cal drove her to town early in the morning. The bright morning sun would have been blinding if not for the tall cottonwood, cedar and oak trees lining the dirt road, blocking most of its rays. She sat next to Cal, silently counting the trees along the way, and tried not to be nervous. He left her at the one room white clapboard schoolhouse with a bucket of biscuits and sausage wrapped in a cream-colored handkerchief. CT was stitched in blue. "My momma made me several of these when I went off to school." He patted her hand. "You'll be fine."

Ellen thanked him and waved goodbye as he drove back to the farm. She caressed his initials and sighed. What a sweet gesture to get her through this new ordeal. She walked into the building, feeling more alone than ever.

Mrs. Shoemaker stood tall and thin in a plain gray dress, her skin pasty and tight around her face. She looked like her hands were full. The students ranged from ages six to sixteen. Two of the little ones cried all the first day, and one had a perpetual stream of snot dripping from his nose into his mouth. Three of the teenage boys tested their manliness by ignoring the teacher and flirting with the older girls. The girls took one look at Ellen and began whispering. Not once did they bother to speak to her.

One red-headed boy with blue eyes almost as charming as Cal's sat in front of her. "I'm Tom Clark. This is my last year here," he informed Ellen as he turned around to face her with his elbow resting on the back of the pew. "I'm going to work with my uncle next year. He's a

conductor with the Southern Pacific. He's promised me a good job on the train. I've got four brothers who'll stay here to help my Paw. I never wanted to be a farmer."

Jacob, a big blonde in overalls, walked past Ellen's desk and dropped his books and slate near her feet. The loud noise made her jump.

"Oops! I guess my fingers went weak over the sight of you." He winked at Ellen.

Ellen laughed and shook her head. Jacob looked like a strapping young man—too old to be in school. She wondered if there was something wrong with him.

"Go sit down, Ox. She ain't interested in the likes of you." Tom looked back at Ellen, twirled his fingers near his ears and rolled his eyes as the other students snickered. "Don't know why he bothers coming to school; he hasn't a lick of sense."

Mrs. Shoemaker slammed her ruler on her desk, making everyone jump. Through gritted teeth, she said, "Get quiet, all of you, and get back to work. No dillydallying."

At that moment Ellen decided she did not want to be a teacher.

The day dragged on, but finally Mrs. Shoemaker removed her glasses, smoothed a few loose strands of gray wispy hair away from her face, and said with a sigh, "I think that's enough for the day. Go home."

Noise erupted in the classroom as the children dropped their slates and ran for the door. Mrs. Shoemaker screamed, "Be careful not to break the slates!" No one listened as they pushed and shoved their way out. Ellen set her slate on her desk and waited until all the children were gone before she walked out. Tom stood on the front steps outside. He smiled at her. "Waiting for the stampede to pass, aye?"

Ellen laughed. "They're like a bunch of animals."

"Yep. It's like that every day, like being on a cattle drive. Which way you headed?"

Ellen nodded to the left.

“I’m going the same way. I’ll walk with you awhile, if you don’t mind.”

“Why would I mind?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

Ellen shook her head and laughed. “Then why ask a stupid question?”

Tom blushed and looked at his feet.

She stopped laughing and punched him on the shoulder. “I’m teasing. I didn’t mean anything. Come on, let’s get going.”

Tom regained his jovial manner and off they went down the dirt road. “Where do you live?”

“At the Turner farm. You know the place?”

Tom stopped in the middle of the road and stared at her. “You mean . . . ?” His words trailed off, but his mouth remained open.

Ellen stopped only for a second. “Oh for heaven sake’s, Tom, shut your mouth. You should see yourself.” She waited for him to catch up with her. “Yes, I know what you’re going to say. Yes, my mother is the woman who married Cal Turner. Yes, she answered his advertisement for a wife. Did I leave anything out?”

Tom shook his head and kicked a rock. “Well, I’ll be.” He remained quiet for about a quarter of a mile. Finally he said, “Well, welcome to Hartridge. Your mother is about the most exciting thing that’s ever happened around these parts. That’s all I hear when my mother gets to yakking with the neighbors.”

“Gee, isn’t that splendid.” Before she could say another word, a cloud of dust headed toward them, and Ellen saw Cal leading his wagon down the road.

“Whoa!” He stopped the horses a few feet in front of her. “How about a ride?”

Ellen glanced at Tom. His mouth hung open again. She shrugged, placed her lunch pail and books in the back of the wagon, and lifted her skirt as Cal pulled her by her free hand. Once seated beside Cal, Ellen looked at Tom and said, “See you tomorrow, Tom. And don’t forget to close your mouth to keep out the dust.”

Cal tipped his hat at the boy and turned the wagon around. “Who was that?” He asked after a moment.

“Oh that’s Tom. He goes to my school.”

“He looks a little old to be going to school.”

“He’s fifteen. Next year’s his last year. He’s going to work for the railroad.” She grinned and added, “I think he likes me.”

“Oh?” Cal raised his eyebrows. “Well,” he said. “Who wouldn’t like a girl such as yourself? I’m sure you’ll make plenty of friends.”

Ellen stared at Cal. “I think,” she said with an exaggerated sigh. “He likes me for more than a friend.” She wasn’t about to mention his fascination with her mother.

Cal remained silent for a moment and then said, “Oh, I almost forgot.” He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to her. “You received a letter.”

Ellen grabbed it and tore it open. “He finally wrote me back. I thought he forgot me.”

“Who’s that?”

Ellen grasped the fluttering letter with both hands to keep it from flying away. “David Janowski, my friend from back home,” she said.

Once they reached the farm, Ellen hopped from the wagon, ran to her room, and began reading. David’s sloppy handwriting and poor grammar made it a bit difficult.

“Sorry you are so unhappy. Not fair. Your mum sounds like she’s gone a bit mad. We are moving soon.

Mum starts a new position with another Mr. Cook in San Antonio.

Mum sends her love. Will write when we are settled.”

Another Mr. Cook? How strange. She tucked the letter away beneath her bed.

Lenore stood outside hanging laundry. When she saw Ellen, she smiled. “Oh good, just in time to help.” She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a handful of clothes pins.

Ellen took them and grabbed a damp shirt out of a basket. “David wrote me: said he and his mother are moving to San Antonio to work for a man whose last name is Cook. Is that not strange or what?”

Lenore didn’t respond. She continued hanging clothes on the line.

“Momma, Mother, did you hear me?”

“Yes,” she said. She turned away from Ellen to inspect a shirt she lifted from the basket. She scraped a fingernail across a spot Ellen couldn’t see. After she hung the shirt, she said, “I don’t think that’s so strange. Cook is a common name.”

“Well, I can’t wait to hear from David again to see how this new Mr. Cook compares to Daddy. There’s no way he could be as nice and generous.” Ellen hung a petticoat, the last item in the basket, and turned to leave.

Lenore lifted the basket off the ground. “For their sakes, Ellen, let’s hope that he is.”

Cal continued to drop off and pick up Ellen from school every day even over Lenore’s objections. “That’s a mighty waste of your time, Cal. It won’t hurt her to walk.”

Cal wouldn’t hear of it, making Ellen feel special. Though she didn’t like school, she looked forward to the time she and Cal spent together. Spending time with Cal reminded Ellen of

the times she spent with Ada. The housekeeper always asked Ellen about what she'd learned after the tutor left for the day. When David would come over after school, Ada would ask her son the same question. "I'm getting my education along with you two," she often said.

Ada wasn't the only one interested in Ellen's day. Frank also asked his daughter about her tutorials whenever he arrived home after work. Sometimes, he wouldn't get home until Ellen had already gone to bed. Even then, he checked on her and kissed her goodnight. She missed those kisses, the feel of his stubbly cheeks, and the special smell of him whenever they hugged.

Cal's interest in Ellen's day reminded her of those she loved and missed. Thoughts of him slipped into the empty place in her heart; she imagined it opening and making room for him. It was unlike a father daughter love, and different from what she felt for Ada, or even David; it was a new feeling, one she enjoyed.

Ellen became comfortable enough with Cal to share some of her stories about her father. Cal nodded and smiled as he listened. "When Daddy wasn't at work, he spent all his spare time with us. If he wasn't reading to one of us, then he was helping with a jigsaw puzzle. He didn't like for either one of us to be unhappy. When mother had one of her spells, he would whisk her away in his arms, singing and dancing around the parlor, twirling her around until she would laugh and say she felt dizzy."

Cal coughed. "Spells? What kind of spells?" Ellen noticed he was no longer smiling.

Ellen laughed. "Boredom! Daddy called it cabin fever. It only happened when it was too cold to go outside. Don't worry. Mother doesn't have time to be bored now."

"Your father sounds like he was a good man," Cal said.

"He was," she said. Sadness stirred in her throat. She swallowed and blinked to chase away the threatening tears. They remained silent the rest of the way home.

Grateful for his lightening the burden of her loneliness, Ellen shared with Cal some of the interesting stories she had read. “There was a reporter who posed as an insane woman in order to get inside an asylum. She then exposed the horrid living conditions. Isn’t that something?”

“It certainly is.” He seemed genuinely impressed. “You’re very well-read! I haven’t had a chance to read a good book in a long time. But aren’t some of those stories you’ve been reading a bit much for a . . . you?”

Ellen frowned. “You were about to say ‘a child’ weren’t you?”

He shook his head. “A young lady,” he added.

She laughed. “My father bought newspapers, magazines, and books so I could read them to my mother.” When she noticed Cal’s stunned expression, she hesitated about telling him more.

“But . . .?” he began and then stopped. He looked to her to continue.

“Mother can’t read very well,” Ellen said softly.

“Oh,” he said. And they never spoke of it again.

Soon they changed their conversations to simple subjects like the weather, how it wouldn’t hurt to get a couple of more inches of rain this month, about plants and what needed to be planted before the end of fall, and the animals and how Pumpkin needed her hooves trimmed. They created mundane small talk to pass the time whenever there was nothing else to discuss.

But then one day on their way home, Cal changed the subject. “I dreamt about a tornado last night.”

Eager to hear more, Ellen said, “Oh my! Have you ever seen a tornado before?”

“Yep. One flew over our field several years ago. I watched as this black mass bounced from one field to another and then off into the woods. I saw huge trees spiraling around it. It was sure scary. I was thankful it didn’t hit the house or barn. Thank God, no one was hurt.”

“Have you ever had to get in the cellar?”

“Several times, only, we didn’t have to stay too long.”

“Oh, I hope we never have to. I can’t bear the thought.” She wrinkled her nose and cringed.

Cal glanced at her and grinned. “I know. But it’s better than being hit by a tornado.”

“What about in your dream? Did the tornado hurt anybody?” Ellen enjoyed watching his face brighten as he spoke.

With a long, concentrated look down the road, he described what he saw inside his head. “Well, at first it zigzagged along the road leading to the house, and then it flew over the house, taking the roof with it. I came running from the barn, and there were cows circling the sky. I started running around the house and tried to scream your name but no sound came out. I couldn’t find you. That’s when I woke.”

Ellen couldn’t take her eyes off him. “What about Mother?”

“What?” Cal looked away from the horses and at Ellen as if just waking from the dream.

“Wasn’t she in the dream?”

“Oh! I can’t recall.” Cal scratched his chin as he searched the sky, trying to remember. He shrugged. “I guess I couldn’t find her neither.”

As the mornings grew colder, Ellen huddled in her coat with a blanket wrapped around her, covering her entire face except her eyes. She gazed at him on those chilly mornings,

watching the cold smoky air escape from his mouth and wait for his words he doled out like candy.

She watched his strong hands flick the reins and hurry the horses onward. Nestling deeper in her blanket, she wished the ride to school lasted longer; it didn't matter if either one of them spoke. She felt comfortable with Cal, even in his silence.

Chapter Six

June - August 1896

The days like thick thunder clouds rolled through the hot, humid summer as everyone on the Turner farm went about their daily chores. In the mornings, before the oppressive heat took hold, Ellen plodded through the gardens, dragging a woven basket. She gathered all the ripe vegetables—green beans, okra, yellow squash—and then plucked fat green horned caterpillars off the tomato vines, and stomped the grotesque little bodies into a gooey pulp. After the fifth one, she gagged, spit on the dirt, and continued on without looking at the aftermath. Letting her mind wander, Ellen missed the rides with Cal to and from school. She even missed Tom; he was her only friend other than Fairfax and Ruby, and they didn't count seeing how they were animals.

In the early evenings, before darkness fell and the heat blew away, leaving behind a cool flushed sky, Ellen helped Lenore scrape and sand the old paint off the house. They worked until their hands, raw and full of splinters, blistered. "Let me hire someone to do this," Cal said as he held and inspected Lenore's open palm after the second attempt. "You're going to ruin these lovely hands of yours." For a moment, Ellen thought he would kiss her mother's palm, but he didn't.

"But that costs money. Ellen and I can do this." Lenore presented Cal with a jar of lanolin. "Would you open this, please?"

With a quick twist of his wrist, the lid popped off. "Want me to slather some of this on for you?"

"Just be gentle." Lenore beamed at him.

When he finished smoothing the clear ointment on her blisters, he placed some cotton on top and wrapped around a clean strip of white cloth and tied it loosely. “There. That should make them feel better.” He turned to Ellen. “Now let me doctor yours.”

Ellen held out her hands, feeling their heaviness from the day’s toil. All she wanted to do was go to bed.

“You’ve done enough already. Let me do that.” Lenore reached for the ointment.

Cal moved the jar away. “Nonsense. Not bandaged like that. I can do this.” He took Ellen’s hand.

Ellen watched him scoop out an oily glob with two long fingers. Closing her eyes, she sighed as the lanolin cooled the burning sensation. She concentrated on the tenderness of Cal’s rough, calloused fingers.

“See? I’d make a good doctor.” Cal chuckled.

“Why, you’re good at everything you do.” Her mother’s voice sounded husky and far away.

Ellen opened her eyes. Everything looked blurry. Cal tied the last knot and smiled. She held her hands in front of her face; they felt even heavier now. She tried to flex her fingers, but they were too stiff.

“Take those hands to bed now. They’ll be right as rain tomorrow.” He patted her shoulder.

Trance-like, Ellen made it to her room and used her wrists to pull the quilt down. Not bothering to undress, only kicking off her boots, she dropped on to the bed and fell asleep.

* * * * *

Since they no longer went to church, Sundays became Ellen's only free day. She used this freedom to write letters to David and to read. She started reading a novel by Samuel Richardson called *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Her father gave it to her shortly before his death. Had he known what the book was about before he bought it? Until now, she hadn't found time for it. The story was a series of letters by a beautiful young servant named Pamela whose master, a Mr. B., was infatuated with her. It seemed a bit scandalous. Cal would certainly think so. Knowing this and not having to share it with her mother made it even more enjoyable. But once she began the book, and started getting to Mr. B's shameful yet delightful behavior, she didn't have much time to read it because Tom started arriving after lunch.

Lenore sat on one of the new rockers Cal spent painstaking hours on, while Ellen and Tom leaned on the front porch railing. "For heaven's sake, Tom" Lenore exclaimed. "Why don't you come as soon as church services are over and eat lunch with us?"

Cal joined them and before Tom replied, he said, "Now Lenore, I'm sure the Clarks would prefer their boy eat at home."

Tom shrugged and brushed his red-tinged bangs out of his flushed face. "I might could manage, let's say, every other Sunday." Tom took a sip of his lemonade, and gestured with his glass. "That is, if it's all right with Mr. Turner."

Lenore answered for Cal. "Of course, it's all right. Isn't it, dear?"

Cal swatted at a fly buzzing past before saying, "I guess, if his folks don't mind."

So, every other Sunday, Tom arrived at noon, and they ate what took the form of an elaborate dinner. Lenore supervised Ellen while she baked a peach cobbler, roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, and steamed green beans.

“It’s too hot outside to be cooking a mess like this. Why can’t we settle for sandwiches like we did before he started coming over?” Sweat dripped off Ellen’s forehead, between her breasts, under her arm pits, and down her legs. She fought the urge to strip off her clothing.

“Now Ellen,” Lenore said as she sat at the table, fanning herself. “You need to feed this boy right. He needs to put some meat on those bones. Besides, there’s nothing like good cooking to catch a husband.”

Ellen laughed in spite of her discomfort. “That’s not how you landed one!”

For once Lenore laughed with her. “Besides, it’s nice for all of us to have a delicious Sunday meal at least twice a month. I must admit, you are a good cook.”

When Ellen finished, she had enough time to run a damp cloth over her body and change into a dry dress. She couldn’t wait for Tom to leave so she could jump in the creek for a summer bath.

Upon Tom’s arrival, the men immediately seated themselves at the kitchen table, while Ellen and Lenore served. After eating, they left the dishes soaking in soapy water and went outside to enjoy their usual tea. The shade of the front porch attracted the cooling relief of an erratic breeze or two.

Ellen’s natural boredom with all this was offset by enjoying the obvious change in Cal’s manner. If she didn’t know any better, she would think he was jealous. She pretended it was because of her, but he probably didn’t like the way Lenore became so animated in Tom’s presence.

Only after they finished their drinks were Tom and Ellen allowed privacy. She introduced him to Ruby, who now was big as a cart and kept in her pen. They went inside the stall and patted her. She snorted with pleasure. Tom laughed. “She acts just like a stupid dog.”

Ellen frowned. "Dogs aren't stupid."

Tom shrugged. "Some are."

"She likes her belly rubbed." Ellen bent to demonstrate, forgiving Tom for his stupidity.

When they tired of the smelly pig sty, Ellen and Tom took turns riding Fairfax. Sitting on top of the horse, Tom patted the leather saddle behind him. "Hop on. Let's ride together."

"We might be too heavy for him." She stroked the Paint's pink and white nose.

"Nah, you hardly weigh a thing." He offered her his hand.

Tom showed Ellen his horsemanship abilities by making Fairfax canter, trot, and gallop. After awhile, Ellen's legs started sticking against the leather and the horse's side. Then her hands became clammy wrapped around Tom's waist. Her blisters began itching.

"It's too hot to ride. I imagine Fairfax is tired of us by now."

They led the horse back to the barn, where Tom helped Ellen remove the saddle and brush the horse's sweaty coat. Once they finished grooming Fairfax, Ellen led Tom to the creek past the front pasture where they sat beneath the shade of a giant oak tree, stripped off their boots, and put their bare feet into the cool blue-green water. "Aw. That's much better." With her feet dangling, Ellen lay in the grass and stared at the luminous blue sky.

Tom leaned back on his elbows and pointed. "That cloud looks like a pig with wings."

Ellen laughed. She pointed at another cloud. "That looks like an angel."

They continued to look up, but fell quiet. Ellen didn't know what to say. She hated small talk. She'd rather be alone at the other creek near her valley at the opposite end of the farm. She wasn't about to tell Tom about it. It was her secret.

After long moments of silence, Tom asked, "How come y'all don't come to church no more?"

Ellen was surprised anyone would even notice their absence. “It doesn’t feel right there. Folks don’t go out of their way to make us feel very welcome. All they do is talk about my mother.”

Tom shrugged. “Now they just talk about y’all sinning for not going and taking Cal away from the Lord. My Ma said he’d never missed a meeting before y’all came.”

“Well, let them talk. They’re the sinners for judging us so. Cal could go if he wanted; we aren’t stopping him. We still read the Bible and pray. God understands.”

“I guess.” Tom didn’t have anything else to add to the conversation and they resumed their silence. Ellen closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next thing she knew Tom was tapping on her shoulder. She opened her eyes and saw the sky was a darker blue with a hint of the moon in the distance.

“I got to get going.” Tom thrust his boots on, stood, and brushed the back of his trousers. Ellen fumbled with her stockings and boots as Tom fidgeted with a tree limb. As soon as she was done, he offered his hand and pulled her off the ground. “I guess I’ll see you next Sunday. I better run if I want to get home before dark.”

His image faded in the distance. Ellen was indifferent about any forthcoming visits. What in the world would they ever find to talk about?

On his next visit, Tom approached Cal. “Mr. Turner, I see you’ve been readying your house for painting.”

Ellen watched Cal’s eyes narrow. “Well, actually, the girls, I mean Lenore and Ellen, have been. I’m getting ready to start sanding the second story. I’m afraid the women might get their long skirts all twisted and fall and break their necks. I’ve been thinking of hiring someone to help out. You interested?”

Tom's eyes sparkled. "Yes sir! I'd love to help."

Cal patted the boy on the back and winked at Ellen. "It's a deal then."

Ellen tried to hide her lack of enthusiasm. Now she would have to endure more time with him. It wasn't because he was a bad person, just boring.

Thankfully, they didn't work close together, so words were seldom spoken. After a month, when they finished sanding and painting the house white, they turned their attention to the barn. They painted it red.

Toward the end of summer, Tom took her by surprise. She threw a stone across the creek at a croaking frog, wondering what to say during the lull in their conversation, when Tom grabbed her by the chin and kissed her.

He kissed her so quickly at first she wasn't even sure it was a kiss. They stared at one another for a second, and Ellen asked, "What did you go and do that for?"

Tom blushed as he stuttered, "I, I, I want you to be my girl."

"Well, you're going to have to do better than that!" She'd read her fair share of love stories. This certainly was not what the characters referred to when mentioning a kiss. Where was the tingling sensation that rushed through one's body? Where was the breathless excitement?

The stupid expression on Tom's freckled face revealed he didn't know what to do next, so Ellen leaned over and kissed him, only she left her lips on his longer than the first kiss. It felt strange to have their lips touching, and she wasn't sure what else to do. As she pulled away from him, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed his lips harder to hers. This time, she could feel his teeth beneath his lips.

“Aw!” she said with a gasp after she managed to unlock his grip. “That hurt!” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Tom blushed again, turning his blue eyes watery. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think you know how to kiss.” She jumped to her feet and brushed the grass off her skirt. “Maybe we can practice again the next time you come over, but for now, I think you bruised me. You best go home.”

He headed down the dirt road in silence. He turned once, his hair swinging about his face, and as he brushed it away, she thought how sad he looked. She waved. He waved back and smiled. Maybe his feelings weren’t hurt too badly.

After he left, while washing dishes, Lenore asked, “Did you two get into a tiff?”

Ellen shook her head without looking at her mother.

“Well, he left early. Are you sure there’s nothing you want to talk about?”

She looked at her mother then, and wondered if she should say anything. She hated to risk the closeness they were finding again.

“I can see it in your eyes, child,” Lenore said and smiled. She put her arm around her daughter. “You can tell me. I know about matters of the heart.”

“Well,” Ellen began. “Tom kissed me today.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, but I didn’t like it.”

“You didn’t? Hum.” Her mother didn’t look like she knew how to help with this problem. “Maybe you need to give it more time. You’re still a tad bit young. These things can kind of grow on you.” She patted Ellen’s shoulder and went back to drying the dishes.

“What things can grow on you?” Cal asked as he entered the kitchen.

Before Ellen could stop her, Lenore said, “Tom kissed Ellen today.”

“Mother!”

Cal frowned. “Why, I ought to—.”

“Ought to be thrilled,” Lenore interrupted. “Ellen’s almost fourteen. Tom would make a suitable husband. They need to court for at least two years.”

“Who said anything about marriage?” Ellen screeched. How dare her mother say such things in front of Cal.

“Yeah! Who said anything about marriage? Ellen’s too young and Tom isn’t good enough for her.”

Lenore dropped her dish towel and glared at Cal. “What do you mean? Tom Clark is a perfectly fine suitor. Or do you have someone else in mind?”

Cal hesitated. “Well, no. But there’s something about that boy that bothers me. He tries too hard. He doesn’t seem sincere.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Ellen ran out of the kitchen and shut herself in her room, wondering if she could ever bring herself to come out again. Their voices drifted beneath her closed door, but she couldn’t make out the words. She stayed there the remainder of the night, finishing a letter to David. After chewing off half her fingernails, Ellen fell asleep. She dreamed of Cal kissing her, but his kiss felt different from Tom’s. His lips were soft as feathers. A rush of pleasant feelings flowed through her body, unlike the nothingness of Tom’s kisses.

When she awoke the next morning, Ellen wondered what the dream meant. Though she never considered Cal as a father figure, she had not thought of him romantically either. She liked him and enjoyed his company; he was easy to talk to. Now, Ellen wasn’t really sure what she felt

about him. She definitely enjoyed the dream. Pushing the thoughts away, knowing they were wrong, she tried to think of Tom. Perhaps they could learn how to kiss together.

The following Sunday, when she didn't have to cook, she took Tom by the hand the minute he appeared at the door. "Come on, it's too hot around here. Let's go to the creek." Off they went before Lenore or Cal even knew Tom was on the property.

Underneath the shade of the oak tree, they sat in silence, dangling their feet in the water. Out of the corner of her eyes, Ellen caught Tom looking at her, but the minute she turned, he looked away. After a few minutes of this, she elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"Hey," he grumbled, holding his side. "Why did you do that?"

"Cause you're being silly."

"Am not."

"Are too!"

"How?"

"You're too afraid to look at me."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

She kicked her foot in the air, sending a splash of water on both of them. Smiling, she said, "Try kissing me again, but this time don't press so hard with your lips."

He brushed his hair back behind his ears and took a deep breath, leaned forward and kissed her, not as short as the first kiss, nor as long as the last.

"Any better?" he whispered.

"Try it again, but part your lips a little, like this." She opened her mouth in a slight pout and kissed him this time.

By the end of the day, Tom finally learned how to kiss, but not before he rubbed Ellen's skin raw. How would she explain her red chin to Cal and her mother?

Luckily, her mother acted like nothing looked different about her. Cal, on the other hand, stared at her, but said nothing. In fact, he seemed to avoid her for the next couple of days.

Sundays came and went. Tom came and went. Her fourteenth birthday came and went. Her mother knitted her a pretty lace collar she could attach to a dress. Cal gave her a book of poetry by Ellis Bell. Tom gave her flowers he picked on his way over. After he kissed her goodbye, Ellen felt a sudden urge to wipe her mouth as she watched him leave. The kissing was losing its appeal. Ellen never experienced any special stirrings in her blood when Tom kissed her, only curiosity, but now she felt annoyed.

She started noticing things about him, too, things she didn't care for. On his next visit, she noticed his breath stunk. "I have a sore throat," she told him and placed her hand on his chest to push him away as he leaned in to kiss her. "You might catch it."

The Sunday after she stared at his teeth and didn't bother hinting to him about what she thought. "My goodness, Tom, you need to clean your teeth. They look all yellow and gooey. No telling what's stuck on them. There is no way you're going to kiss me with teeth like that!"

After that, his teeth sparkled fresh and white. She still didn't want to kiss him, though she allowed him one quick peck before he left. If that wasn't enough to bother her, then it was his hair. The sun turned it redder than usual and it had grown so long his bangs stayed tucked behind his ears instead of flopping in his face. Now his ears looked larger and seemed to stick out more.

"You know, Tom, I do believe you could use a haircut."

"You think so?" He looked puzzled as he twirled a stringy strand between his dirty fingers.

“And while you’re at it, cut those finger nails, too!”

Every time Ellen told him to do something, he did. She grew tired of how easily she could change him.

The Sunday before school started, she told him, “I think you should stop coming over, especially since school’s starting tomorrow. I need to concentrate on my studies.” How could she tell him she would rather read her novels than spend time with him?

Ellen felt bad when she saw the hurt in his eyes, but it wasn’t fair to lead him on. Even though she talked blunt about all his faults, she didn’t have it in her to come right out and tell him she didn’t care for him. Maybe once school got underway, he would take a hint. All she had to do was wait until he left to catch the train like he talked about doing. She hoped it wouldn’t be long.

Chapter Seven

September - December 1896

Back at school, Mrs. Shoemaker enlisted Ellen to tutor the younger children in reading. “You’re as smart as they get around these parts,” her teacher said after the first week. “And I could use some help.”

Ellen took turns sitting between two children, helping them sound out words in their primers. Whether it was a boy or a girl, they would wrap their little arms around hers as they read.

“You’re so pretty,” Rebecca, a dark-haired girl of six, said as she blinked her long thick lashes at Ellen. “I want to be like you when I grow up.”

“Such a sweet thing to say,” Ellen responded, enjoying the little girl’s admiration.

“I love you,” Stephen said. He was seven and often had green mucus clogging one nostril. Ellen dreaded being near him, worried he would sneeze on her or the book they were reading. She still felt flattered, though.

The girls close to her age always whispered and giggled behind her back. Priscilla Hunt, a pale blonde, led the group. Ellen didn’t have to be told what they were saying and she no longer cared. To make her days even more wearisome, she now felt awkward around Tom, her one and only friend. She couldn’t ignore him. He sat next to her. So she made friends with the boy on the other side of her, Danny Brown, a tall skinny blonde with eyes the color of his faded blue overalls. He needed as much help with his reading as the younger students.

She hadn’t paid much attention to Danny last year. Nothing about him made her take notice. He definitely wasn’t any better looking than Tom. And to think she thought Tom was so mature when she first met him just because he was older. Now he didn’t seem so grown up.

Both boys wanted to walk her home. The three began their trek down the dirt road. Ellen admired the trees as the leaves changed from green to red, then to orange and yellow, while the boys silently glared at each other. They took turns collecting rocks and showing Ellen how far they could throw.

When Ellen picked one of her own and threw it, Danny exclaimed, “Well I swan, Ellen, you throw pretty good for a girl.”

“She throws better than you,” Tom said. He moved closer to Ellen.

Danny glanced sideways at Tom and then at Ellen. “Did you hear something? It’s that darn shadow. Where the heck is it coming from? It’s following us everywhere?”

Tom frowned and grunted. “What? You talking about yourself? I think you’re headed in the wrong direction. The slaughter house is back that away. We don’t need no pig tagging along. Ellen has one at home follows her around already.”

Tom grabbed Ellen’s arm and kept walking, pulling her along. Ellen looked over her shoulder. Danny stopped in the middle of the road and picked up a stick. Still walking, Danny held the stick above his head and scowled behind Tom’s back. She shook her head at him, pleading with her eyes. He lowered his arm but continued walking. By the time Danny caught up with them, walking on the other side of Ellen, the tension had reached its peak.

Tom’s face blared bright red. He snatched another, larger rock. “You best leave us before I have to bash in your ugly face.” He pushed Ellen to the side of the road.

Danny held the stick like a bat. “Come on, pus face. I’ll knock your head off.”

Tom threw the rock, hitting Danny in the shoulder, and dove at him, tackling him by the waist. Danny had enough time to swing once, hitting Tom in the arm, before they both landed in

the middle of the road. They were wrestling when Cal arrived with horses and wagon in a cloud of dust.

“What’s going on boys?” he yelled.

The boys froze, Tom on top of Danny with a rock raised in his hand. Tom glanced at Cal and dropped the rock. “Nothing, sir. Just playing around.” He scrambled off Danny and brushed himself off.

“Playing mighty rough looks to me.”

Ellen ran to the wagon and flung herself up. “You two stop now and go home. Be nice.” She turned to Cal. “You got here just in time. Get me out of here.”

As they rode away, Ellen glanced over her shoulder. Both boys still stood in the middle of the road, watching her leave while eyeing each other.

“What was that all about?” Cal asked.

“They’re fighting over me.” Ellen shook her head. “Don’t know why they bother.”

Cal laughed. “Boys will be boys, I guess.”

The next day, early in the frosty morning, Tom grabbed Ellen’s hand before she could make it inside the school house. He had a split lip. His pale freckled face turned crimson as he announced, “Today is my birthday!”

“Well, Happy Birthday, Tom,” Ellen said with a thin smile, wanting to jerk her hand out of his cold grasp.

“Now that I’m 16, I decided it’s time to head for the tracks.” He swallowed and took a deep breath. “Would you mind if I wrote you?”

Shocked, Ellen felt a sense of pity mixed with relief. “Of course, you can write me, Tom.” She leaned forward and kissed his warm, red cheek. “I’ll write back,” she said and pulled her hand away.

Tom smiled and the split on his lip widened. Fresh blood rose to the surface. He wiped it with the back of his hand. He beamed all day and was even nice to Danny, who had a black eye, on their walk home. Tom acted content that day, but he didn’t return to school the next.

Now Ellen was left with only Danny to walk her part way down the road. Same as Tom, Danny didn’t have much to say.

After a week passed, Cal asked, “What happened to ole Tom Clark? I haven’t seen him in awhile.”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? He joined his uncle the conductor, like he said he would. He’s off to see the world.” She tried to gauge his reaction to the news, but the shadow of his hat covered his eyes.

“Well, I’ll be,” he said under his breath. He glanced at Ellen and added, “You don’t seem too bothered by him leaving?”

Ellen shrugged. “Why should I be?”

Cal let out a short laugh and shook his head. “I thought he was your beau. Your mother thought you two would eventually marry.”

Peering off into the distance, Ellen said, “Maybe we will and maybe we won’t.”

“Well, what about this fellow who’s been walking with you? Is he a friend?”

Delighted with his interest in her love life, she grinned and teased. “Maybe he is and maybe he isn’t.”

Cal’s laugh sounded more like a snort. “Girl, you are something else.”

The next day, Ellen headed down the school steps, ready to begin the usual walk home, and didn't realize Danny wasn't following until she reached the edge of the school yard. She turned to see his blonde hair shining beneath the giant oak tree that shaded the front of the school. Thrusting his hands deep into the front pockets of his overalls, he stood there, swaying from one foot to the other.

"Danny?" she called. "Is something the matter?"

With his hands still in his pockets, he glanced at the ground and shrugged.

Ellen walked back to him. "Well?"

He shrugged again and said with a grumble, "Your father doesn't seem too friendly."

"He's not my father. My daddy is dead. Cal Turner is my mother's new husband. He's way too young to ever be my father."

"Well, whatever he is, he looks kind of mean."

"Are you saying you're scared of him?" She laughed.

"I don't know him, but I hear rumor that he's bewitched and he sure does give me the evil eye."

"He does not." She held her breath for a second to keep from laughing.

Danny nodded. "Oh yes, he does. I can tell he doesn't like me."

Ellen slapped him on the shoulder. "He's not bewitched. You're imagining things."

Danny shook his head and rubbed his shoulder. "No, I'm not. He may not be under no spells, but I can tell he don't like me walking with you."

"Hum." Ellen stood there a second longer. "So you don't want to walk with me anymore?"

Danny took his hands out of his pockets. "It's not because I don't like you, because I do."

Before he could finish speaking, Ellen said, “It’s okay. Really it is. I understand. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She turned away and grinned. If only it had been that easy to get rid of Tom.

* * * * *

With the weather turning colder than usual and snow flurries icing the muddy roads, school closed early for the Christmas holidays. A week before Christmas, two burly men bundled in heavy black coats arrived midmorning on the farm. Ellen wiped the fog from the kitchen window. Through her frosty breath, she could see both men sported bushy beards, unlike Cal’s smooth, hairless chin.

Lenore appeared behind her. “Come away from the window, Ellen, and help me make lunch. Those men are going to work up a hunger.”

While they sliced bread, made ham sandwiches, and stirred the thick soup, they heard a loud squeal beyond the barn.

“What on earth?” Ellen dropped the ladle in the pot, splattering hot soup on her arms. Mindless of the burning sensation, she headed for the back door.

Before she could make it outside, Lenore grabbed her by the elbow. “There’s nothing to worry about. You stay right here.”

“What are they doing? What was screaming like that?”

Lenore took a deep breath and led Ellen by the shoulders to a chair. “They slaughtered Porky.” Her tone suddenly brightened. “Just think we’ll have fresh sweet ham for Christmas dinner.”

“Porky?” Ellen screeched and tried to stand.

Lenore held her. “Honey, now calm down. I know how much you like animals, but where did you think our bacon and ham came from? It’s not like Salt Flat with a butcher down the

road.” She released her hold on her daughter. “It’s best you stay inside until they finish. It’ll stink until the meat’s salted and the area’s tidied. Before long, they’ll have the meat smoking. Now that smells good.” Lenore crossed her arms and rubbed them as if warding off the cold.

Ellen bowed her head, trying to force the images out of her mind. “Poor Porky, she’s Ruby’s mother! I could never eat Ruby’s mother.”

Lenore patted her daughter’s shoulder. “Well, at least it isn’t Ruby.”

Ellen’s head shot up. “It better never be!”

“Don’t know you have much say in the matter, young lady.” Lenore opened the back door, walked out and yelled, “Boys, soups on.”

Ellen spooned the soup into five bowls, being mindful each contained a hearty serving of ham, potatoes, onions and carrots, except hers; she left out the ham. She grabbed a bowl and a piece of bread and disappeared into her room. She didn’t want to see those men or Cal. She had to think of a way to save Ruby. Ellen didn’t speak to Cal for four days after the butchering of Porky. She finally approached him Christmas Eve after he finished putting new shoes on the horses. His back was to her as he put away his tools in a big wooden chest in the barn.

She crept behind him and poked him on the back.

Cal spun around, blue eyes open wide. “What . . .”

Ellen giggled. “Startled you, didn’t I?”

Cal laughed with her. “I didn’t hear you. I guess I was lost in my thoughts.”

“What were you thinking about?”

He shrugged and sighed. “Oh, about things I got to do and such.” He turned to his tools, grabbed a pick, and placed it in the chest.

His complexion brightened to a light red. He closed the chest and faced her. "So, what brings you out here in the cold?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Ruby."

"Aw hah! So that's why you haven't been speaking to me. I figured as much. Your mother told me how upset you were about Porky. You know, you're going to have to get used to the fact pigs are our food."

Ellen waved her hand to silence him. "I know, I know. But Ruby is different. I've always been like a mother to her and now you went and killed her real mother . . . well, Ruby is my pet."

Cal chuckled until he saw the look on Ellen's face. "Oh Lord, you don't really mean it? I should have never let you raise that pig."

Ellen clenched her fist and hugged her heavy wool coat closer to her body. "Well, you did," she said with a huff. "So don't kill my Ruby!"

"Maybe not now, but someday, yes, we'll have to slaughter her, too." Cal tried to put his hands on Ellen's shoulder, but she jerked away from him.

"I hate you!" The words escaped before she had time to think. She didn't know what else to do then but run out of the barn and get as far away from Cal as possible.

"Ellen!" Cal called as he followed after her.

She ran toward the woods. Her feelings rushed through her, making it difficult to think. Would he really kill Ruby? She loved her so much; she didn't want her to die. Her father's death pushed its way into her mind. God, she missed him so much.

Her thoughts fueled her on. If she ran fast enough maybe she could make the pain go away. Puffs of smoke escaped her lips. The cold air felt like icicles in her lungs. Cal's heavy breathing followed by the crunching and snapping of twigs and dried leaves sounded behind her.

When she couldn't run anymore, she twirled around. Cal stopped, only an inch away. She couldn't speak, only sob, her arms flaying at his chest.

"Ellen, Ellen." Cal struggled with her while trying to regain his breath. When he had her by her wrists, he pinned her arms to her side, and hugged her. He held her tight until she stopped fighting. She collapsed against him, her body shaking.

"Calm down," he whispered into her ear as he stroked her hair. His warm breath was soothing. "I won't slaughter Ruby if she means that much to you." Pulling away from her, he said, "Okay?" He held her at arm's length, searching for a response.

"Okay," she said and sniffed. Wiping her hands across her eyes, she scrutinized Cal. "You promise?"

Cal smiled and touched her chin where she had missed a tear. "I promise." He took her by the arm. "Now let's head back."

Worn out from the run, Ellen wished she could rest her head on Cal's shoulder. "I didn't mean what I said."

Cal gave her arm a light squeeze and said, "I know." They walked toward the house. With no more words left to say, Ellen went inside and Cal headed back to the barn. She walked to her room and closed the door, aware of Lenore's watchful gaze. Exhausted, but feeling better, Ellen pulled out sheets of paper from under the bed and composed another letter to David, explaining her heroic efforts to save her pig. It wasn't much later when Ellen heard the wagon. She looked out the window and saw Cal leading the horses off his property.

Ellen rushed from her room and out the back door. Her mother followed her. When Lenore realized it was Cal's wagon, she asked, "Now where in the dickens is he going?"

Ellen shrugged. "I don't know."

“Well,” Lenore said and touched Ellen’s shoulder. “While he’s away, you can help me make some more Christmas goodies.”

* * * * *

Morning arrived sooner than usual. It felt like she had just gone to bed when she heard her mother calling her name.

“You’re going to sleep your life away? Get up, girl. It’s Christmas!”

She pried her eyes open and saw her mother, her hair loose around her shoulders, looking lovely, standing by her bedroom door. She heard Cal yell, “Ho, ho, ho,” as he stomped outside toward the barn.

Had it not been the excitement in her mother’s eyes, and the sound of Cal’s voice, she would have rather gone back to sleep.

Everyone acted itchy around the kitchen table while they ate their breakfast of bacon, eggs, biscuits, grits, and gravy. Ellen passed on the bacon. Lenore made everyone eat first before they could exchange gifts, so Ellen took big bites, barely tasting the food before swallowing.

Ellen placed her fork next to her empty plate. “Do we have to wash dishes now or can we open presents first?”

“Let’s open—” Cal began.

“Dishes first, please,” Lenore interrupted.

Ellen sighed but didn’t argue. Why spoil Christmas over dirty dishes? As fast as she could, she cleared off the table and scraped any leftovers into the slop bucket.

“How can I help?” Cal asked.

Lenore and Ellen stopped what they were doing and stared at each other. Cal never helped with the dishes. Before Lenore could decline his offer, Ellen threw him a dish towel and said, "You can dry."

When the dishes were done, everyone rushed to their respective hiding places to gather their gifts--Lenore and Ellen to their rooms, and Cal out to the barn.

Ellen hoped Cal would like the green scarf she knitted for him. During the fall, after they finished painting the barn and their hands healed and formed calluses, Lenore had been patient teaching Ellen the basic pearl and chain stitches. She gave Ellen sewing lessons as well. Sewing remained Lenore's best skill, something she never relinquished to Ada. Ellen helped her mother make lovely yellow curtains with lacy trim around the edges for every window. Lenore's sewing lessons paid off. Ellen managed to make a presentable apron out of discarded white flour sacks for her mother's gift.

They gathered in the parlor where Cal set their Christmas tree, a short pine he found the day before growing deep in the woods at the end of his property. Ellen made the popcorn chain twirling around its slender limbs. Lenore tied a scattering of colorful bows to the branches along with a few glass and wooden ornaments leftover from Christmases' past, theirs and Cal's. Ellen sat on the braided rug by the toasty fireplace while Cal and Lenore reclined on the sofa.

"You go first," Lenore said, handing Ellen a box wrapped in twine.

"It's lovely." Ellen held the lace-trimmed blue and yellow bonnet. She placed it on her head and blew her mother a kiss. "Thank you."

"But that's not all!" Lenore's face glowed with satisfaction. She reached into her skirt pocket, pulled out a small brown paper sack, and handed it to Ellen.

“Another present?” Ellen tore the sack in two and gasped when she saw what looked like a crystal on a stick. “Rock candy!” She plopped it in her mouth.

“I know how you love sweets.” Smiling, Lenore turned to Cal. “Now it’s your turn.”

“Oh no, it’s not.” Cal chuckled. “Ladies first.”

“No, I insist.” Lenore handed him his gift. “I hope it fits.” Neatly wrapped in brown butcher paper was a red and black flannel shirt she made for him.

“You did a mighty fine job. Thank you. Now here.” He handed Ellen her gift. She tore it open.

“A pair of ankle boots!” She sniffed the fresh smell of new leather. “And they have little pearl buttons!” She got off the floor and hugged his neck, noticing for the first time his own unique woodsy scent. It wasn’t the same as her father’s, but pleasing enough to make her want to bury her face between his neck and shoulders. She reluctantly pulled away and murmured, “Thank you, Cal.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled at her as she returned to her seat on the floor. Then he turned to Lenore. His expression became serious. He placed a small box in her hand.

Lenore lifted the lid and peered inside. She gasped. “Oh Cal!”

Cal grinned. “Do you like it?”

“Oh, I love it!”

Ellen couldn’t stand the suspense. “What is it?”

Lenore lifted a gold ring out of the box and handed it to Cal. “You put it on me.”

Cal placed the gold band on Lenore’s wedding finger. “Sorry, it’s so long overdue.”

“But well worth the wait.” Lenore grabbed Cal by the neck and kissed him long and hard on the lips, and then she whispered in his ear.

Ellen watched him blush as he averted her gaze. A knot formed in her stomach, so she grabbed the two boxes from behind her and thrust them at Lenore and Cal. “You have to open my gifts now.”

Cal seemed pleased with his scarf and draped it around his neck while Lenore fastened her apron around her waist. Lenore touched Ellen’s cheek. “You did good, girl.”

“Merry Christmas.” Ellen felt like crying, remembering how much her father loved Christmas.

“We’re not done yet!” Cal announced. “I think Santa left something out in the barn.” He marched to the back door.

“Oh Cal, you are so silly.” Lenore beamed with love and happiness making Ellen want to cry even more, though she wasn’t quite sure why. Her mother had a right to be happy. Life did move on. But Ellen wasn’t certain about its direction.

Cold wind wafted through the room as Cal carried in a big wooden box. He kicked the door shut with his boot. “Now,” he huffed. “I do believe this here package is for little Miss Ellen!”

Something shuffled around and whined inside the box. Ellen forgot about crying and rushed to throw off the lid. A black, brown, and white splotched puppy leaped out of the box. It licked Ellen’s face as she lifted it into her arms. She hugged it tight to her chest, caressed its long, soft fur, and breathed in its sweet puppy breath.

“It’s some kind of sheep dog,” Cal said. “It’s supposed to be good at herding.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?” Ellen lifted the dog above her head, looking for the answer.

Cal chuckled. “It’s a boy.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” Ellen said in a murmur as she hugged the puppy and kissed his nose. “I think I’ll name him Turner, after you.”

“That’s a funny name for a dog,” Cal said and laughed.

“I like it just fine,” Ellen said. The puppy licked her face. For the remainder of the day, Ellen held the dog and tried to forget about how wonderful Cal smelled and about Lenore’s new wedding ring.

Chapter Eight

March - April 1897

Before school let out for the planting season, a letter from David arrived. Ellen read it several times, not sure what to make of his news. He and Ada liked San Antonio more than Salt Flat. It sounded similar to Hartridge except larger. They lived in a small house behind a mansion. These Cooks were rich and paid Ada a handsome sum, according to David. He was certain if his mother saved enough, they, too, would be rich some day. The new Mr. Cook, whose first name was Percy, looked like a younger version of Ellen's father.

Ellen reread that part of the letter many times. How strange there existed another Mr. Cook who looked like her daddy. Percy was married and had two sons, George and Henry. George was twelve like David and Henry was ten. David was allowed to attend tutorials and play with them. Mr. Cook treated Ada and David like family, almost. David sounded happy.

Ellen relayed the contents of the letter to her mother. Lenore sat quietly in her rocker darning a black sock, eyes never once leaving her task. "Isn't that peculiar?" Ellen leaned her elbows against the back of the rocker, waiting for some response. "Aren't you delighted for their good fortune?"

Lenore finished the sock and placed it in her basket and picked another one in need of darning. "That is quite a coincidence, but Cook is a common name. It's good Ada works for someone wealthy. She deserves to be paid well. And it sounds like this new employer has taken an interest in David." Lenore put the sock, untouched, back into the basket. "When you write back, tell him how happy I am for them. Now if you don't mind, dear, I'm beginning to get a headache. I think I'll go lie down for a bit."

Ellen watched her lumber up the stairs. Winter was a hard time for her mother. Back in Salt Flat, she'd let Ellen read to her as she lay on her bed with a hot water bottle tucked beneath her neck. Ellen would read until her mother fell asleep for her daily nap. Being stuck indoors with the cold wrapped around the house like a vise was enough to make many a soul weary, but Ellen was determined to shake it off, knowing it wouldn't be long before the days grew warm enough to set them free. That's how her father had been. If only her mother could be that way, too. With a shrug, Ellen retreated to her room to write a reply to David. She wished she could visit him.

As she finished her letter, she heard a whining and scratching at the back door. Ellen snuck the dog into her room. Since her mother was napping, she would never know. At three months old, Turner's head reached Ellen's knee. His paws proved sign enough he would be large. "I guess you're almost too big to sit in my lap." Ellen wrapped her arms around the sheep dog's neck after he jumped on her bed. She loved the long-haired spotted dog more than Ruby and almost as much as Fairfax, but still something was missing. She needed a human friend.

Tom was long gone, not that she cared, and so far she had not felt inclined to write. Cal was right about Tom. There was something about the boy other than being boring. Ellen couldn't put her finger on what it was.

Danny shied away from her. She reckoned he was still afraid of Cal, but then again, she didn't give poor Danny Boy any encouragement either. No boy in Hartridge attracted her attention and the girls would never be willing to befriend her. Restless and unsure about her life, Ellen continued her schooling, wondering what she would do to make a living when she was grown should she be destined to be an old maid.

As the spring thaw melted away winter's hardness, leaving small patches of pale green tufts in its wake, Cal made an announcement at the dinner table. They were finishing a quiet meal of pork chops, potatoes, and squash. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and laid it on his empty plate. Clearing his throat to get their attention, he began, "Before you ladies get started with the dishes, I have some good news."

Ellen perked up. Maybe his news would benefit her, too. She glanced at her mother for a clue, but noticed nothing in her expression. Lenore had been rather quiet the past month. Her mother was still buried deep in the winter blues and now Ellen was beginning to experience it too. They stayed indoors as much as possible, keeping a constant fire burning to chase away the cold, but it remained chilly inside the house, making it necessary to wear a shawl for added warmth. If only Daddy were alive to dance her mother's blues away. They could all use some sunshine to brighten their lives.

"Our crops did well last year. I decided to make that money grow even further by expanding. Once I finish planting the fields, I'm going to start raising cattle. We've got six hundred acres of good grass needs to be put to use." His smile widened as he glanced from Lenore to Ellen.

Ellen had no earthly idea why Cal was so excited and what cattle had to do with her future. She glanced at her mother to see her reaction.

Lenore put her napkin beside her plate of untouched food. "Why that sounds wonderful, Cal, but how are you going to manage cattle by yourself?"

"I'm going to hire some local boys. They're always looking for work around here."

"I guess I could help," Ellen said. "Seeing how I'll probably have nothing better to do for the rest of my life."

Lenore reached across the table and petted Ellen's hand. "Now, now."

Cal said, "Working cattle isn't for a girl."

Ellen flushed. "I won't be a girl much longer. I turn fifteen in five months. In a year or less, I could be married with a house all my own."

Cal looked surprised. "Well, what I meant was there's men's work and there's women's work—always has been."

Ellen held her hands under the table and clinched her fists. Something about his statement bothered her: his self-assurance of how everything was meant to be. "Well, I had no idea what was involved. I thought I'd offer."

"That was sweet of you, dear," Lenore said.

"Yes, it was," Cal said.

Lenore continued. "But just think, once you're finished with school, you can move away from this God-forsaken town and become a teacher, maybe in a big city. Then you'll meet a man, get married, and have a house of your own."

Sudden agitation jolted Ellen into saying, "I don't want to be a teacher!" She stood and turned toward the back door, needing fresh air to stop the swirling thoughts and restlessness.

Lenore and Cal sat in stunned silence. After she shut the door behind her, Ellen heard Cal's chair scrape loud across the floor as he stood. She stopped and listened. "If she doesn't want to be a teacher, she doesn't have to be a teacher."

Ellen wrapped her shawl tighter around her as the wind tried to whip it off her back. She ran for the barn, wishing she had grabbed her coat. The beginning of spring was almost as harsh as the winter. The days were inconsistent—warm sunshine one day, blustery weather the next. Dust storms would whip through the farm, ripping limbs from trees and covering everything in a

brown veil. When the rains finally came, they would hold the dirt long enough for the sun to work its magic. Turner, who burrowed under the house, came running towards her. “Come on, boy,” Ellen called. “Let’s get out of this cold.”

Her fingers fumbled with the latch on the barn door; a gust nearly shut it on Turner’s tail once they made it inside. The wind moaned through the slates like a grief-stricken woman. If she listened close enough, it sounded like the cries of a baby. She shuddered and walked to Fairfax’s stall. Wrapping her arms around his thick neck, Ellen pressed her face into his warm winter coat. She scratched behind his ear. “You need a good brushing,” she said. His lips moved in circular motions through her hair, rummaging around, searching for a treat. He came to her ear and sniffed, making it tickle. Ellen giggled and pulled away. “Silly boy.” She rubbed his nose and let him lick her hand.

After massaging and kneading his muscles, feeling the power lying dormant there, Ellen slapped his rump. “Yes, you’re a good boy,” she cooed. She left his stall to grab a handful of grain, and returned to let him munch on it from her open palm. Sometimes, she wished she was a horse. Just about anything would be better than a teacher.

When Fairfax finished, Ellen wiped her wet palm on her skirt. She stepped out of the stall and found Turner lying in a mound of hay. Ellen curled around the dog, placing their heads together. Being a dog wouldn’t be so bad either, she thought, as she caressed Turner’s fur. The dog lifted his head and licked Ellen’s face. Why did life have to be so difficult? Why did her daddy have to die, abandoning her in this situation? Did her mother want to get rid of her? Or just looking out for her future? Ellen squeezed Turner closer to her. She felt so helpless, so alone. Her eyes grew cloudy with tears, but she didn’t want to cry. She wanted an answer. She wanted to know what she was supposed to do with this life.

Chapter Nine

Spring and summer 1897

Ellen moped about the house, helping Lenore with chores while Cal plowed the fields, seeded the rows, and traveled back and forth from town, hauling wood posts and barbed wire. Her mother misread her sour mood for not being included in the fence-making. While she and Ellen hung wet clothes on the line, Lenore said, “What if you went on out there and took them some refreshments? Those boys he hired from town might be worth meeting.”

Ellen dropped the clothes pin she’d been holding between her teeth and stood gaping at her mother. How could she suggest such a thing? Had she seen them?

Lenore hung the last shirt and brushed her hands together. “I know, let’s bake a pie.” Smiling, Lenore bustled off with the empty basket on her hip, the smell of fresh laundry following her.

Ellen had already spied the two young men working for Cal. One boy close to twenty, Seth, looked fine from behind, tall and muscular, but when he turned around, Ellen cringed. Dark greasy hair surrounded his scarred face, all sprinkled with red bumps, some oozing pus. When he smiled, he revealed a mouth full of brown, crooked teeth. Her stomach turned at the thought of him. The other boy, Ralph, a few years younger looking than Seth, stood short and stocky. He had a nice enough face, even teeth, dimpled cheeks, and clean brown hair, but Ellen, not overly tall for a girl, stood half a foot taller; she wasn’t interested in men shorter than herself. She had a feeling Ralph would balloon out as he aged. She didn’t want a fat husband either.

By the time the apple pie cooled, Cal arrived home finished for the day. “You can take it tomorrow,” Lenore told Ellen. The smell of apples and cinnamon lingered through the house as a reminder of her mother’s intentions.

That night, at the supper table, Lenore turned to Cal. "I think Ellen would be a big help to you and the boys."

Cal snorted. "I tell you, building a barbed wire fence isn't work for a woman. Besides I don't have time to train her."

Lenore reached across the table and patted his hand, her eyes darting back and forth between him and her daughter. "Now careful, you're about to get Ellen all riled. You know and I know she's tough as nails. Let her prove what she's capable of doing. Have those boys teach her. Surely, there's something she could do to help. Heaven knows she needs to meet a fellow. What better way?"

Ellen raised her voice and hand as if she were in school. "Pardon me, but I'm right here. I don't appreciate you talking about me as if I wasn't. As for you trying to marry me off to one of those two boys, you might as well forget it."

Cal glanced at Ellen and back at Lenore. "You need help around the house."

"Not all day, I don't."

Ellen knew this was untrue; there was always plenty to do, an unending list of chores. It was just another one of Lenore's ploys to get Ellen out of the house to meet a man, so she could get her out of the house for good. Just because she was expected to marry one day, she didn't see the hurry. Why couldn't she just wait until the right man came along? It wasn't like she was a burden. Or did her mother see her as such? She could never tell what her mother was thinking.

Cal continued eating. They all were silent, waiting for his reply. He wiped his plate clean with a piece of bread and popped it into his mouth. His eyes traveled between Lenore and Ellen as he chewed. After he swallowed, he said, "I'll tell you what. I'll let Ellen help out half a day, in

the morning before it gets too hot. The other half she can help around the house. How's that sound?"

Lenore smiled at Ellen and waited for her response.

Though Ellen was excited about doing something different for a change, she didn't want to give her mother or Cal the satisfaction by showing it. She shrugged, tossed her braid behind her back, and said, "Okay by me."

Cal woke Ellen way before the sun rose. She was used to rising early, but this seemed earlier than usual. After splashing her face with cold water and donning her oldest threadbare dress, she fried bacon and eggs, baked some biscuits and stirred a pot of white gravy. Breakfast tasted better knowing she didn't have to do the dishes.

"You do the cooking and I'll do the cleaning," Lenore volunteered. "No sense in denying who's the better cook." Ellen smiled as her mother kissed her cheek. Maybe she worried too much about her mother trying to get rid of her.

With the sun peeping over the hills, the morning began with a cool, pleasing breeze as Cal and Ellen made their way on the wagon to the fields. Ellen breathed in the smells of cedar and fresh cut grass, trying to calm her nervous excitement. Seth and Ralph were already waiting at the work site when they reached them. Seth left his bundle of wire he'd been uncoiling to greet them while Ralph leaned against his shovel.

"Boys," Cal announced as he hopped off the wagon. "This here is Ellen and she wants to learn how to build a fence. So boss her around as much as you like, she's your helper." Cal grinned as the boys snickered.

Ellen did her best to ignore them, avoiding Seth's crooked smile and Ralph's dimpled grin, put on some leather gloves, and said, "Let's get started then." If she was going to do a

man's job she needed to act and be treated like a man. She had no earthly idea how she was going to pull it off but she was going to give it her best effort.

Ellen's job was to deliver the wooden posts to Ralph after he dug each hole, while Cal and Seth attached and stretched the barbed wire to the already standing and secured ones. Dragging the rough cumbersome posts, she left a rutted trail in the soft ground behind her. After awhile all her muscles, some she never knew she possessed, began to strain with each step. She wondered why she'd volunteered, but by God, she would prove to them a woman could do anything she set her mind to.

On her sixth try, Ralph dropped his shovel and ran to her aid, picking up one end and lightening her load. Once they'd placed it in its hole, Ellen straightened her back and took off her gloves. Though she appreciated Ralph's considerate nature, she needed to put a stop to it if she was to be taken seriously. "What's the point in you helping me if it keeps you from digging? I can do this myself."

Ralph took a step back as if he'd been stung, looked at her again to make sure he'd heard her right, and shrugged. "Well, okay," he said and went back to digging. His soft brown hair fell across his face, hiding his expression.

After that he kept saying, "Thank you," every time Ellen brought a new post until she snapped. "Stop thanking me! I don't hear anyone else doing any thanking!"

"I'm sorry," he stuttered and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Cal laughed from behind her. "I forgot to warn you, Ralph. She bites."

Ellen swung around and said, "Very funny." She turned toward the wood pile before Cal could see her grin. Cal's laughter sounded so pure; it was contagious. Being near him now,

working alongside him, made her feel more like his equal, his friend. She liked this new feeling very much.

By noon, Ellen's back and arms ached. Sweat trickled down her forehead and between her breasts, but she said nothing of the discomfort. Cal and the boys' shirts clung to their wet backs. Seth peeled his damp shirt off and continued working. Ellen had never seen a man without his shirt on, or at least without long johns. Seth's muscles flexed as he worked but pimples covered his back as well as his face. Ellen looked away, embarrassed for him. Soon Ralph had his shirt off, too. Though not as muscular as Seth, Ralph's skin was tan and smooth. Shocked at first, she was about to cover her face and protest until it dawned on her their actions signaled her acceptance as one of the boys, so she said nothing and acted like it was perfectly natural to work alongside half-naked men. She waited for Cal to remove his shirt, curious about how he would look, but lunch time arrived and he never did.

Seth and Ralph found a shady oak tree to sit under to eat their lunch while Cal drove Ellen back to the house. Though disappointed in having to return, she was grateful her mother had lunch waiting for them. Ellen would now have time to cool off before beginning the second half of her busy day.

* * * * *

April seemed to blow by as fast as the spring time wind. They made a great deal of progress on the fence even though delayed for an occasional day of rain. Six hundred acres made for one long fence. Ellen never realized how much man power and hard labor was involved. Looking upon their work at the end of each day filled Ellen with a strong sense of pride she'd never felt before. She was a part of something, something large and unnamable, but something important.

“I bet it’ll be finished by July,” Cal said. He smiled at Ellen, his blue eyes shining. He had still not removed his shirt while they worked, but she found herself thinking about it, wondering what he would look like. Just from the way his arms looked when he rolled his sleeves she knew his would be the body worth viewing.

She grew strong over the past month. In the mornings as she dressed and the evenings as she undressed, she was astonished to see and feel the hardness of her muscles. She flexed her arms to squeeze her biceps, then stretched her long legs and ran her hands down her firm thighs. Her back no longer hurt, and she had enough energy to handle both of her jobs, out in the fields and around the house. Was this what it was like to be a man? If so, she liked it.

She worked well with Ralph; he reminded her of David and his playful, brotherly ways. Ralph treated her as if she were no different from Seth. “Think fast,” he would often say right before he threw something at her, sometimes a rock, sometimes a stick.

Every morning they brought a wooden barrel filled with fresh drinking water and left it sitting in the back of the wagon. They took turns filling smaller buckets to carry along. Ellen was headed to the bucket she shared with Ralph when she spotted her dog quenching his thirst. “Turner, get away from there. Your water is in the trough. Go home.” She tried chasing him away, but he just ran circles around her and appeared to smile as he panted, water dripping from his chin. Laughing, Ellen shook her head and was about to dump the bucket to refill it with fresh water when an idea came to her. Why waste water?

She lugged the half empty bucket to where Ralph was busy digging. “Think fast,” she yelled and threw the water the moment he turned around. She burst into laughter at the sight of his surprised face.

Ralph stood still for a second, but recovered, and like her sheep dog, he shook his long wet hair at her. He even smelled like her dog. She covered her face with her hands, laughing so hard, she almost fell backward, tripping on a log, as she tried to move away from him. From a distance, they heard Cal's voice shout, "You two need to stop playing and get to work!"

Cal didn't sound too angry. As for Ralph, she could tease him without worrying about what he thought. Ellen turned it into a game to make Cal, when he was there, take notice even though most of the time he acted as if he hadn't. She grew hungrier for his attention, wanting him to look at and talk to her more, to acknowledge the woman she was becoming.

One day, she devised a plan to catch Cal's attention. Pretending to drop one of the wooden posts on her foot, Ellen shrieked, hopped around on one foot, and did her best to make tears come to her eyes. Within seconds, Ralph stood by her side, taking her weight on his shoulder and guiding her to a mound of soft green grass. He helped her sit and took her foot in his hand. When he tried to remove her boot, Ellen screamed. She saw Cal and Seth running towards them. Already she felt special.

"What happened?" A scowl etched across Cal's face. He removed his straw hat and threw it on the ground.

"She dropped a post on her foot. It might be broken." Ralph rose and made room for Cal to crouch beside Ellen.

Seeing the look on Cal's face, Ellen said quickly, "It's not broken."

"Let me see." Cal reached for her foot.

She jerked her foot away, regretting her deception. "No, it'll hurt."

"It'll hurt worse if you let that foot swell inside your boot. Then we'll have to cut it off."

She stared at him in horror. Had she taken her charade too far? “It’s not bad, I promise. You don’t have to cut off my foot.”

The muscles in Cal’s jaw loosened and he managed a small smile. “I wasn’t talking about your foot. I’ll have to cut off your boot if your foot swells too much.”

Ellen’s face burned. Now Cal probably thought she was stupid. She sniffed. “Oh, I know that. I was just teasing. See, I’m feeling much better.” It was time to downplay the injury now.

“I still need to take a look.” Cal gently removed Ellen’s boot. He hesitated. “You’ll need to remove your stocking.” He stood and directed the boys to turn their heads.

Ellen felt all her hard won equality vanish in the breeze as she lifted her skirt enough to remove her stocking. Once her skirt was smoothed to cover all but her supposed injury Cal squatted and rubbed her foot and ankle, checking for broken bones. Hoping her foot didn’t stink, she bit her lip to keep from smiling, realizing for the first time how wonderful it felt to have her skin caressed by a man. But as he examined her foot, Ellen realized it was Cal’s touch, not just any man’s that she enjoyed.

“Nothing feels broken.” Cal scratched his head and put his hat back on. “Or looks even bruised, for that matter.”

“I imagine it’s a deep bruise,” Ellen said as she rubbed her foot, trying to stop her hands from shaking. “It’s feeling much better now.” She reached for her boot, wondering what to do with the thoughts pouring into her head.

“Don’t put that on. You need to soak that foot in some cool water and Epsom salt or vinegar. No need taking any chances. You’re done for the day, girl.” Cal looked at Seth. “Go get the wagon for me. I’m taking her home.”

Ralph knelt beside her, concern still on his face. “I hope you’re going to be all right, Ellen. I sure am sorry.”

Ellen worried what her little play for attention might cost her. What if Cal wouldn’t let her come back to work? She patted Ralph’s plump, sweaty cheek. “I’m going to be just fine. Tomorrow I’ll be right as rain. You’ll see.”

Seth stopped the wagon a few feet away from where Ellen sat. As Cal swept her into his arms and carried her to the wagon Ellen imagined him as some Byronic hero in a gothic novel. More new sensations rushed through her as she breathed in the woodsy scent of him and rested her head against his warm shoulder. She closed her eyes and listened as his boots crunched on gravel. If only he had a longer way to walk. Within seconds, he had her seated in the wagon and the horses headed toward the house.

“I’m sorry you have to stop working to take me back. It really isn’t all that bad.” She looked at his face, fearful of what she might find there. Did he know she was faking it? Would he hate her if he knew?

He glanced at her, nothing evident in his expression other than concern. “It’s no problem, Ellen. I’m sorry you got hurt. Now you just relax and I’ll have you home in a jiffy. I imagine your mother will be mighty worried.”

Ellen stiffened. She hadn’t thought about how this ploy would involve her mother. If only she could take it all back. Working with the men, she wanted to prove how she was so strong and grown up. Maybe she really was just a stupid and silly girl.

Her thoughts shifted again when they pulled into the yard and Cal lifted her from the wagon. At least the walk into the house lasted a bit longer and Ellen once again enjoyed the

briefness in his arms. As he held her, all her worries seemed to disappear. This was how she wanted to feel, for always.

Was it normal to feel this way? It was wrong, yes, because he was her mother's husband, but was it normal? It wasn't like he was her father or ever would be. Ellen tried to block the thoughts and creeping guilt from her mind.

Lenore dropped her knitting and rushed to their sides when Cal carried Ellen in. After Cal placed Ellen on her bed and told Lenore what occurred, Lenore said, "You stay put until we soak that foot. Need to prop it up afterwards. No walking around for you today, young lady."

Ellen pretended to limp the following day for good measure, but didn't want to take her ruse any farther. She begged Cal to let her return to work. "I promise I'll be more careful. It'll never happen again."

"I don't know. I never liked the idea of you working out there to begin with."

"But I did a good job, didn't I? I proved to be helpful." The idea of going back to life the way it was before, being stuck inside or close to the house, performing the same endless chores day after day, was enough to drive her mad. She enjoyed the freedom of more strenuous physical labor, and for once she felt like she belonged. "Please."

Cal frowned at her for some time before giving in.

As the summer trudged along, Ellen, with her mother's permission, found time at the end of each week to head back to the work site after her chores. Her mother seemed encouraged Ellen enjoyed the company of the boys. "I think Ralph likes you. He'd make a fine husband."

Ellen never commented one way or the other about her feelings toward him. "Mother, I like working outdoors, that's all."

Lenore would smile. It was good enough for her.

With her sheep dog running close behind, Ellen rode Fairfax to where the men worked. One hot steamy afternoon, she brought a watermelon they'd kept cool in the cellar and tucked it away in a burlap bag tied to her saddle. The men stopped what they were doing, wiped their sweaty brows with the dark blue bandanas they wore around their necks, and stared as she approached.

As she drew closer her breath caught in her throat. There stood Cal with his shirt off, the long sleeves tied around his neck. His broad shoulders were strong and tan, his upper body hairless, smooth bronzed muscle. He put the other two young men to shame in every way, in his stature, his complexion, and his beauty, even more in his lack of self-consciousness. Ellen fumbled the reins, nearly dropping them, and got her foot stuck in the stirrup as she dismounted, but she caught herself from falling and tried to hide her admiration by focusing on the ground and then on retrieving the watermelon.

Cal ripped into a chunk of sliced watermelon with large bites, dripping juice down his chin and onto his chest. He seemed oblivious to the sticky juice as he and the boys spit the black seeds from their mouths, trying to see who spit the furthest. Seeing him this way, with sweat shining on his smooth brown skin, made Ellen want to touch him, to wipe the juice from his chest, to run her fingers down his spine to the edge of his faded jeans. She swallowed hard to force down the lump lodged in her throat as she looked at him.

After that she started dreaming about Cal: sweet, sensual dreams. There was one where he was carrying her through a rain storm and into a dark forest where he laid her on a bed of leaves. Then he was next to her, lifting her dress as he kissed her, his hand sliding between her legs. Sometimes she awoke during these moments with sweat dripping between her now full breasts, gasping for breath. She had no idea why she had these dreams because she fought hard

not to think about Cal during the waking hours, but when she did, she fully remembered each moment with the heat of longing. She would hug her pillow and touch herself during these times and found the new feelings pleasant, but frustrating. If only she could imagine another man's hand wedged between her legs, but she knew of no other who attracted her. She knew it was wrong to lust after her mother's husband, but was it a sin to dream, something she had no control over?

Chapter Ten

Summer 1897

Rex, a local man with a bushy black beard and hair to match, delivered a bull on a rope behind an old rickety wagon. Ellen could hear the wheels squeaking as it came up the road. The black beast, if he had a mind to, could have stopped the wagon from moving or pulled it in the opposite direction. Cal took the creature to the pasture next to his other bull, separating the animals by a length of fence. They completed the barbed wire fence on schedule in the steaming heat of early July. Ellen could look at it proudly, knowing she'd played a part in it. In its creation she had grown stronger, and she hoped, a little wiser. The rough wooden poles with sharp barbed wire contained the tall green grass for now, but if not eaten or mown soon, the pasture would turn a pale brown from neglect.

"Why do you need two bulls?" Ellen asked while tagging behind.

Rex chuckled and waited for Cal to answer.

"We're bringing home twenty cows, and that other one is getting too old."

"And falling down on the job," Rex added, slapping his leg and hooting louder.

"Get a hold of yourself, man." Cal elbowed Rex in the ribs.

"Oh," Ellen said, remembering what bulls were good for. Cal must think she was an idiot. If he only knew what parts he played in her dreams and the thoughts she tried to chase from her mind. She climbed on the gate and stared at the creature grazing. "What's its name?"

Rex chuckled again. "It ain't got no name."

Cal glanced at the man and frowned. He turned to Ellen. "Why don't you name it?"

"You haven't even named the old one." Ellen hopped down so Cal could shut the gate.

"I've always called the other one Bull."

Ellen laughed. "That's not a name."

Cal cocked his eyebrows and grinned. "It is now."

Ellen followed the two men back to the house. "How about Butch? Butch and Bull."

The men laughed and Cal patted Ellen on the shoulder. "'That'll do, funny girl."

* * * * *

The railroad didn't deliver cattle all the way to Hartridge. Cal, Seth, and Ralph prepared to head to San Antonio to round up the cattle themselves.

"Just think. It'll be like the great cattle drives of the old days, though we won't be going to Dodge City." Standing in the parlor, Cal twirled his new cowboy hat in his hand, tossed it in the air, and jumped underneath to catch it on his head.

Ellen laughed and clapped her hands. "You're pretty good at that!"

He grinned, tipped his hat, and bowed at her. "Why thank you, ma'am."

Lenore shook her head and smiled from her place in her rocking chair as she polished his boots. "Will there be enough grass for the cows to graze on coming from San Antonio?"

"It's not like I'll be leading a thousand head of cattle. We should be back in a couple of days, if all goes well. Those cows will have plenty of grass waiting for them here when we do."

On the day the men left, Ellen watched from the kitchen window as Lenore grabbed Cal by the collar and made him lean from his horse to kiss her good-bye. When he saw Ellen watching, he removed his hat and waved it at her. She waved in return and sighed, wishing she had a man of her own to kiss good-bye, or better yet, wishing she could go with them. The belonging she'd felt during the fence building disappeared once the last nail was hammered in. She was no longer needed. There was nothing left to do but return to being just a girl who helped her mother.

Lenore and Ellen went about their daily routines of preparing three square meals while canning vegetables from their garden for future suppers. They swept and mopped the floors, scrubbed the stove, washed, ironed and darned laundry, all with little to say between them. Ellen had more time to read, but found her mind wandering often, visualizing what Cal was doing. She envisioned him swirling a rope, chasing after a loose cow too stupid to stay with the herd. Even as Ellen started reading *Pamela* again, she kept imagining the love stricken master looking like Cal, though she knew Cal would never act like Mr. B, the nobleman who tries to take advantage of Pamela. But day-dreaming of a different life wasn't enough to relieve the restlessness. If only she had a real future to think about or her own beau to envision.

The day after Cal left, while lying on her bed reading, Ellen kept hearing her mother let out deep sighs from the kitchen. She peered out of her room and saw Lenore sitting at the table knitting a yellow and white blanket.

“Mama, would you like me to read to you?”

“No, you go ahead and read it to yourself,” Lenore said without looking up.

Now it was Ellen's turn to sigh. It would be nice to have someone to talk with.

The day Cal and his men came home, Ellen heard them before they reached the property. Cows lowing intermingled with men yelling. It sounded like a stampede approaching. Dropping her book and leaping from her bed, Ellen ran outside to watch a sand storm whirl around the herd as the men led them through the gates. The dust stung her eyes and made her sneeze, so she went back inside. She'd have to wait before she could find out how their trip went.

After the men corralled the cows into the north pasture past the barn, Cal entered the house and danced sideways through the kitchen. Ellen and Lenore watched from the dinner table where they peeled and chopped potatoes.

“What do you have there?” Ellen rose from the table and tried to walk around Cal to see what he held behind his back.

He blocked her view by turning to face her. “It’s a secret.”

Her eyes widened. Even though he was covered in dirt, Ellen still thought him handsome. “Is it for me?” She doubted it, but asked just the same. The recent days of silence were driving her half mad.

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

She pretended to pout. “Why not now?”

“Because it’s not your birthday yet.” Before she could say anything more, he ran from the kitchen and bounded up the stairs. His heavy footsteps vibrated through the house.

“He’s acting like a school boy,” Lenore said, shaking her head, smiling. She returned to the stove to stir the simmering green peas and onions.

A few moments later, Cal skipped down the steps, grinning. “Do I have time to head to the creek and get a bath? I’ve never been this dirty in my life; it’s making me itch.”

“We’ll keep the food warm and wait for you, dear,” Lenore said.

Ellen watched as he ran out of the house, wishing she could go to the creek with him. She envisioned him with his shirt off, baring his strong back, the water playing at his waist, hinting at the shadowed contours of his lower body. The thought shivered through her. She bit her lip hard; she had to stop thinking about him that way.

* * * * *

August arrived in a hot whirlwind with the smell of cow manure and dry hay.

“We sure could use some rain,” Cal said as he stared at the cloudless sky.

Every morning, Ellen woke to the sound of hammers echoing far past the farm. The men spent every moment of daylight working, until they completed open-ended stalls along one fence line on the north pasture. When finished with chores, Ellen donned her bonnet, tucking her sun-bleached hair inside, and walked the perimeter. During the heat of the day, when the sweltering sun beat on their backs, she watched the new cows and bull saunter to the cluster of tall cottonwood trees for the cool shade. She guessed the stalls would provide some shelter for them during the winter. Old Bull shared his pasture with the milk cows near the barn. He didn't seem to notice the bull on the other side of the fence.

When Ellen completed her inspections, she rode Fairfax bareback to her special place with Turner racing ahead. With the lead rope, she tied the horse to a shady oak surrounded by tall green grass near the water. She stripped to her underclothes and floated in the lukewarm creek as the dog waded. When they got out, the hot air felt breezy. But it wasn't enough to stay in the shallows. Taking off the remains her clothing, she laid them neatly across a gray boulder to dry and swam further out in the creek. It grew colder the deeper it got. The smooth, cool water caressed her while the sun kissed skin it had never seen before. It had been a long time since she'd gone swimming. Her father taught her when she was six.

It had been summer, and her father had suggested a family picnic. They left early in the day to avoid the heat, but in the time it took their carriage to reach a suitable place with a rare shade tree, the temperature rose with the sun's glare.

While Lenore and Ellen unfolded the calico quilt and sorted through the food in the wicker basket, Frank walked to a nearby windmill and stock tank. A long wooden ladder leaned against the metal tank. Her father stood tall enough to look over the edge and dip his hand in.

"Let's take a swim." He removed his light jacket and placed it on the seat of the carriage.

“We have no suits,” Lenore said and waved her hand with a laugh. “Let’s eat our sandwiches and head back home. It really is too hot for a picnic.” She patted the empty space beside her.

“Nonsense.” Frank tugged at his moustache. “We’ll strip to our undergarments. No one’s around to see.” They were still on their own property where the fence-line faced a vacant field. “This is the perfect time for Ellen to learn how to swim.”

“But it’s nasty ole rain water.” Lenore rearranged the folds of her skirt fanning out around her.

“It’s fresh, clean and clear, pumped from that windmill.” Frank scooped a handful and tossed it in Lenore’s direction.

She squealed with laughter. “Oh goodness, Frank. Stop that.”

Despite her mother’s protests, Frank climbed the ladder in his long johns with Ellen, in her slip and bloomers, following close behind. She sat on the edge of the tank and waited as her father swam around in circles. Then he held up his large hands and yelled, “Jump!”

She did and landed in his arms without getting her head wet. He carried her around and told her his plans before beginning her lessons. First, he taught her to float on her back, and then how to hold her breath under water.

He bounced her in his arms and counted, “One, two, three” and blew in her face before dunking her. All the while, Lenore alternated between dipping her handkerchief in the cold water and dabbing it on her face, watching the two swim for a minute, and returning to her spot on the quilt in the shade to nap. By the end of the afternoon, her father taught Ellen how to dog paddle. They returned to the tank throughout that summer, and the next, until Ellen was confident enough to dive and touch the bottom.

Ellen was a confident swimmer now and squinting at the sun, she smiled at the memory. Her father would have liked it here. She savored every minute, every stroke as she glided along the glistening surface, keeping her head above water, pretending she was a mermaid.

On the day of her fifteenth birthday, she returned to her swimming hole, certain no one else had ever stepped foot near this creek. This was *her* creek, not like the one closer to home where they all bathed during the summer.

Ellen looked at her white naked body underneath the water. Her breasts floated and bobbed on the surface. She ran her hands down her narrow waist and enjoyed how the water made her skin feel slick as silk. She felt and looked like a woman. Ellen imagined Eve in her garden, being the only living woman around, so she chose the perfect name for her special place—Eden. After she named her creek, she floated on her back and wondered what Cal had gotten her for her birthday.

* * * * *

Ellen picked at her chicken and green beans. When was she going to get her present? After dinner, Lenore brought out a round gingerbread cake she had baked.

With raised eyes and a big smile, Cal said, “Why this is mighty tasty!”

And it was, but Ellen couldn’t sit still long enough to finish her piece. She jumped out of her seat, nearly knocking over her chair and rushed to Cal’s side and held out her hand. “Okay, now what did you get me?”

He grinned. His blue eyes sparkled. “I’ll give you three guesses.”

“Oh no, you won’t.” She wished she could tousle his hair, but knew it wasn’t appropriate. “Come on, hand it over.”

“Okay, okay. Hold your horses. I’ve got to get it.” Laughing, he stood and walked toward the stairs. He stopped and looked back at her, still smiling.

She waved him forward. “Hurry. I can’t wait forever.”

When he disappeared up the stairs, Ellen turned to Lenore. “What is it? Tell me.”

Lenore shrugged. “I have no earthly idea.” She began clearing the dishes off the table and scraping the leftovers in the slosh pail.

Ellen rolled her eyes. “Oh yes, you do. You just won’t tell me.”

Lenore placed a plate in the wash bucket. “He didn’t tell me he was getting you anything.”

Before Ellen could give it another thought, Cal stood by her side with a brown paper sack in his hands. Her mother turned her back and scrubbed at a spot on the table cloth.

Ellen reached for the sack, but Cal pulled it away. “Oh no, you don’t. You have to close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

“Okay.” Ellen did as she was told. She heard rustling of paper. Something small and metallic dropped into her palm.

When she opened her eyes, she gasped, “Oh Cal! It’s beautiful!” In her hands, she held a shiny silver locket on a thin chain. “Here.” She thrust it at him. “Put it on.”

She turned her back to him and lifted her long braid. His fingers brushed her neck as he first fumbled with and then finally hooked the clasp. Her skin tingled. She closed her eyes and smiled. When he finished, on impulse she twirled around and threw her arms around his neck. “Oh thank you, Cal. It’s the nicest gift I’ve ever gotten, not counting Turner and Fairfax.” She kissed his cheek.

“Ah, it’s nothing really. Glad you like it.” He laughed and his face turned red. Glancing in Lenore’s direction, Cal stopped laughing and coughed. Ellen let go of his neck and turned to see her mother facing them holding a soapy rag and a wet dish. Her blank face looked pale.

“Well,” Lenore said, breaking the silence. “Let’s get these dishes washed and hurry on to bed. I’m plum tuckered out after all this excitement.”

“I’ll go feed the horses.” Cal grabbed his hat off its hook and headed out the back door.

Neither Lenore nor Ellen spoke until they dried and put away all the dishes. Lenore took Ellen by the shoulders and studied her for a moment. Ellen waited, worried of what she would say. Without a word, her mother dipped a hand into her apron pocket and pulled out a bundle of folded white linen wrapped in a pink silk ribbon. “Happy birthday, young lady.”

Ellen took the bundle to find four handkerchiefs with the initials EMC stitched in pink. “Oh, Mother! They’re lovely.”

“I know it’s not as nice as Cal’s gift, but I made them myself.” She kissed Ellen on the forehead. “I’m going to bed now. I’m tired. Good night.”

“Good night. And thank you.” Ellen watched her mother leave the kitchen and head toward the stairs. Once she heard the bedroom door shut, she escaped to her own room. In the candle light, she admired her necklace, placing the cool silver locket against her lips, and twirled it between two fingers. Finally, she wrapped the necklace in one of her new handkerchiefs and wondered what was on her mother’s mind. Were her feelings hurt? Was she ashamed of her homemade gift or jealous of Cal’s store bought one? Surely, she wasn’t upset he bought her a gift? She couldn’t imagine her mother ever being jealous of her. Hadn’t her father always said Lenore was the loveliest lady in Texas? She still saw her mother as such. Ellen shook her head

and thought about Cal. What was taking him so long at the barn? Normally, he retired to bed soon after her mother.

Ellen didn't know how long she'd been dozing when she heard soft footsteps creaking up the stairs. The upstairs bedroom door clicked shut. She waited for the sounds of their lovemaking she so often heard and hated. She waited and waited, holding her breath until she felt her lungs would burst. No sound came from above, not even a mumbled "good night." For many nights to follow, no sound came.

Chapter Eleven

Fall 1897

Not wanting to upset her mother any further, Ellen wore her necklace tucked under her slip. And now her mother no longer treated her like a child. That alone would have been fine, but Lenore put distance between them as if she was one of those icy women from church. She spoke in either single words or simple sentences: “Here” or “Take this,” when she handed Ellen something. “Let’s get to work,” became the longest and most common of all. Her mother didn’t even bother to say, “Please” or “Thank you” anymore.

The silence between them made Ellen uncomfortable, but she didn’t know how to break it. While they were washing the breakfast dishes, she managed to speak. “Mother?”

“What?” Her voice was neither curt nor welcoming.

When Ellen couldn’t force the rest of the sentence from her mouth, Lenore looked expressionless at her and waited. “What?”

“Never mind.” Ellen knew her mother was still miffed at Cal for giving her the necklace, but he always gave nice gifts. Was it because it was silver? He gave Lenore gold, so why should it matter? And it wasn’t a wedding ring.

She swallowed and tried again. “Mother?”

Lenore glared at her. “For heaven’s sake, what?”

“Why are you mad at me?” Afraid to look her mother in the eyes, Ellen focused on her fingers in the sudsy water. Seconds passed.

“Now why would I be mad at you?” Her mother’s voice seemed to come from far away.

“I don’t know, you act mad, that’s all.” Ellen continued to stare at the dish water.

“Have you done something I should be mad about?”

Ellen glanced up. “No!” Her heart beat faster. They stared at each other. She couldn’t read her mother.

Her mother looked away first. “Then I have no reason to be mad at you.”

Lenore must have said something to Cal because he rarely smiled at Ellen, especially if her mother stood nearby. Work became the only saving grace for them all. No one had time for small talk as they went about harvesting and canning.

A week before school resumed they took some of their goods into town to sell and trade at Horton’s general store. Their heavy footsteps on the wooden planks announced their arrival before the bell on the door. The few customers inside looked up as they entered, with Cal leading the way and Lenore at his heels. Ellen kept a few paces behind them. From behind the glass counter, Mr. Horton greeted Ellen as if he had known her all his life. His smiling eyes scanned her from head to toe. “Why Miss Ellen, you sure have grown since you first came here. You’re looking mighty grown up.”

She was not aware he knew her name. She didn’t know what to say.

As if he sensed her confusion, his pale puffy face flushed and he tweaked his moustache. “I do believe you have mail.” He bustled into the back room and returned with an envelope. His hand shook slightly as he handed it to her.

Looking at the envelope, Ellen expected to see David’s familiar handwriting, but it was from Tom Clark. She had forgotten all about him and had never written as she promised. She glanced up. Mr. Horton smiled and winked at her.

“Another letter from David?” Lenore asked as they climbed aboard and took their respective seats on the wagon.

“No, as a matter of fact, it’s from Tom.”

“Tom?” Lenore’s voice sounded cheerful for once. “Why, that’s just dandy!” She clapped her hands together and held them that way. “He hasn’t forgotten you. That boy is more than smitten with you, my dear. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to marry you. Maybe he’s saved some money in order to do so. That would be splendid indeed.”

“Well, I don’t want to marry him. I may never get married.”

“Ellen, don’t say such things. You *will* get married.” Lenore placed her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead—end of subject.

As they headed back to the farm, Ellen asked, “How did Mr. Horton know my name? I never see the man.”

Cal looked at Lenore, waiting for permission to speak. Lenore turned her head and glanced at Ellen in the back of the wagon. In a dry voice, she stated, “Mr. Horton knows who we *all* are.”

Ellen read the letter as she bounced in her seat along the bumpy, dusty road.

Dear Ellen,

I thought you might have lost my address, so I took it upon myself to write you first. The railroad business is interesting and exciting. I’ve seen a world bigger than I ever imagined.

I think of you often and hope you have an occasion to think of me.

I’ll be home for Christmas. I hope to see you then.

Yours truly,

Tom

Ellen felt a twinge of guilt. She vowed to answer him with a brief note. She needed to think of some way of discouraging him.

After they arrived home, they unloaded the wagon with the provisions they bought or traded for at the store. Ellen carried two rolls of wool, one powder blue and the other sage green. She became better at sewing with each of her mother's lesson and thought perhaps she could one day be a dressmaker. It had to be better than teaching.

She and her mother would begin work on some new dresses soon. Several times they had already mended the plain brown dress Ellen wore now.

"These seams are stretched close to bursting," Lenore said after they let out and mended it, along with her two other old dresses. "I'll help you make some new dresses."

"And not like these old ones?"

"Ones more suitable for a young lady," her mother said.

"Ones with puffy sleeves and trumpet-shaped skirts?" Ellen asked as she bit through thread and put her needle away.

"Yes, yes." Her mother sighed. She had been doing a lot of sighing lately.

Lenore also ordered Ellen her first corset. Her mother probably thought it best to keep Ellen's newly curved figure hidden. At every opportunity, when Lenore was out of sight, Ellen would finger the silver locket under her clothing. She longed for the day she could dress like and be a woman, leave the farm, and start a life of her own without her mother's watchful eyes. She wasn't sure how much longer she could wait.

School only added to her dilemma. The day before it began, Lenore announced at the supper table, "Ellen, while the weather remains warm, you may ride Fairfax to school. It's not that long of a trek and he should do just fine." She took a bite from the buttery corn cob and wiped her fingers on her napkin as she chewed.

“But,” Cal added, while Lenore still had her mouth full. “Once it starts getting cold, I’ll take you.”

So the next day, Ellen tied her horse to the oak tree shading the front of the school and filled a bucket with water from the pump behind the small building. At first, some of the smaller children wanted to remain outside to pet or stare at Fairfax.

“I’ve never seen a Paint before,” little Stephen announced. He stepped forward from a small group of boys, lifted his dirt-covered hand, and stroked Fairfax’s neck. “I thought only Indians rode them.”

“I’m part Indian,” Ellen lied. “So don’t touch him or I might have to scalp you.”

Startled, Stephen took a deep breath, blowing air out his nose. The perpetual green glob blocking his nasal passage finally let loose and landed on Ellen’s sleeve.

“Oh my G . . .” Ellen gasped. She shoved her hand deep into her pocket and pulled out one of her new handkerchiefs and wiped the offending matter off. She gagged as she shook the cloth and tried to dislodge the mucus. When it dropped to the ground, Ellen waved her soiled handkerchief at all the children. “Get inside now, before I wipe your face with this.” After some squealing, the children ran into the building. Ellen thought about throwing the hankie away, but instead avoided the stain while she folded it and stuck it back in her dress pocket. She felt sick to her stomach the remainder of the day.

After the first week of school, Ellen’s knees stayed a constant shade of purple from bumping against the smaller children’s desks as she left one for another while tutoring them. The children grappled for her affection, constantly pulling at her skirt or poking her in the stomach.

“Miss Ellen, will you help me?”

“It’s my turn! She already helped you.”

“Don’t poke me,” Ellen growled as she poked them in return on their shoulders or on top of their heads.

This tug-of-war went on throughout the morning and afternoon. By the end of the day, Ellen wanted to scream. She would have howled all the way to the farm, but she didn’t want to spook Fairfax. If only she could strip off her clothes, jump in the creek, and scrub her skin raw. But the water was now too cold. Once home, she didn’t even want to talk to her mother or Cal. She’d had enough of human interaction.

Toward the beginning of October, late one night when she couldn’t sleep, Ellen stepped out on the front porch with a shawl wrapped tight around her. How she dreaded the coming morning and having to go to school. Shivering, she looked at the bright full moon. It grinned at her, daring her to take charge of her life. As if it spoke to her, she made up her mind. She wasn’t learning anything new at school, except to hate children and teaching. She agreed with the man on the moon; her formal education was finished and she would never step foot in a school house again.

Chapter Twelve

December 1897

A few days before Christmas, a loud knocking on the door caused Lenore and Ellen to jump in their seats. They were sitting at the kitchen table, warming themselves by the stove, quietly piecing together a pattern for new Christmas dresses. Now they were the same size, they could use the same design. Lenore teased, “Why we’re cut from the same pattern, you and me.”

Lenore glanced at Ellen as she set her pin cushion down. “Who on earth could that be?” They hadn’t received much company in the past year. The household remained silent when it was only the two of them. They endured the silence like an illness that would eventually pass. When Cal came home, Lenore had someone to focus on, and Ellen had her book to take her to another world.

Lenore stood and patted her bun, making sure her hair was in place and presentable. Ellen, who started wearing her hair down when not working outside, ran her fingers through it and brushed it behind her ears, pulling loose strands tangled in the hidden silver chain. Ellen peered out the kitchen window and rubbed the frost away as Lenore went to the door. A man with auburn hair stood on the porch, wearing a black woolen coat and holding a black hat in his hands. It wasn’t until Lenore opened the door and spoke when Ellen realized who the man was.

“Why Tom! I almost didn’t recognize you. You’ve grown since the last time you were here.”

“Yes, ma’am, I reckon I’ve grown a foot since then.” Tom Clark’s voice sounded deeper.

“Well, get yourself in here and out of the cold.” Lenore opened the door wider and stepped aside. She held out her arms. “Let me take your coat.”

Ellen stood frozen in the kitchen, struggling with what she would say to Tom. She wrote him a letter, a very short one, apologizing for not writing sooner, but her life was too busy with housework and school work. Guilt stirred in her stomach because she always found time to write David, and now she no longer went to school since she managed to convince Miss Shoemaker to give her a diploma a year and a half early. She shrugged off the feeling and took a deep breath before she entered the parlor. He stood close to the fireplace and rocked on his feet as he warmed his backside and twirled his hat in his hands.

“Hello Tom.” Ellen extended her hand in greeting. She noticed the beginnings of a thin mustache above his lip. His hair was shorter and darker, more neatly groomed. He had grown, not only into his large ears, but in height as well, but then again, so had she; he was more than a head taller. His shoulders were broader now, making him look more like a man, but there still remained a trace of boyhood in his face.

Tom took her hand, but didn’t shake it; he merely held it with the lightest of touch. Even in the cold, his hand felt damp with sweat. His smile revealed whiter teeth than she remembered and many of his freckles were erased from his face. “You look well,” he said. His blue eyes twitched.

“Why thank you, so do you,” Ellen began. “How—?”

“How—?” Tom spoke at the same time.

They both laughed. Ellen released her hand, and Tom’s face glowed crimson.

“Why don’t you two have a seat,” Lenore said. “I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

Ellen watched her mother rush out of the room. Though she’d lost some of her mother’s hard-earned closeness, Ellen didn’t want to be alone with Tom either. He looked improved in appearance, but not enough to put her at ease.

Tom sat on the sofa, so Ellen took the rocking chair.

“I’m only here until Christmas day and then it’s back to work,” he said. He spread his fingers and patted his knees.

“What exactly do you do?” Ellen asked, relieved he wasn’t back permanently.

“Well for now, I’m the boiler man. I shovel coal in the boiler and check the water gauge to keep the steam engine running smoothly, but soon I’m being promoted to a porter.” Tom sat straighter and adjusted his tie. “After a year or maybe less, I’ll be eligible for a desk job at one of the stations, selling tickets. Then I’ll be able to settle in one place, even buy a house. I’ve been saving all my wages while I’ve been living with my uncle. And with my promotion, I’ll have several choices of towns to choose from.”

“That’s wonderful,” Ellen said. She wished she had, if not his job, at least his options.

Lenore entered the parlor, carrying a tray with two steaming hot cups of tea. “My! Tom, you sure have come up in this world. I bet your mother is mighty proud.”

Tom blushed and smiled. “I guess she is.”

“I’d love to join y’all and hear more about your exciting adventures, Tom, but I have much to do. I’ll leave you two alone to catch up. I hope you’ll stop by again. You’re welcome to supper anytime.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Turner. I’d be much obliged.”

Lenore waved her hand. “Oh for heaven’s sake, don’t be so formal. You’re almost like family. Call me Lenore.” She flashed a smile at him and then at Ellen. “If you’ll excuse me now.”

Inwardly cringing, Ellen watched her mother’s retreating back, knowing full well what Lenore’s words implied. She picked up a cup and saucer, took a large sip, felt the hot liquid burn

her throat, and almost coughed it back up. Setting it back, she glanced at Tom. In her annoyance, she forgot to hand him his cup of tea. “Oh, where are my manners?” She tried her best to imitate her mother and handed him a cup. She hoped he choked on it; it would serve him right for barging back into her life.

Tom took a sip and studied the room. Ellen followed his eyes. Though this parlor paled in comparison to the lavishly decorated one back in Salt Flat (everything imported from catalogs), Lenore *had* done wonders to the place, considering her limited funds. Dainty yellow checkered curtains trimmed in white lace hung on the windows and cream-colored pillows embroidered with a rainbow of swirls sat on the green velvet sofa. She placed a collection of painted porcelain figurines on the fireplace mantel—a figure of a man and a woman dancing, one woman playing the flute, and a man playing the violin—all the past two years’ worth of birthday gifts from Cal. It now looked more like a woman’s home than a man’s.

Ellen and Tom sat in silence until Tom sneezed. “Bless you,” Ellen said. Maybe he was coming down with something and wouldn’t be able to stop by again. She could only hope.

“Thank you,” he replied. He set his cup down and looked at her. “I’ve thought about the summer we spent together for a long time now. I wonder, have you?”

Ellen took a sip of tea to contemplate. She had to stop whatever was about to happen, but how? “To be perfectly honest, Tom, I haven’t given it much thought.”

He looked wounded. “But . . . we kissed!”

“So?”

“Doesn’t that mean *something* to you?”

Ellen took a deep breath. “We were children then.”

Tom shifted in his seat as if he wanted to jump up. "I was hoping . . . I've seen a bit of the world now, and I have to admit, Ellen, you are the most beautiful young lady I have ever seen. You've grown even more beautiful since I last saw you."

Surprised by his compliment, Ellen said, "Why, that's very sweet, Tom."

"What I'm trying to say is I was hoping you and I could begin anew now we're older." He puffed his chest out and leaned toward her. "I want to court you."

Ellen stared at him.

"I'm making good money. I could take real good care of you once we're married. I'd let you pick where we'd live, with the towns I have to choose from."

"Oh Tom! I'm flattered, I really am. But I'm not sure I ever want to get married. I was thinking of becoming a dressmaker or a governess. I'm sure you can find a better wife elsewhere." She hoped it would be enough to deter him.

He rose from his seat, knelt by her chair, and grabbed her hand. "I don't want anyone but you, Ellen. I would do my best to make you happy. You don't have to answer me now, but promise you'll think about it?" His eyes pleaded with her.

She was about to tell him no, when the back door opened with a loud bang and a gust of frigid wind blew from the kitchen and into the parlor. Flames from the fireplace crackled and rose, and then the back door shut. A few sparks flickered into the air and died before hitting the wooden floor.

"Burr," Ellen heard Cal bellow. "What are you doing?"

"Shush!" Through the wall came Lenore's harsh voice.

Tom let go of Ellen's hand and hopped to his feet. "I best be going. Promise me, you'll think long and hard about what I said?"

Before she could answer, Cal entered the room. “Hello, Tom!” He shook the young man’s hand. Tom wasn’t as tall as Cal. His clothes hung on him as if waiting for him to grow up, whereas Cal’s were loose enough to allow movement, but snug enough to reveal a man’s muscular build. If Tom had been half the man Cal was, she wouldn’t mind him courting her.

“Uh hello, Mr. Turner. I’m in town for a short while, so I thought I’d drop by.”

“Well, good to see you.” Cal looked at Tom’s flustered expression and then at Ellen. His eyebrows arched as if he could read her mind. He turned back to Tom. “You heading out?”

“Yes sir, got to head back home.” Tom retrieved his hat from the sofa and fumbled it in his hands.

“So soon? Why you just got here,” Lenore said as she bustled into the room. She flashed a quick scowl at Ellen and an adoring smile at Tom.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well, if you must. Let me get your coat.” When she returned, Lenore handed it to him and said, “Come to dinner tomorrow evening, will you?”

“I . . . don’t know I can.” He swiftly looked from her to Cal and then to Ellen. When she didn’t say anything, he looked at his hat.

“Then come by the next,” Lenore demanded.

“That’s Christmas Eve,” Cal stated.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“But his folks—“

Lenore frowned. “Would your folks mind, Tom?”

“I . . . doubt it. We celebrate Christmas on Christmas morning.”

“Then it’s settled!” Lenore clapped her hands lightly together and beamed with delight.

Ellen could have kicked her. She had practically gotten rid of Tom and now her mother went and invited him to dinner. If only she could just run away to some foreign land, never to see Tom or her mother again.

After Tom left, Lenore watched from the window until he was far from hearing. She turned to Ellen and shook her finger at her. "What were you thinking? That young man is in love with you and will take excellent care of you. You'd be a fool to pass up his offer."

"But I'm not in love with him!" Ellen hated her mother's finger being so close to her face.

"He asked you to *marry* him?" Cal's eyes opened wide.

Lenore shot him a look that could boil water. "He asked to court her. He's offering her a life and a home of her own. She needs to accept."

Anger sweltered inside Ellen. "I don't need to do any such thing. I'll leave if you want me to, but I won't marry Tom." She headed for her bedroom before she could lose her temper further.

Cal caught Ellen by the arm. "Whoa! Wait a minute, you two."

Lenore glared at Cal, stalked up the stairs, and slammed the bedroom door.

"I'm not a horse!" Ellen jerked her arm out of his grasp and stomped to her room. She banged the door shut and leaned against it, breathing deeply, trying to slow her racing heart.

From the other side of the door she heard Cal. "Damn!"

Later in the afternoon, lying on her bed, fiddling with her necklace, she deliberated on what to do. Hearing Cal curse for the first time troubled Ellen. What was happening between her and her mother wasn't his fault. It wasn't fair to him. It was time for her to go. But where? Though she thought about becoming a dress-maker, she wasn't skilled enough yet. But she knew

she qualified to teach. She still didn't want to be like Mrs. Shoemaker. Perhaps being a governess like Jane Eyre would be better; dealing with one or two children wouldn't be as bad as a whole classroom. She would then have a place to live while earning money. Once she saved some, she could find her own place to rent *and* a dress-making job. She pulled out her stationery and composed a letter. She would place an advertisement seeking employment just as Cal did for a wife.

After drafting the ad, she thought about how to place it. The weather was too blustery cold to ride to town on Fairfax. It was much farther than the school and she'd never ridden that far before. She thought a little longer and decided to ask Cal at dinner to deliver it for her.

When she came out of her room, Ellen noted the material and patterns were put away. Her mother sat at the table, holding her head in her hands. She'd been crying.

"Oh Mamma!" She rushed to her side.

Lenore reached out to Ellen, and they both started hugging and crying. Ellen knelt on the floor with her head in her mother's lap. As Lenore stroked her long hair, she said, "I worry about you. You've grown up so fast. I want you to have a good life."

"You don't have to worry. I've got it all figured out." Ellen prayed her mother didn't see the silver chain beneath her hair. It would only upset her again.

Lenore removed her hand from Ellen's head. She stared at her daughter. "What, pray tell, have you figured out?"

Ellen told her mother all about her plans to be a governess and about writing the advertisement.

Lenore shook her head and gazed at the ceiling. "Lord in Heaven, what have I done to deserve this?" She looked back at Ellen. "Why won't you give Tom a chance?"

“Because I don’t love him.” Why couldn’t her mother accept that?

“Child, most people marry *without* being in love. Some are fortunate enough to fall in love *after* they’re married. Used to be when parents arranged the marriages for their children. You’ve read too many of those fairy tale romances. Real life isn’t that way.”

“If I can’t marry for love, then I don’t want to get married. It’s as simple as that.”

“You are so stubborn. You must have gotten that from your father.”

Ellen laughed. “You were always the stubborn one, Mother. I think I got it from you.”

Lenore let out a small laugh, touched her daughter’s head, and scooted her chair away from the table. “You might be right. Just give it all a bit more thought before you do anything rash. It wouldn’t hurt to let him court you while you make your decisions. It’s not like there’s another man in your life. Think about it.” She patted Ellen’s head and stood. “Now let’s get cooking.”

Cal came in from the cold with his head down as they prepared dinner. He didn’t see them until he removed his hat and hung it on its hook. When he turned around, he hesitated. Lenore smiled at him. He approached her and planted a timid kiss on her cheek. “I see you’re feeling better.”

“Yes, I am. I don’t know why I got so emotional, must be lack of sunshine. Ellen and I reconciled, so everything is fine.”

Ellen thought his blue eyes looked dark and confused.

At dinner, Lenore mentioned Ellen’s plan. “I guess if she isn’t going to marry Tom she might as well place the advertisement. If she gets employed, maybe she’ll change her mind and see marrying Tom is the best option.”

Cal shook his head. “I don’t know if it’s such a good idea.”

Lenore put her fork down, followed by her napkin. “And why not?”

He shrugged. “Well, she’s still a bit young and we sure need her help around here.” He glanced at Ellen. “If it’s money you’re wanting—“

“That’s not it!” Lenore interrupted. “She wants her independence.”

Ellen glanced at Cal and lowered her eyes. “Will you place the ad for me? Since you know what to do?” Ellen could never tell them she needed more than independence.

Cal let out a long sigh. “If that’s really what you want. I’ve got to go into town to get some things I ordered, so I’ll deliver it for you tomorrow.”

And so it was settled.

Chapter Thirteen

Christmas 1897

Cal brought a headless chicken into the house and handed it to Lenore. “Must be the heat that comes ahead of a cold front. With as warm as it is now, I bet it’ll be a doozy of a storm tomorrow.”

Lenore turned around and passed the carcass to Ellen. “Let it boil for thirty minutes and then get to plucking.”

There was almost nothing as dreadful as plucking a chicken. Ellen breathed through her mouth to avoid the awful stench as she sat on the front porch, rocking in a chair, flicking feathers into a bucket. She hated the smell and the texture of its slick dead skin against her fingers. At least she could sit outside. Consoling herself, she tried not to think about Tom’s upcoming visit.

It didn’t feel like Christmas Eve. They arranged the Christmas tree with all its decorations and ornaments earlier that morning. Ellen made a wreath out of a strip of chicken wire she’d twisted into a circle. After weaving small green cedar branches and pine cones through the wire, Ellen then added red holly berries and sprigs of mistletoe. She hung it with a nail on the front door. Even after she finished, Ellen still wasn’t in the Christmas spirit. Maybe something would keep Tom from showing. One could only hope.

She shivered. It wasn’t as warm as she thought. Sunlight shining through the windows teased and whispered early spring, but once outside, the crisp, cold air shook the skeletal trees and reminded Ellen winter had not left, to go back inside and grab a coat. With a coat on, the warmth fell on her as she lifted her face to the steel blue sky, letting her mind wander as the sun’s rays lulled her into a drowsy stupor. She fantasized about who would read her advertisement. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if she found employment in a huge mansion on an

estate filled with beautiful fountains and gardens tended by a real gardener? Cal said the newspaper's readership covered a wide area of Texas and parts of Oklahoma. Surely only the well-to-do would need a governess, and with Texas being as large as it was, there had to be a few of them out there.

When Ellen finished with the sticky feathers, she took the bald bird back to the butcher's block and chopped off its feet. She remembered when she was little how David once chased her around the yard with chicken claws he'd scavenged from a nearby farm. Ellen screamed with terror as he growled and clawed at the air in front of her face until Ada scolded him to stop. She smiled at the memory and sighed. Now it was time to gut the carcass—another chore she detested.

Once she completed all the dirty work she soon forgot it as the buttery smell of baked chicken wafted through the house. She helped her mother peel sweet potatoes, snap green beans, and chop onions for the side dishes. When done, she began mixing the flour and sugar for cookies.

As the bright afternoon sun made its slow descent and chased away what little warmth remained, Tom rode up on a gray dappled horse, casting a long shadow. Ellen watched his arrival from the front porch where she finished sweeping. Dread swallowed her whole. If only she could fly away on her broom like a witch in a fairytale.

Tom tipped his hat at her before dismounting. He withdrew something from his saddlebag. His approach seemed hesitant. Ellen stood frozen against her broom. As his shiny black boot reached the first step, he gazed into her eyes and tried to hand her a small heart-shaped box. "Merry Christmas," he said.

“You shouldn’t have.” Ellen didn’t reach for the box. She didn’t want it. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“A good meal is enough of a gift for me.” He took another step and pushed the heart at her. “Go ahead. Take it.”

Once she held it in her hand, Tom’s face relaxed. He smiled. Ellen placed the broom against the house and headed for the door.

“Wait!” His voice sounded panicky. She turned back to him. “Open it out here, while we’re still alone.” He thrust his hands into his coat pockets, squared his shoulders, and rocked on his heels, waiting.

She stared at the box. It was small and stained a light tan. Her name was engraved in red on the top. Why did he have to keep pressing her? It made her want to scream. Holding her breath, she removed the lid. With her hand to her mouth, she let the air seep out soundlessly. Thank goodness, it wasn’t an engagement ring. She raised it out of the box. Sunlight glinted off it and into her eyes. It was a silver charm bracelet. She blinked to focus on the charms. There was a horse, a heart, and her initial E.

“I wanted to get you a promise ring, but I know you’re not ready.” His voice took on speed. “So I figured you’d like the charms. I hope you’ll wear it and think of me, and think about my proposal.” He reached behind his collar and pulled out a chain. “I have the T charm in case you decide to accept. You can have it then.”

When Ellen remained silent, he asked, “Would you like help putting it on?” He stepped forward and stood even with her on the porch. He took the bracelet and lifted her thin wrist.

Ellen watched him latch the bracelet as if from far away. It was another girl's wrist, not hers. She glanced up. Tom's face turned pink and beads of sweat perched on his thin mustache like morning dew.

"Thank you," she managed to say. "You are very thoughtful." And he was, but she wished he wasn't. Why did he have to be so nice to her? If only she could feel something for him, but she didn't. "Shall we go inside now?" She actually liked the bracelet. Why did he have to go and make her feel guilty?

While Ellen put Tom's coat and hat away, Cal shook his hand. "How about this weather?"

"Quite unusual for this time of year."

"Yes, it is." Cal bent, grabbed a stick, and poked the logs in the fireplace. "Still a bit chilly in here though." When the fire roared back to life, Cal straightened and looked at Tom.

Tom coughed. "How are your cows doing?"

"Doing fine. We'll be seeing calves everywhere this spring." Cal put his hands in his pocket.

"That's good." Tom glanced at Ellen as she stood with her hands clasped behind her back.

"Dinner's ready," Lenore called from the kitchen.

Relieved, Ellen helped Lenore place it on the table. They didn't have to waste time with small talk; they could just dig in.

Talk at the dinner table remained stilted and the air grew heavier. Ellen did not mention her gift, but when she reached for her glass of tea, Lenore spotted it right away. "Why, that sure is a pretty bracelet."

“Tom gave it to me,” Ellen said. She gave a little turn of the wrist for emphasis. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cal looking in her direction. She wondered what he thought about Tom and his gift. He’d never seemed to really like him though he treated him fairly.

“That was very sweet of you, Tom.” Lenore smiled. “You’re such a considerate young man. Would you like some more of Ellen’s delicious chicken?”

“No thank you, ma’am. I’m stuffed.” Tom patted his stomach. “It was mighty tasty. Ellen sure is a good cook.”

“Yes, she is,” Cal said with his face bent over his plate. It was the only comment he had made so far.

After another awkward moment of silence, Lenore stood. “Anyone for dessert? Ellen made some sugar cookies.”

Tom looked at Ellen and smiled. “Well if Ellen made them, I’ll have one.”

Ellen’s food bubbled in her stomach; she worried it might run right through her. While Lenore poured coffee, Ellen left her seat to get the plate of cookies and offered it to Cal first, and then Tom. She left the plate by her mother’s place at the table.

“No coffee, thank you.” She held her hand before her mother could pour her a cup.

Lenore touched her hand against Ellen’s forehead. “Are you feeling poorly? You look pale. I hope you’re not coming down with the flu.”

“Just full,” Ellen said. She took her seat, placed her hands in her lap, and prayed no one could hear her stomach gurgle and growl.

Tom glanced around the table as he devoured his cookies, his eyes darting and blinking from one person to the next and back again. Ellen watched him, but whenever his gaze landed on her, she looked away. He grabbed his mug and gulped the hot coffee. The silence shrouded the

room like thick cotton batting, making it sound like he slammed the empty mug on the table.

“Well, I hate to eat and run, but I best get home before the front blows in. Thank you for the wonderful dinner.” He placed his napkin on top of his plate. “I hope you folks have a very merry Christmas.”

Cal rose from the table. “Same to you, Tom.” He waited for Tom to stand and offered his hand. As they shook, he said, “I’ll walk you to the door.”

Lenore stood. “Honey, let Ellen. I’m sure they’d like to say their goodbyes. You can help me with the dishes.”

“Good luck to you then.” Cal nodded his head at Tom before retrieving the dishes from the table.

Ellen headed for the parlor without looking at anyone. Tom followed her. She handed him his coat and hat and opened the door. She placed her hand on her stomach as it gurgled again. “Thank you for the thoughtful gift,” she said.

Tom took one step out and turned around. “Ellen, please think about my proposal. You have a whole year to decide.”

When she said nothing, he took a step closer to kiss her cheek. She held her hand against his chest to stop him. “I’m sorry, Tom. I’m feeling a bit sick. You’ll have to excuse me.” She slammed the door behind her, lifted her skirt, and ran around the side of the house and headed down the graveled trail to the outhouse. “Have a Merry Christmas!” she yelled. Ellen wasn’t sure if it was the chicken or Tom that made her sick, but thank God she made it in time.

On Christmas morning, Ellen felt better though her stomach muscles were sore as if she strained them lifting something heavy. Eating little for breakfast, she wasn’t excited about unwrapping presents. The cold front returned and shook the house with whistling winds. She

would rather stay in bed, warm and cozy beneath her quilt, dreaming of a life filled with romance. But her mother called her to help with breakfast, so she emerged from her cocoon, threw on her clothes, and bundled her coat, dreading the daily trip to the barn for eggs and milk.

After breakfast, they were ready to unwrap gifts. She knitted a white shawl to give to her mother. For Cal, Ellen braided a dark brown leather strap to go around his cowboy hat.

This year Ellen's Christmas presents were from both Cal and Lenore. The first package, wrapped in white butcher paper, held parchment. Ellen ran her fingers across the smooth, off-white paper.

"That's high-quality paper," Lenore stated. "I know how you love to write letters."

Ellen smiled. "Thank you, Mother."

"Thank Cal, too."

Ellen looked at Cal and murmured, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Cal replied. He sat on the edge of the sofa. His fingers fidgeted with a piece of string. His eyes did not rest on Ellen for long.

The second package contained a pen, and the third a bottle of ink. The last was a silver ink stand. She wondered if these gifts were a sign. Were they for writing letters to her mother once Ellen left home? Was she in a hurry to be rid of her?

"It's supposed to save seventy-five cents worth of ink within six months. Why, that's more than what the stand cost," Lenore said as Ellen lifted the shiny silver object out of its box. "See what else the card says about it inside."

Ellen read the card aloud. "It seals ink from the atmosphere and prevents evaporation. It won't overflow and delivers ink to the pen in perfect liquid form."

"Fancy, huh?" Cal said. His expression stated he had no idea one way or another.

“It’s very nice.” Ellen turned it around in her hand, noting its heavy weight for such a small object. There were four intricate legs shaped like the ends of expensive silverware—something Ellen hadn’t seen since her father died.

“Now you can write fancy letters instead of lead ones,” Lenore said with a smile and let out a small laugh.

Though Ellen appreciated her gifts, something about this Christmas didn’t feel right. It felt sad, hollow, and cold. She guessed Christmas gifts were really just for children.

When Lenore opened her gift from Cal, Ellen knew he must be seeking her mother’s forgiveness. Lenore held a beautiful pearl bead necklace. The necklace contained three strands of what Cal called “the best quality pearls,” graduated large in front and small at back with a pearl bead clasp and three small diamonds on each side. It was lovelier than the other pearl necklace. Ellen wondered what would happen to her father’s old gift. Would her mother continue to wear it, too?

As Lenore planted a kiss on Cal’s cheek, Ellen knew, without a doubt, her mother had swept the past from her memory, no different from the way she swept dirt from the house, as if Ellen’s father never existed. If his ghost had never been, then what did that make Ellen? Just an unwanted woman in another woman’s house? The thought sent chills through her and made her stomach tighten in a knot as if she would be sick again.

Chapter Fourteen

February 1898

If Ellen didn't hear any responses from her advertisement by spring she would indeed go mad. She wrote David and poured out her frustrations with the gift of new ink.

That evening, Ellen cooked her first steak, a large bloody one, fresh from the slaughter of one cow whose other parts were sold to Horton and Sons. Ellen wondered if the cow's blood was a sacrifice to appease Lenore, the goddess. Cal probably used the money from the sale to pay for her mother's precious 32nd birthday present: pearl earrings to match the new pearl necklace from Christmas. These presents surely granted Cal forgiveness for the mistake of Ellen's gift of a silver locket.

Lenore flushed with delight, yet barely touched her food. After a few bites, her face turned pale. She sipped her water, swallowed and stood abruptly. "If you'll excuse me." She rushed for the back door.

"Mother?" Ellen left her chair to follow.

Lenore made it outside in time to vomit behind a bare rose bush.

Ellen grabbed hold of her mother's apron strings in case she should topple. "Was it the steak?"

"Should I fetch the doctor?" Cal asked.

Lenore waved a hand at them to get away from her. She straightened and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "I'm okay," she said, heading back into the house with Ellen and Cal in her wake. When she made it to her chair, she took a sip of water and a deep breath. Her face was flushed and sweaty. "I have something to announce. Y'all have a seat."

Ellen wasn't sure how to take the news. She could tell by Cal's hesitation he was shocked. Lenore became teary eyed, "I thought you'd be happy."

Before she could break down completely, Cal hurried to her side, crouched awkwardly, and wrapped his arms around her shoulder. He took her hand and kissed it, and managed to say, "That *is* exciting news."

Lenore wiped her eyes with her napkin. "I would have told you sooner, but I wanted to make sure I didn't lose it. I'm almost three months along now." She smiled at Cal. "You're going to be a wonderful father." She looked at Ellen and added, "Aren't you excited?"

Ellen couldn't make her mouth move. Her brain emptied of all thoughts. "I don't know what to say. I'm shocked!"

Lenore smiled. "Now don't worry. You'll be a wonderful sister." She glanced back at Cal. "Our baby will be blessed." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Now if you don't mind, I think I'll go lie down and rest. I'm feeling rather weak."

"Let me help you." Cal stood and pulled her to her feet. He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her out of the kitchen.

Ellen wanted to scream. She didn't want to be a sister. Her mother was too old to be having a baby. Before she could start crying, she grabbed a bucket and dashed outside. She pumped the water handle fast and hard. A sharp pain ripped through her shoulder. When the water overflowed the bucket, she stopped pumping and took a deep breath. It was difficult to breath. She had to get hold of herself before going back inside. If she could keep busy, she could stop the thoughts from drowning her.

Back inside, she began cleaning the kitchen. Cal came downstairs as she started drying the dishes. "Here," he said and took the towel away from her. "I'll dry."

“No, I can do it.” She tried to take the towel back.

“But I want to do it. Really.” He picked up a plate and began drying. He cleared his throat as if to say something, but Ellen didn’t want to hear it. She wasn’t going to cry in front of him.

Before he could speak, Ellen grabbed her coat off its hook near the back door. “I’ll go grain the horses.”

She ran through the darkness. Turner barked and came out from his hiding place under the front porch and raced after Ellen. Had it been daylight, Ellen would have run through the woods to Eden. As she reached the barn, she realized her mistake. Without a lantern, what would she do inside? She leaned against the door and closed her eyes, not caring that it was cold. Visions of Cal and her mother making love floated before her. The thought made her ache with jealousy and longing. Not able to hold the tears in a moment longer, she sank to the ground and buried her head in her hands.

Turner nudged her with a wet nose and licked Ellen’s hands. She pushed the sheep dog away. “Leave me alone.” Turner sat and whined. “Please go away,” Ellen pleaded. The dog tucked his tail behind him and wandered off.

When Ellen found a job and left she would never see Cal again. The thought made her cry harder. But how could she stay with this insane longing in her heart and a baby who was living proof Lenore had been touched by Cal? How could she look at her mother while wanting Cal as her own?

Ellen lifted her head to catch her breath, reached up her sleeve, and pulled out her hanky. Her embroidered initials scratched her nose. She heard Turner barking in the distance and saw a

dim light approaching. Scrambling to her feet, Ellen jerked the barn door open and slipped inside. Cows snorted and the horses neighed; their large shadowy forms shifting uneasily.

Running her hands along the wall, Ellen slid behind the wooden grain barrel as the barn door swung open. Light flooded the stalls. "Ellen?" Cal called.

She tried to hold her breath, but was still gasping and now hiccupping from her crying bout.

Cal swung the lantern in her direction. "Ellen?"

She ducked further, lost her footing, and fell backward. She looked up and saw Cal standing over the barrel. He reached his hand to her. "Ellen, what in the world are you doing?"

She ignored his hand and turned her head. "Go away," she said and hiccupped.

Cal hung the lantern on a hook overhead and scooted the barrel away from Ellen, making enough room to squat in front of her. He patted her head. "Now, now, don't cry."

She slapped at his hand. "Don't pat on me. I'm not a dog." She tucked her head under and curled into a ball, clasping her arms around her knees. "Leave me be."

He stood, lifted the lid off the barrel and scooped out grain. "Guess I could feed the horses." Ellen heard him mumble. When he finished, she sensed him standing in front of her like a sentinel. He sat next to her without a word. Heavy silence, except for the soft sounds of animals grazing, filled the barn. When Ellen had her breathing under control, she peeked over her arm. Cal stared straight ahead, an unreadable expression on his face. As if he could feel her watching him, he glanced over before she could duck her head and hide her face.

"Do you want to talk now?" His voice sounded gentle and soothing as if he were talking to a small child.

But she wasn't a child! She felt his arm next to hers, muscles twitching beneath his shirt sleeve. Tempted to lay her head on his shoulder, she met his gaze. His beautiful blue eyes mesmerized her, making her want to kiss him. Could he read her mind? If only she could read his. If only he wasn't married to her mother. The thought of her mother snapped her to her senses. She leaped to her feet. Before Cal could stand, Ellen ran out the door.

She shut herself in her bedroom. Moments later, she heard him enter the house. His footsteps led to her door. In the darkness, she could see the shadow of his feet blocking the sliver of light beneath her door. He remained there without speaking or knocking. Ellen held her breath, hoping he would turn the knob. By the time she convinced herself to rush to the door to face him, his shadow disappeared.

Chapter Fifteen

April 1898

Ellen stared out the kitchen window as she dried the breakfast dishes, watching the rain wash down like sheets of glass and spread in a thin layer across the front lawn. She could just see the tiny shoots of green grass beneath its filmy surface. If only the weather would clear, maybe her head would too.

Cal stormed into the house, shaking water from his brown leather jacket and spilling more from his hat as he hung them both on their hooks. "The roads are going to be mighty muddy for some time after this rain." He removed his boots and sat them beneath the dripping garments. In his black-stockinged feet, he stood with his back to the hot stove. "I hope it lets up soon. We need to make a trip into town; getting low on supplies."

Lenore sat at the table, knitting a baby's yellow cap, her elbows resting on the small mound of her belly. "We? Why, I can't go. It wouldn't be safe to go bouncing around on those

roads. You better go alone.”

Cal glanced at Ellen the same moment she looked at him. “I’m going to need help with loading and unloading. Ellen can come,” he said and faced the stove. He rubbed his hands together.

“Maybe I’ll have a response from my advertisement waiting for me.” Ellen looked to her mother for approval, trying to hide her excitement. It had been such a long time since she and Cal had ridden alone. She missed those days.

Lenore’s lips set in a straight line as she came to a stopping point in her needle work and placed it on the table. “I suppose she can. But I’d wait about a week to let the roads dry or you’ll be trapped forever out in the mud.”

Cal waited five days before they headed out. The roads remained muddy in places, but he maneuvered the wagon around the worst spots where the wheels could be sucked under. Like when they’d just met, Ellen didn’t know what to say to Cal. They rode in silence until they were far from the farm.

“I hope I have some offers in the mail.” What else could she talk about?

“You have to go on interviews before someone offers you a job,” Cal said.

“Well, it’s been four months since you placed it. You’d think I’d have heard something by now.” She glanced at him.

He didn’t look at her, but mumbled, “Maybe.”

“You don’t sound very hopeful.”

“You don’t have to leave.”

“Yes I do. I need to start my life. I’m no longer a child. I can’t live with my mother forever.”

“I know you’re not a child. We . . . Your mother needs you, in her condition.” His eyes never left the road.

“Women have babies all the time. She’ll be fine without me.”

After a full minute, he finally said, “I won’t.”

Ellen wasn’t sure if she heard him right. “What?” Her heart pumped faster.

“I said I won’t be fine without you.” Cal’s voice rose as he flicked the reins and stared straight ahead. “I need your help just as much as your mother.”

All he cared about was having her as a farm hand or a babysitter. She crossed her arms and glared at his profile. “You already have Seth and Ralph. If you need more help, you can hire someone else.”

Cal’s head whipped around. “It’s not that. You’re family. I’d miss you. We’d miss you.”

She bit her lip. “I’ll visit.” Though she probably wouldn’t. It would be too painful.

They remained silent until they reached Horton’s storefront. Next to the store, a group of men were building a small structure, all the wood a newly-cut yellow. Mr. Horton stood talking to one of the men, while the others sawed and hammered away. The deafening noise stopped when their wagon came to a halt. Cal hopped off and offered his hand to assist Ellen. All heads turned in their direction. Ellen recognized one young man, Jacob, from her first year of school. He saluted her with a grin. He was brawny back then, but now he was a massive man, solid muscle except for his blubbery gut. He obviously still ate well. At least he was finally out of school.

“Hello, Mr. Turner,” Mr. Horton called and walked over to shake hands. “What can I do for you today?”

Cal nodded his head at the work site. “What’s this?”

“Hartridge is finally building a post office. Once it’s in place, we’ll have a certified post master take over. It’s one less thing I’ll have to worry about.” Mr. Horton laughed and his big belly shook. He ran his hands down his apron as if he could smooth out the bulge. He smiled at Ellen. “But I will miss getting to see your pretty face when you come to collect your mail.” With a wave of his hand, he said, “As a matter of fact, I have some waiting for you now.”

Closing the door to the general store behind her, she heard the construction commence. A mixture of emotions washed over her as Mr. Horton disappeared behind the counter and into the back storeroom. She hoped she had an offer. Her pulse quickened. If she had a job interview, she’d need advice. She glanced at her skirt and noticed a fleck of hay. She flicked it off and smoothed out a wrinkle. What would she say and do? Her body tingled with anticipation. Unable to stay still, she tapped her foot and glanced around the store.

Cal stared at her; his expression difficult to read.

When Mr. Horton reappeared, holding an envelope, Ellen’s hand shook as she reached for it. When she saw the all-too-familiar handwriting, her stomach turned a somersault.

“Is this all?” she said.

“Why? Were you expecting more?” Mr. Horton laughed. “You’ve got them beaus all over kingdom come, have you? Wouldn’t surprise me a bit.”

Ellen frowned. What in the world was this man saying? She looked from him to Cal. “I’m talking about—“

Before she could finish speaking, Cal was leading Mr. Horton by the arm to the counter to make a list of supplies he needed.

Ellen scurried after them. “I guess I need to place another—“

“Not now,” Cal scolded and turned a perplexed-looking Mr. Horton away from her. He

was doing something funny with his eyes, signaling some kind of secret message to the store owner.

Outraged, Ellen gritted her teeth and clenched her fist tight around the envelope. Something wasn't right. What was Cal up to? With a huff, she stormed out of the store and threw herself on a bench near the door. The loud clattering and banging lessened. Ellen glanced to her right. Jacob and a few other men were watching her. She glared at them until they commenced their work, then smoothed the wrinkled envelope and opened it. David suggested she come to San Antonio to live with them. Ada said she could get her a job working for Mr. Percy Cook as a maid.

Ellen reread the letter several times before Cal opened the door and poked his head out. "I could use a little help now . . . please."

She scowled at him, tucked the letter in her pocket, and went inside. Without speaking to him, Ellen helped load the wagon with all the goods light enough for her to lift: bags of coffee, beans, and sugar. When she finished, she rushed back into the store and confronted Mr. Horton. "Mr. Turner placed an advertisement for me about four months ago, do you remember?"

"Uh, why yes, indeed I do." The man's eyes darted around the store, refusing to settle on her face.

"Do you have a copy of that newspaper?" Ellen placed her hands on her hips and tapped her foot.

"Uh, why no, I don't, at least, um, not a new one." He glanced at her before returning his gaze to the ceiling. "Would you like to place another one?"

She decided to test him. "Do you remember what I wrote?"

He stared at her then. "Can't say as I recall the exact wording." He went to the counter,

grabbed a writing tablet and pencil, and thrust them at her. "Here, why don't you write it down?"

Cal reentered the store at this point. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she said. She looked at Mr. Horton. "Never mind. That won't be necessary. I've already found a job." Lifting her chin and the hem of her dress, she twirled around, opened the door with her free hand, and marched out. She didn't wait for Cal's assistance and pulled herself onto the wagon seat. She stared straight ahead with her arms folded, hiding her doubled-up fists, until the wagon lurched into motion. The construction workers took another short break to watch their departure.

"What's this business about finding a job?" Cal asked.

"What's this business about my advertisement you supposedly placed for me?" Ellen was so angry she could spit.

"I threw it away. I thought the whole idea was crazy; I didn't think you really meant it."

"How dare you! I trusted you." Ellen gripped her seat, digging her nails into the wood.

Cal's shoulders sagged as the truth came out. "I'm sorry. Will you ever forgive me?"

She gulped in air and looked away from him. The trees flashing past began to blur as tears filled her eyes.

"I didn't want you to go either," Cal continued, his voice pleading. "I was being selfish. With your mother so tired lately, you bring light and spirit to the house. I'd miss that."

Ellen blinked and tears rolled down her face. What was he saying? She pulled out her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. As she lowered her hand, thinking of what to say, the wind whipped the hanky out of her hand. She watched it drift away like her dreams.

The wagon wheel hit a rut in the road and came to a sudden stop. "Ha," Cal yelled and flicked the reins harder. The horses pushed forward. The wagon lurched out of the hole,

bouncing and slamming the boxes in back with a loud clatter.

Ellen glanced behind her, noting all their goods were still in place, nothing broken.

Cal's hand touched hers. "Will you accept my apology?"

The look on his sweet face filled her with a heaviness spreading from her heart to her feet. Her left hand lay limp in his. She thought she would never move again. His skin felt warm and wonderful. Everything within her sight blurred around the edges and all she could see were his blues eyes beseeching her. She wanted to kiss him. The wagon wheels hit more ruts in the road. The jolts lifted her bottom off the seat and down with a hard thump. Pain rippled from her tail bone to her neck. She gasped and clutched Cal's hand. With her right hand, she grabbed her seat so tight she tore a fingernail to the quick. The pain snapped her back into reality. She let go of Cal. Ellen looked at her bleeding finger and stuck it in her mouth.

"Are you okay?" Cal slowed the horses to a saunter.

She winced and held her finger out in front of her. "Just a torn nail," she said. "I'll be fine."

Cal exhaled loudly. "Now what's this about a job offer?"

"David's mother said I can live with them and work with her." Saying it aloud brought it clearer into focus.

"Is that what you want to do?"

She couldn't look at him. "Yes." Her throbbing finger was a reminder to keep her resolve.

"Well, give it some thought before you do. That's all I ask."

Back on the farm, neither spoke as they began unloading the wagon until Cal glanced at Ellen's hand when she carried the first box in. "Go take care of that. I can get the rest."

Lenore was upstairs napping, leaving Ellen with time to gather her composure and wrap a strip of cotton around her finger.

When Lenore came downstairs later to help prepare dinner, Ellen decided to make her announcement while Cal remained outside. She would never mention what Cal did to her advertisement or said on the wagon. "I heard from David today," she said as she chopped onions.

"Oh, that's nice. How are he and Ada getting along?" Lenore set a plate on the table.

Ellen spoke quickly before she lost her nerve. "They're doing fine. Since I haven't received any other offers, I'm going to move in with them and work for Mr. Cook as a maid until I can find a governess job."

The sound of glass breaking caused Ellen to spin around. Lenore stood staring, empty hand in mid-air, her face pale as the broken white plate at her feet. "Oh no," Lenore said. She placed one hand on her belly and reached for a chair.

"Mother?" Ellen rushed to her side and pulled the chair out for her. "Are you all right? Is it the baby?"

Lenore sat. She grabbed Ellen's apron. "You can't go."

Ellen unclasped her mother's hands and sat next to her. "But? I have to. It's a great offer. I thought you'd be happy."

Lenore set her elbows on the table, putting her face in her hands. "No, no, no," she moaned. She wagged her head back and forth.

Ellen patted her mother's back. "It's okay. If it's the baby you're worried about, I'll wait until it's born before I go."

"You don't understand." Lenore lowered her hands. Her pale face now beet red where her hands had pressed. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, she sat still for a moment, staring

at a space above Ellen's head. "There's something I need to tell you."

Her mother's voice sounded like the time she told Ellen her father was dead. What could be worse?

"I've thought of telling you this many times, but I wanted to wait until you were old enough to understand. I guess that time is now." Lenore grabbed a napkin from the table and twisted it in her hands. "Well, here it goes," she continued. "Mr. Percy Cook . . . is . . . is your uncle. He's your father's younger brother."

"What? Daddy was an only child. He said so."

"I don't know if he even knows who you are, but I'm sure once you moved there he would find out."

"How do you know?"

"I knew who he was when you first mentioned Ada had gone to work for him."

"But why did Daddy keep his brother a secret?"

"The Cooks are a very wealthy family. They disinherited your father." Lenore focused on the napkin wadded up in her hands.

"Disowned him? What? No, Daddy would have told me."

"Your father married me against his family's wishes."

"But I don't understand. Why didn't they like you?" Ellen's head was spinning with questions.

Lenore sighed. "This is so difficult for me. Promise you won't hate me?"

"I could never hate you." Ellen took her hand. "You're my mother. I love you."

Lenore smiled. "I love you, too." She squeezed Ellen's hand. "I hope you know that."

"Yes, I do. Now will you please tell me everything? I can handle it."

“When my parents died I went to work for the Cooks. I was about your age. I worked for your grandmother, Catherine Cook, as her personal maid. Percy was at boarding school, and your grandfather, Horace, was preparing Frank to take over their family’s bank. When Frank approached his mother about marrying me, she pitched a conniption fit.”

“But you were in love and married anyway.” Astonished, Ellen thought how similar her mother’s story was to the book where the master wanted to marry the maid. “That’s so romantic.”

“Well, that’s not all of it.” Lenore twisted the napkin between her fingers and clasped her hands above her belly. She began rocking forward and back. Her lips turned down in a grimace. Taking a deep breath, she bowed her head as if praying for courage. Ellen had to strain her ears to hear when she said, “I was pregnant with you at the time.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open. When she didn’t respond, Lenore lifted her head to glance at her.

Ellen stared at her mother, her mind a complete blank. She could handle only so much shock in one day.

Lenore shook her head and offered more. “I think your grandfather would have accepted the marriage, he was a nice old gentleman, but your grandmother couldn’t bear the stain it would put on the family name. So your father and I moved. He did his best to provide. He gave up a life of privilege to make me an honest woman. He loved you very, very much.”

If his family had been supportive, she would still have a father. Resentment began growing inside her. “He worked himself to death,” Ellen said.

“In a way,” Lenore whispered. She wiped the wrinkled napkin across her eyes and face. “I’m sorry.”

Ellen hesitated. How was she supposed to feel? Looking at her mother, she saw a lost woman, someone she'd never known before. Sadness crept inside Ellen's chest, making it difficult to breathe, but no tears came. She sighed. Who was she to judge? Ellen reached for her mother and hugged her shoulders. "As long as you loved him, that's all that matters."

"I did." Lenore patted Ellen's arms before standing. Her lips lifted in a weak smile. "I better clean up this mess."

"I'll get it for you. Don't worry about it." Ellen felt numb as she swept the broken plate.

When Cal came in for dinner, Lenore and Ellen solemnly passed the serving platters around the table. Each placed little food on their plates. Cal looked from one to the other, his forehead etched with lines of worry. Ellen wished she could reassure him their conversation on the wagon remained safe with her. When he caught her glancing at him, he bowed his head and shoveled food into his mouth. She wondered if her mother told him about her past. How many other secrets did the woman have?

The longer she thought about it, the more she felt conflicted. It was always obvious her father loved her mother. He would do anything for her. But had her mother really loved him? Did she seduce him to catch a rich husband? She already proved, by marrying Cal, by marrying a stranger, she would do almost anything to secure her future.

Ellen glanced at her mother. When Lenore looked from her plate, she blushed and set aside her fork. "I'm not feeling well." She stood slowly. "I think I'll retire early."

His eyes wide with concern, Cal rose from his seat. "Is there anything I can do?"

Lenore patted his shoulder as she walked past him. "Help Ellen with the dishes, if you don't mind." She smiled sadly at Ellen. "I'm sure she'd appreciate some help. Don't worry about me. I'll be right as rain in the morning."

Chapter Sixteen

June – August 1898

The sweltering days of June left Lenore exhausted. She was five months into her pregnancy and took long naps every day. Her feet swelled so she no longer wore shoes. “They look like pig’s feet,” she moaned as she soaked them in a pail of cold water. Ellen glanced at them and shook her head. Poor mother! They did look peculiar.

“This is so odd. I didn’t retain water until I was almost due with you, Ellen.” Lenore removed her wedding ring. “Cal, be a dear, and put this in the dresser, but don’t let me forget where I put it. I couldn’t bear if we had to cut it off.” Ellen wondered how much worse her mother would get.

Lenore waited for the kitchen to cool every evening before washing the dishes, which she did sitting on a chair, legs spread, allowing her belly to droop. “Feels good to get this load off my back,” she said after a long, drawn out sigh.

I can only imagine, Ellen thought as she hauled water to and from the house. She did all the laundry as well as cooked the meals. By the end of the day, she thought her back would snap like a twig if she did one more chore. Placing her hands on her hips, she arched her back and heard her spine crack. Lenore sat at the table drying the last plate and furtively glanced her way. Ellen still didn’t know what to think. So, her mother and father had relations before they were wed? She reached for the broom. At least they married and she wasn’t a bastard child. She swept the kitchen floor and tried to make her mind blank. She needed to get some sleep, not worry about something from the past.

During the day, Ellen alternated between dusting furniture, folding laundry and ironing. Cal didn’t ask her to milk the cows or gather the eggs anymore. “You have enough to do,” he

said.

What else had her mother never told her? She thought as she wrung the mop after cleaning the parlor. She wasn't even sure if she should trust the woman.

That evening, after everyone retired to their rooms, Ellen wrote David, only explaining she wouldn't be able to come to San Antonio until after her mother's baby was born. She'd stay until then, seeing how Lenore needed her now more than ever. She would wait until her mother was stronger before she spoke of the Cooks again.

One afternoon while Ellen was hanging a load of laundry, Cal stopped on his way from the barn to the house. "You're doing a mighty fine job there, Ellen. Here, let me help you hurry this some, so you can take a break and eat some lunch." He grabbed a white sheet from the basket along with two pins and started whistling. He always found ways to be extra nice. Ellen figured he probably hoped his actions would convince her to stay. When they finished, he brushed his hands together and smiled. "There. That's done. Let's eat, shall we?"

He held the door for her. They walked in to find Lenore sprawled on the kitchen floor; her black and white striped calico dress hitched above her knees, revealing her bare legs, swollen and pale like uncooked sausages. A shattered plate and dish towel lay nearby. They rushed to her, one on either side. "Lenore!" Cal cupped her head.

Her eyes fluttered open. "What?" she said with a slight slur.

"You're so pale!" Ellen lowered her mother's dress to her ankles, brushed back a strand of her hair and caressed her clammy cheek. Fear fluttered and pressed inside Ellen's chest making her catch her breath.

"Let's get her off the floor." Cal lifted Lenore with ease. Ellen followed him, watching the hem of her mother's dress trail the stair steps as it left a faint path in the thin layer of dust.

He placed Lenore on the bed and propped two fluffy white pillows beneath her head. She put the back of her wrist to her forehead. "The last I remember things got blurry and I couldn't hold onto the plate. I heard it break like it was a dream or something."

"You rest now." Cal turned to Ellen. "Go get her a wet rag for her head and some water."

Having never seen Cal look this scared before, Ellen's uneasiness grew, making her feel as if she, too, might faint. She hurried, her heart pounding faster with each step. Breathless, she came back with the cool wet cloth and a glass of water.

Without looking at Ellen, Cal took them from her. "Will you sweep up the broken glass, while I watch her?"

Ellen gulped at the air. "Are you going to be okay, Momma?"

"I'll be fine. The heat must have gotten to me. Don't you worry."

"Regardless," Cal said. "I'm going to get Doc Prague to come and take a look at you."

"Oh, nonsense! I don't need a doctor." Lenore waved her hand at him, before letting her arm fall by her side.

"You do and you will. No arguing with me on this one." He looked at Ellen. "I'll wait with her for a bit while she rests, then I'll go fetch Doc."

* * * * *

Dr. Prague, an old, shriveled man with skin like a raisin and a slight hump on his back, arrived with a brown leather bag. His round spectacles magnified his brown eyes so he looked like a bug. Ellen thought he appeared as close to death as one could get and still be able to walk.

He listened to Lenore's and the baby's heart beat with his stethoscope. "She needs to stay off her feet and out of this dad burn heat." He scribbled something on a little pad of paper.

"Here's directions to Mrs. Langley's place. Go visit her. She's a dad gum good midwife." The

doctor closed his bag and made his way slowly down the stairs, using the banister for a cane. Ellen held her breath as he went, praying he didn't fall. She watched as he shuffled his feet in unsteady steps, his back hunched, and his eyes on the ground. Cal waited for him at the wagon to assist him. As they rode away, Ellen wondered if there was a younger physician nearby to take the old man's place. She sure hoped so.

Cal made arrangements with the midwife. He went to town and brought back a brass bell for Lenore to ring whenever she needed something.

"I'm not going to ring that silly bell." Lenore laughed. She sat at the kitchen table, leaning forward in her chair, allowing her midsection to rest on her knees, folding clothes from the basket Ellen brought in. "As if Ellen were my personal servant!"

Ellen raised her eyebrows, but didn't look up from her ironing. Surely her mother would enjoy being waited on as the lady of the household. She'd once had Ada for that. And didn't she once have to wait on the woman who unwittingly became Ellen's grandmother? And didn't she treat Ellen like a servant when she and Cal first married? Ellen placed the iron back on the stove and folded the warm pressed sheet, breathing in the crisp smell of starch.

"You'll use it so one of us can hear you while you're upstairs. We can help you," Cal said. He leaned against a chair, his hands clasping the back as if keeping the chair in its place.

"I can walk down those stairs by myself." Lenore frowned at him. "I'm not an invalid."

"I didn't say you were. It's in case you become faint again. It's warmer up there. We can't be too careful."

She didn't protest any further.

Ellen knew only too well who would be around to hear the bell. Cal was only inside the house when it was time to eat or sleep.

The morning routine changed drastically. After burning wood in the stove, Cal lugged in buckets of water to heat for washing, started a pot of coffee, and then hauled in a bucket of milk, and threw a slab of bacon on the griddle. When all this was done, he tapped on Ellen's door. If she didn't stir, he entered and gently shook her shoulder and whispered, "Time to get up, sleepy head." His voice made her smile. It was also a pleasure to wake to the smell of fresh brewed coffee and fried bacon. Ellen enjoyed this part of the morning, until the bell rang.

Lenore rang the bell as soon as she woke, which became later every morning. Sometimes breakfast grew cold. She possessed such little energy she started wearing her hair in a thick braid. As if they traded places, Ellen now wore hers in a bun. Braids were for sleeping in and for young girls. Ellen felt older than her fifteen years.

During the month of June, Ellen led her mother to breakfast, guiding her elbow to keep her steady on the stairs. But soon after July blew in with the hot summer breezes, Ellen started carrying a tray to her mother's room, though she found it difficult to balance the glass of milk. The first time she tried, it tumbled off the tray, spraying milk and shards of glass down the staircase. Then she tried making two trips, first one with the tray, followed by one with the glass, but it took too much time and energy. She settled for bringing her mother's milk in a mug with a broader base. Lenore didn't seem to care. She didn't touch much of her food and only sipped at the milk. "You have to eat something, Mother, to keep up your strength. Besides, you're eating for two now."

"I reckon I'm eating a good deal enough, seeing how huge my belly is getting." Lenore rubbed both swollen hands across her stomach. "I didn't get this big when I was pregnant with you."

Ellen sat on the edge of the bed. "Tell me about it." She'd never heard this story before.

Her mother had seldom told any stories as Ellen was growing up. That had been her father's job.

Lenore's eyes glazed as she tried to recall the past. "Since I was much younger then, I didn't get tired as easily. I worked up until I started showing." She stopped for a moment, glanced at Ellen, and continued, "I didn't retain water then, though it was just as hot. Salt Flat has more of a dry heat, not like it is here. You were a small baby, so I didn't get very big. Your daddy thought I looked divine, that's what he said, 'Divine.' He'd pet my stomach and talk to it, like 'Hello in there.' He also said I must have swallowed a honey dew melon seed, because that was as big as I got. Now I look like I swallowed a watermelon."

"Tell me about when I was born," Ellen interrupted.

"It hurt something awful!" Lenore rolled her eyes and winced at the memory. "That's the part I'm not looking forward to."

Ellen frowned.

Her mother hesitated, but then added, "The pain doesn't last long though. And look what you get for it!" She patted Ellen's hand and smiled. "I was in labor for about fifteen hours. It took Frank at least two hours to get the midwife to our house. By the time they arrived, I still had another thirteen hours to go. It seemed like eternity. When you were ready to come out, Frank waited in the parlor while the midwife delivered you. I imagine your daddy paced the floor because he was a nervous wreck by the time he saw you. His hands were shaking, but once he held you, he was calm."

Ellen tried to imagine being a baby in her father's arms. It felt like losing him all over again. Her eyes began to mist and the room became as blurry as the memory. She wasn't even sure what he looked like anymore. She didn't have a photograph.

Before Ellen could cry, her mother patted her hand. "I'm exhausted. Let me rest now."

She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

As the summer progressed and August advanced, Cal hired Jacob Smith, the Ox, the big blonde from Ellen's class. The young man had just completed the construction on the post office. When he finished branding cattle or castrating calves, he sauntered on his horse near the house, his eyes scanning the place before he left for the day. If Ellen was outside he would tip his black hat at her and call out, "Howdy, Miss Ellen. How you today?"

"Fine, Jacob, just fine." Ellen shook her head. She definitely wasn't interested in him; he made her uncomfortable.

Her sixteenth birthday arrived. She baked her own cake in the morning, before Lenore had a chance to awaken and ring her brass bell. While the cake cooled, she cleaned the kitchen, dusted the parlor, and swept the floors. She waited for the familiar and annoying sound of the bell, her signal to prepare a tray with buttered toast and a glass of milk for her mother—the only foods she could tolerate in the mornings. It was close to noon when Ellen frosted her cake with vanilla icing. Lenore had still not rung. Heading up the stairs, a quiet dread crept behind her. The door was left ajar an inch. She poked her head in. "You're going to sleep the day away."

Lenore opened her puffy eyes and moaned. "Oh Ellen, thank goodness you're here. I'm not feeling well. Go get Cal." The brass bell lay on the floor, out of Lenore's reach.

Lifting her skirt and petticoat above her knees, Ellen ran to find Cal out in the back fields where he was repairing a fence one of the cows knocked down. Turner chased after her, barking wildly. "Cal, Cal," she screamed. "Something's wrong with Momma." She bent, placed her hands on her knees, and tried to catch her breath.

Cal dropped his tools, grabbed Ellen by the arm, and hurried her to the wagon. He yelled, "Ralph, go fetch Dr. Prague quick." Without another word, he flicked the reins and they headed

for the house.

He leaped from the wagon, raced through the kitchen, and took the stairs two steps at a time. Ellen couldn't keep up with him. By the time she reached the top, Cal was kneeling by the bed, holding Lenore's hand. She heard her mother's weak voice say, "It's a month early."

Cal glanced at Ellen, his face a chalky white. "I need to get Mrs. Langley. Go heat some water." He pecked a quick kiss on Lenore's hand before leaving.

Ellen flinched when she heard the front door slam, followed by Cal's loud "Ha" to hurry the horses. She turned to her mother. Perspiration dripped down her pale puffy face. "Oh, Momma." She sat on the edge of the bed. "You're having the baby now?"

Lenore gasped and curled around her large stomach. "Yes," she managed to say followed by groans and grunts. "Go . . . do . . . as . . . Cal said. Boil . . . water. And . . . bring me . . . a cloth."

Ellen tripped as she ran down the stairs, but saved herself from falling by grabbing the banister. Her shoulder muscles felt like fabric tearing as she did so. Wincing and gritting her teeth, Ellen stoked the embers in the stove and hauled water from the pump. While she waited for the large pot to boil, she went back and sat by her mother's side. She dabbed at her face with a wet cloth. When she smoothed back strands of sweaty brown hair escaping from her mother's braid, she noticed a few wiry gray ones. She watched in horror as her mother thrashed about, tossing her head from side to side, moaning and panting, and grasping her tight belly. Lenore grabbed Ellen's hand, squeezed with a powerful grip, and dug her nails deep into her palm. With tears of fear and pain in her eyes, Ellen prayed Cal would hurry. She couldn't bear being the lone witness to her mother's suffering much longer.

As if her prayers were heard, the sound of hooves pounding the road announced Cal's

arrival. Soon the heavy footsteps bounded up the stairs. He appeared at the door, breathless and wide-eyed. "Mrs. Langley is here. Everything's going to be just fine."

A petite, wiry old woman bustled into the room, carrying a large tote bag and some blankets. A thick gray bun sat atop her head, making her appear a foot taller than she actually was. Though she looked frail, the midwife moved with the speed and agility of a much younger woman. "Go fetch the water," she ordered Cal with pursed lips all wrinkled around the edges. She turned her sharp gray eyes to Ellen. "Help me change her."

Mrs. Langley lifted Lenore into a seated position while Ellen removed her mother's damp nightgown. The old woman removed Lenore's soaked bloomers. Ellen felt her cheeks blush with embarrassment. She'd never seen her mother's nakedness this close before. During winter when she bathed in the galvanized tub in the kitchen, her mother partitioned the small area with a curtain. Privacy was of utmost importance. Even when Ellen spied her parents in the act, she only saw her mother's bare legs. When she heard Cal's footsteps on the stairs, she threw a sheet over her mother's body.

Cal placed the water pail on a stool and stood aside like a lost little boy.

"Do you have the crib ready?" the old woman asked. Cal nodded toward the corner of the room. He hand-carved a wooden cradle large enough to rock with his foot while seated in a chair.

"Okay. Now get." She waved her vein-laced hands at him. "Wait outside." Cal left, shutting the door behind him, looking somewhat relieved to leave the women to their work.

Mrs. Langley winked at Ellen. "Men, they only get in the way."

Hours later, the baby still had not arrived. Ellen alternated between helping her mother sit enough to push and removing soiled sheets, replacing them with fresh ones. She would have

preferred holding her mother and not having to look between her legs at her swollen, damp private parts. When Ellen took a quick peek, she became woozy. She swallowed hard to force the queasiness down and tried to concentrate on making her mother as comfortable as possible.

Several more hours passed before Dr. Prague appeared, this time with a cane in one hand, his bag in the other. With a quick look he told the midwife, “Dad burn Mary, she’s tearing. I’ll need to make a little cut.” He looked up to see Ellen’s terror-stricken face. “Now you go outside and wait with your Pa.”

Ellen hurried out of the room. She found Cal, arms folded tight around his chest, pacing the kitchen floor. He stopped when he saw her. She rushed to him and cried as he held her. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Now, now,” Cal said as he caressed her back. “Of course, she will. We’ve got to be brave for her. Having a baby is hard work, so I’ve been told.”

Ellen wiped away her tears and peered at his face. Cal had a faraway look in his eyes. He blinked and glanced back. He kissed her forehead and forced a smile. He continued to hold her, but when a piercing scream came from above he moved her aside. He stood frozen, staring at the ceiling. Lenore’s howling stopped, then silence followed by an infant’s quivering cry. Cal bolted up the stairs.

When Ellen reached the top of the stairs she saw her mother’s bloody bed through the open door. She grabbed the door frame to keep from fainting.

“It’s a boy.” Mrs. Langley held a fat, bloody, screaming baby.

Ellen looked from the infant to Cal and saw a smile spread across his pale face. The old woman wiped the baby as clean as she could and wrapped him in a blanket. She handed him to Cal. “He’s a big strapping boy. Good thing he was early. Make sure you support his head.”

“My boy,” Cal whispered. He held the baby close and planted a kiss on his blood-smeared forehead. The infant stopped crying. With dark milky blue eyes, he stared at Cal as if he didn’t know what to think. Cal grinned. “I’m your daddy.”

Mrs. Langley placed her hand on his shoulder. “Now Daddy, you take that boy of yours for a moment while Dr. Prague finishes in here. When he’s done, I need this young lady,” she nodded her head at Ellen as she spoke, “to help me clean little momma here.”

When the doctor was done Ellen went back inside the room, but she didn’t want to touch the sheets. Her fingers recoiled as she removed the blood-soaked nightgown off her mother. “Why is there so much blood?” Losing this much would surely mean someone was dead.

The old lady looked up from sponging between Lenore’s legs. “There’s always some blood when a baby is born, but your momma wasn’t big enough to get him out by herself. The doctor made a cut to help her.” She saw Ellen grimace. “Don’t worry, he stitched her up.”

Lenore opened her eyes and said, “I’m okay, honey. Just real tired. Take care of your brother while I rest.”

Once they settled Lenore on the bed with clean sheets and nightgown, they gathered the soiled ones. Ellen led the midwife outside to where the washing tubs stood. “You’ll need to soak these in cold water overnight,” Mrs. Langley said. The midwife helped Ellen pour the buckets, one after another. When they were done and washed the stains from their hands, she said, “Now go warm some water to wash that brother of yours.”

Chapter Seventeen

August 1898

Ellen placed the slippery infant on a towel and sponged warm water over his body. “What’s that?” she asked Mrs. Langley, being careful to avoid the blue fleshy tube where his

belly button should be. It was tied with twine.

“It’s called an umbilical cord, dear, it connected him to your momma while he was in her womb. That’s how he got nourishment,” the midwife said as she stood behind Ellen, watching and guiding her every move.

What would happen if it came untied? Would blood shoot out everywhere? Ellen’s thoughts made her so nervous her hands fumbled with the bar of soap.

The old woman patted Ellen’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Hun,” she said. “It’ll crust up and fall off within a month.”

Ellen worried about holding his legs too tight as she lifted them to sponge around his bottom. He shivered and whimpered, pulling his little arms and legs closer to his body. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

When his red skin was clean of mucous and blood, she diapered him as quick as she could without sticking him with the pins. She wrapped him firmly in a soft blanket and rocked him in her arms. “There now. I’ll warm you up,” she said in a soft, singsong voice. She paced around the parlor until he grew quiet and closed his eyes.

Mrs. Langley came up behind her. “I’ll be back tomorrow to check on your mother.” The steely strength of the woman’s bony fingers penetrated Ellen’s shoulder through her thin cotton dress. “Now why don’t you take the baby and sit for a spell. I have to wait on the doctor and give him a ride back to town.”

Ellen was about to take the midwife’s advice when Dr. Prague, with Cal’s help, made it down the stairs. Cal carried the doctor’s medicine bag while the old man used his shoulder and railing as support. Ellen, baby in hand, followed them into the kitchen. Cal placed the leather bag on the table. The doctor sat next to it. With a shaky wrinkled hand, he rummaged around before

pulling out a brown bottle, a small yellow envelope, and a glass dropper. "Give her this laudanum: a dropper full or a teaspoon every three hours." He shook the envelope. "This here's some quinine powder for fever or swelling. Mix half a teaspoon with sugar water, or wine if you have any, to hide the bitter taste. Bathe that incision twice a day with water diluted with a tiny sprinkle of Epson salt. See if you can get her to eat some cow's liver to strengthen her blood. Keep her comfortable. Other than that, pray to the good Lord."

Ellen nearly dropped the baby. "What? Are you saying she might not get better?"

The doctor shook his head. He removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I can't say one way or another. Have to take one day at a time. Just trust in the Lord. These things are in his hands. I'll drop by later in the week to check on her and collect my fee."

Ellen looked at Cal, searching for reassurance, but saw only puzzlement on his face. Neither spoke. Ellen was afraid to voice her fears, afraid of what might happen by doing so; perhaps Cal was, too. She watched in silence from the kitchen window as Cal helped the doctor onto Mrs. Langley's buggy and the two trotted away. Once they disappeared around the bend Cal took Lenore her medicine, along with a glass of sugar water.

Ellen sat in her mother's chair and rocked her baby brother, watching as he wrinkled his nose and tried to suck on his tiny fist. She ran her hand across his bald head and caressed his cheek. "Aren't you a funny looking fellow?" She laughed, realizing she was already falling in love with him.

Cal came and stood behind her. "What a birthday present, aye? A baby brother." He leaned one elbow on the back of the rocker and touched his son's hand. The baby grunted and turned his head, nuzzling against Ellen's breasts, and started to whimper. Cal reached for him. "I think he's hungry. I better take him to your mother."

Ellen handed the bundle to Cal. He held his son close to his chest and crept up the stairs. She sat back in the rocker and thought how sweet Cal looked holding his son. A knot caught in her throat when she realized she was no longer her mother's only child. What if Mother didn't recover? Sadness spread across her chest. She swallowed. Tears formed in her eyes. Rubbing her palms across her face, she said, "I must be tired."

* * * * *

A hand touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes. Cal stood smiling over her. "Come get a bite to eat and then go to bed, Ellen."

"But I haven't cooked anything yet, except my birthday cake," Ellen said with a long yawn.

"Just because I'm a man doesn't mean I can't cook. I managed to fry up some sausage, potatoes, and onions. Not much, but it'll do."

Brushing loose strands of hair from her face and tucking them into her bun, Ellen followed Cal into the kitchen. A pan of food and a pitcher of milk were already on the table. Ellen smiled at Cal. "But look. You already milked the cow, too?"

"Seeing how you've worked your tail off, and on your birthday at that." With a bow, Cal pulled out a chair for her.

"Why thank you," Ellen said. "I feel like a society woman with this special treatment." She put her hand to her mouth, trying to stifle another yawn.

"Well, you just sit back, enjoy your dinner. I've taken a plate to your momma. She didn't touch much. I guess she just needs to rest." Cal sat at the table, spooned food onto his plate and passed the pan to her.

They ate in silence. Ellen's eyes felt heavy. She blinked often to keep them open.

Halfway through their meal she spoke. "Have y'all come up with a name yet?"

While still chewing on a mouthful, Cal managed a smile. He wiped a napkin across his mouth and swallowed. "Why, Calvin Wade Junior, of course, but we'll call him Wade. One Cal around this place is enough, don't you think?"

Ellen chuckled.

They fell silent again and continued eating. Cal polished off his food before Ellen. He stood and placed his dishes in the wash pan. "Excuse me a second. I better go check on them." He ran upstairs.

While he was gone, Ellen caught herself drifting off. Her head bobbed, jerking her awake. She drank some milk, but it didn't help. The next thing she knew, Cal was standing behind her chair. "Hey, time for you to go to bed. You must be worn out."

"I am, but I'm okay. What about Momma and the baby?" she said as she rolled her stiff neck.

"They're both sleeping soundly. You sure came through for your mother today. No grown woman could have done better."

"Thank you," Ellen said. She reached up and kneaded a small stiff place in her neck where the muscle met the shoulder. There was such a tight knot her neck seemed to be pulling her shoulder toward her ear.

"Let me help you work that out," Cal said. "I have stronger hands." He began massaging her shoulders.

Her muscles melted beneath his touch. Closing her eyes, she moaned with pleasure. If only she could stay here in this moment forever, but then she blinked, saw the kitchen table through her wet eye lashes, and knew it could never be so. Grabbing the napkin from her lap, she

wiped at her face.

“What’s the matter?” Cal bent, his face inches from hers. His hands froze on her shoulders.

“I’m just tired, that’s all.” She pushed her chair away from the table to stand, causing him to step back. “I better get started on these dishes.”

Before she could move further, Cal grabbed her by the shoulders again, forcing her to sit back. “You’ll do no such thing. I’m washing them tonight.” He let go of her and allowed her to stand.

She turned to him in protest, feeling awkward and wobbly on her feet. “But you cooked—”

“I can wash dishes, too. You do it all the time. Tonight, I’m doing them. Think of it as your birthday present. You need some rest so you can help your mother tomorrow. I imagine Wade will be up bright and early.” Cal pulled Ellen to him. Her body stiffened, but as he hugged her she relaxed.

His arms felt so strong and comforting. Ellen rested her cheek on his shoulder, allowing the trance to return. She breathed in the woodsy smell of him. With his mouth close to her ear, his warm breath flowed down her neck as he caressed her back. Her body weakened to the point if he let go she would fall to the floor. “Happy Birthday, Ellen,” he whispered and pulled away, holding her until she regained her footing. “Now go to bed. We can eat your cake for breakfast.”

Shuffling off to her room, she felt like a sleep walker, barely able to move her feet. She crawled into bed with her clothes still on, though she managed to kick off her boots. Nestling deep beneath the cool bedcovers, still feeling his arms around her, she had little time to let her thoughts linger on her mother’s health, the new baby, or Cal’s strong hands before she fell fast

asleep.

* * * * *

Ellen woke from a dream of Cal's embrace—his shoulder massage turned into caresses up and down her back—to the sound of a baby screaming. Darkness still enclosed the house, so she didn't know what time it was. She sighed, wanting to return to her dream. Untangling herself from the sheets, she lit a lantern and headed barefoot up the stairs. The baby was screaming louder by the time she reached her mother's door. Her mother no longer needed to ring a bell with his good set of lungs, she thought as she knocked on the door. "Mother?"

"Oh thank God! Come in, Ellen. I can't get out of bed." Her mother's voice sounded muffled.

When Ellen opened the door and took a step inside, she froze with the lantern swinging from her hand. Through the top of the sheets, a black pool spread around her mother's hips. At the foot of the bed in his cradle, Wade screamed and coughed as his little body trembled. Ellen didn't know what to do first, grab the baby or run find Cal.

"Get the baby," Lenore said in a feeble voice.

Once she lifted him, his screams lowered to a whimper. Then he started hiccupping. His lips puckered and quivered.

"Bring him here." Lenore raised her arms to take the baby.

"But, you're bleeding badly! Shouldn't I get Cal?"

"Give him to me anyway. He's hungry."

Ellen watched as Lenore unbuttoned her gown with shaky hands and tried to nurse him. He whined as his little mouth opened wide and rooted around for a nipple. "What should I do?"

Lenore sighed. "Fix these pillows and prop me up."

As she did so, her mother groaned.

Her mother's face glowed like a pale moon in the lantern's dim light. Ellen inwardly cringed. "I'm sorry."

"Can't be helped," Lenore said and guided the baby's mouth to her breast. Once he latched on, she leaned her head back against the brass headboard and closed her eyes. Breathless now, she said, "Now go get some more sheets and monthly rags. When Wade is done, you can help change me and these sheets."

The whole time Ellen raced around the house, gathering what she needed, fingers of fear clawed through her lungs to her heart, making it difficult to breathe. By the time she made two trips up and down the stairs, the baby finished nursing. His little bald head rested on his mother's shoulder.

Lenore whispered, "Put him back in his cradle. He's full as a tick now. Change his diaper when he wakes later."

Ellen held her breath and laid him slowly as to not awaken him. She turned back to the blood-smeared bed. Was it normal? The sight and smell of it sickened her. She tried breathing through her mouth and prayed she wouldn't faint. It was even more difficult to change the bed and her mother without Mrs. Langley's assistance. She nearly tripped on the makeshift pallet where Cal slept on the floor on the other side of the bed. Lenore could barely lift her hips as Ellen bathed her and slipped clean sheets beneath her. After Ellen finished, both women dripped with sweat. Then she heard the back door close. Ellen held a glass of water to her mother's lips. Lenore took two sips, leaned back in bed and sighed.

Ellen stood. "I'll go make you some breakfast."

Lenore reached for her hand. "I'm not hungry, but tell Cal I need more medicine. I hurt

something awful.”

Cal was in the kitchen with a basket of eggs and a pail of fresh milk on the table. His hands, quick with the knife, sliced slabs of bacon. “Did you sleep well?” He looked up with a smile. It vanished the moment he saw Ellen with her arms full of bloody sheets.

“Mother said she needs her medicine. She was bleeding.”

He stabbed the knife into the remaining block of bacon and ran for the stairs. In a stupor, Ellen opened the back door and stepped outside. The early morning sun rose over the green hills, forming a halo of pink and gold in the pale blue sky. It didn’t seem right birds were singing. She dumped the sheets in the wash tub, noting Cal had already removed the ones from last night. He had them in the other tub filled with soapy water. As she pumped water into a bucket, she noticed dried blood on her hands. Her mother’s blood. Bile rose in her throat. Was she going to die? Thrusting both hands in the bucket, she rubbed and scratched so hard they stung. When she pulled her hands out, they were red, but no longer from blood. She dumped the stained bucket of water in the closest flowerbed and started over.

She left the sheets to soak, knowing they would never be white again, and went inside. Cal, sitting at the kitchen table with his head in his hands, looked up when she entered. “She’s resting now. That laudanum knocked her out. I was going to get the doctor, but she told me not to, she’d be fine. Mrs. Langley is supposed to drop by today.”

Ellen averted her gaze and remembered her cake. Maybe if they didn’t think about it, her mother would get better. She went to the cupboard and brought two plates to the table. “What do you say we have some cake now? I’ll cook the bacon and eggs for lunch.” They ate in silence. If they spoke, Ellen was sure the words would get stuck in their throats, making it impossible to swallow.

After breakfast, Ellen washed all the bloody sheets from the night before. There were no more clean ones. She prayed they wouldn't need more. Her mother would stop bleeding and be walking around in no time. Hanging them to dry, Ellen watched as a slight breeze lifted the splotchy pink sheets like a ship's sails weathering a deadly storm.

Mrs. Langley showed up after noon. Cal rushed her through the house. She entered Lenore's bedroom alone and shut the door behind her. Cal and Ellen stood outside the room, avoiding each other's eyes, straining to hear what was going on. Ten minutes later, the old woman came out and handed Ellen a bloody rag. "I used the last one you had in here, so you better get some more for later. You'll be needing plenty of them."

The midwife closed the door again, leaving a bloody hand print on the white knob. As Ellen turned away, she noticed a glob of blood jiggling like jelly on the rag. She pushed past Cal, ran down the stairs, and outside. She shook the rag before tossing it into the wash tub, and began pumping the water furiously. She'd never had human blood so thick on her hands, let alone her mother's. It was like little pieces of her life were falling out of her body. Ellen gagged and choked as she scrubbed her hands, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to envision her mother as healthy and whole, but all she could see was blood. She clutched her boiling stomach with raw hands and bent in pain. On the ground, right before her eyes, lay the blood clot sparkling in the sun. She would have screamed, but she couldn't breathe. Instead, hot liquid forced its way up her throat and out spewed her birthday cake.

Chapter Eighteen

August 1898

Wade's screams rattled the windows. The sound jarred Ellen from her sleep. When she opened her eyes black red-tinged splotches floated before her like dangling spiders. For a

moment, she thought the day before was a nightmare, but the baby's wails reminded her otherwise. She blinked until the images vanished. Dragging herself out of bed, concentrating on moving one heavy foot in front of the other, she wished Cal was in the house to get him. Filled with dread, she hesitated before turning the doorknob that last night she wiped clean.

The quilt lay folded at the foot of the bed. The sheets remained white and tucked around her sleeping mother. Ellen relaxed her shoulders. She lifted the red-faced baby from his cradle. The volume of his crying lessened. "Mother, you ready?"

Lenore didn't answer. Her eyes were closed, the lids sunken and a reddish-purple. She hadn't moved an inch since Ellen entered the room. Ellen put Wade back in his cradle. He began shrieking louder. His little arms and legs trembled in the air. Ellen shook her mother's shoulder. Lenore rolled her head from side to side, opened her eyes for a second, and closed them again. "Momma?" Ellen tried not to panic. She shook Lenore again.

Lenore opened her eyes. "What?" she whispered. She blinked several times trying to focus and smacked her lips together. She rolled her tongue across her lips as if she'd tasted something thick like molasses. "Is it time again? Seems like I just fed him."

"What do you mean?" Ellen didn't hear the baby cry earlier. She lifted her mother to a seated position and propped the pillows behind her back. "How can you sleep through that ruckus?" She pulled the covers back and saw pink spread like a fan below her mother's waist. Though the blood was less than the day before and more like colored water, it still made Ellen want to cry along with her brother.

"Worry about that later," Lenore mumbled.

Not knowing what else to do, Ellen lifted the baby again, patted his back and rocked him. "It's okay. It's okay." She kissed his flushed face, tasting his salty tears, and tried to hand him to

Lenore.

“Check his diaper first,” Lenore said and closed her eyes.

“Hush now.” Ellen tried to soothe him as she changed the wet diaper. “You’re going to get fed.” She started to hum, but quickly stopped. “I wish I knew a lullaby.” She couldn’t think straight with his screaming and kicking.

Managing to get the pins in the cloth without sticking his squirming, little legs, Ellen lifted him to her shoulder. She looked at her mother. “He’s ready now.” When there was no response, Ellen spoke louder. “Mother, are you ready? Wake up!”

Lenore opened her eyes and reached for him, but couldn’t lift her shaking hands high enough. “I feel so weak. Unbutton my gown for me.”

Ellen lowered him into her mother’s arms. Lenore rested the whimpering baby in her lap.

Ellen gasped. “What about your bleeding? Shouldn’t we do something? You’ll bleed on him.”

“I can’t hold him.” Lenore moaned. “Help me feed him.”

With shaky, yet fast fingers, Ellen unbuttoned the gown, sat on the bed, and held the baby to her mother’s breasts. Lenore closed her eyes again, leaving Ellen alone to feed the baby. She let his body rest on her mother while she held his head with her other hand. His bottom started to slide. As she reached for her mother’s lifeless arm to place as a barrier, his little lips puckered in the air. He whined. Once supported, he opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping for air, making small popping noises. Then he found his mark and latched on tight. Ellen was startled. How could her mother not stir? It felt strange being so close to her mother’s naked breast, even more so watching the baby suck with such intensity. Her arms ached. She wouldn’t be able to hold him in this awkward position much longer.

Her arms began shaking. The baby seemed firmly attached to the breast. She was afraid to pull him away. When she thought she couldn't hold him a moment longer, he moved away from the nipple with a cough. Milk dripped down his chin. His face tightened. He coughed again as if choking.

"That's what you get for being such a glutton, you little piglet." Ellen put him to her shoulder and patted his tiny back. She didn't have the strength to hold him for the other breast. Rising from the bed, she carried him downstairs.

Ellen opened the back door and walked toward the barn. The sheep dog came out of nowhere, running in circles around her. "Get out of the way, Turner." She kicked at the dog. "You're going to trip me." The baby burped. Something wet and warm ran behind her shoulder. She cringed and walked faster. Hammering came from inside the barn though it felt like it came from inside her head. The warm fluid worked its way down her back like a crawling insect. She screamed, "Cal?" The baby wailed.

Cal ran outside, holding his hammer. "What the devil?"

Ellen's words tumbled from her mouth as tears flowed down her face. "Momma won't wake enough to feed him. I held him to nurse one side of her. I can't do it again. He just spit up on me. She's bleeding again, too. I don't know what to do!"

Cal dropped the hammer and took the baby from Ellen. "There, there," he said as he rocked his son in his arms. "Everything's going to be okay." He glanced at Ellen. "It must be the medicine. She took some late last night after feeding him. Are there any more clean sheets?"

"Just one set."

"Go change her and when you're done, I'll see what I can do."

Ellen wished he would change her, but she didn't have the heart to say so. She went to

her bedroom and stripped off her soiled, sour smelling dress.

Changing the bed and cleaning her mother was more difficult the third time around with Lenore as limp and heavy as a sack of flour, and Ellen was drained of energy. The entire time Ellen worked, the baby screamed in the cradle. She shook her head. All the sheets they owned were ruined. All the rags were hanging out to dry. The only unsoiled cloths were a few diapers. She used one to put between her mother's legs. Her lips quivered, but she fought back the tears. Now wasn't the time for hysterics. Her mother needed her to be strong; Cal needed her to be strong. Wade needed her most of all.

She carried the load downstairs to start washing all over again. Was this what having a baby was like? If so, she would never have children. She would rather have a dog.

The morning sunshine, rising higher in the sky, burned her shoulders through her blue cotton dress while she scrubbed the sheets as best she could. Uncorking the wash tub, she drained the pink water into a smaller bucket one after another until each one was empty, depositing the bucketfuls into the garden. The thought of her mother's diluted blood running through the veins of their vegetables and flowers distressed her, but she knew better than to waste precious water. Raising her elbow, she wiped the sweat from her brow with her sleeve. She stood still for a moment to catch her breath and arched her back. Her entire body trembled with exhaustion.

A disheveled Cal hurried outside where Ellen rinsed the sheets a third time. "They're both asleep. I'm going to ask Mrs. Langley to come over while I hunt for Doc Prague. I'll be back as soon as I can." He squeezed her shoulder as he walked past.

As soon as his wagon disappeared down the dusty road, Ellen sat on the back step and sobbed. The sheep dog came running from the barn, nudged her hand, and whimpered. "Oh

Turner, I still love you.” Ellen caressed the dog’s head. “Please God, don’t let Momma die.” She cried until nothing remained inside her. It took what was left of her strength to stand and go inside to her room to lie down. She was asleep within seconds.

She woke to the sound of wagon wheels pounding the road. It was still daylight outside. She struggled out of bed and went to the kitchen window. Mrs. Langley’s one-horse buggy pulled in front of the house. Ellen walked out, stiff and aching, to greet her. The old woman eyed Ellen’s puffy, red-rimmed eyes. She shook her head knowingly and clucked her tongue. “Here you go, child.” She handed her a bundle of extra sheets and scraps of rags.

“Bless your heart,” Ellen said as she cradled them with one arm and held out her other hand to help the woman.

“Bless your daddy’s heart. He asked if I had any extras. They’re old and about worn out, but they’re better than nothing.”

“He’s not my daddy,” Ellen said, making sure she spoke loud enough so the old woman heard her. Ellen didn’t care about the state the sheets were in, she was glad to have them, but she didn’t want this woman to go on thinking Cal was her father. “He’s my mother’s husband. Don’t get me wrong. I think he’s a good man, but he’s not my daddy.”

Mrs. Langley’s steely gray eyes crinkled into a smile. “No, I guess he isn’t.”

Ellen smiled in return. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ellen tagged along behind the woman as she made her way to Lenore’s room. The old woman spoke as they walked. “Your mother shouldn’t still be bleeding this heavily. I’m going to try something that might help ebb the flow.” She stopped when they reached the bedroom door. “Now I know you’re a bit squeamish, so you might want to wait out here.”

“What are you going to do?”

Mrs. Langley took the rags out of Ellen's arms and pulled a wad of cotton out of her apron pocket. "I'm going to tear this here rag into thin strips, wrap some around the cotton, and put them inside her. Then I'll bundle her as usual. This should keep the sheets clean long enough for them others to dry and maybe even cause her to clot so there'll be less bleeding."

Ellen stared in horror. "You're going to put them inside her?"

"Yep." The midwife opened the door. "You'll need to take the baby downstairs in case she wakes screaming. It ain't going to feel too good at first. I'll call for you when it's time to change the sheets."

Ellen glanced at her mother. Her skin looked a dull bluish gray. Ellen lifted the sleeping baby, being careful not to wake him. She felt too drained to deal with more of his crying.

Sitting in her mother's rocker, Ellen held her brother and gazed at his sleeping face. He was only three days old and he seemed thinner since his birth, but his head looked smoother and rounder, his skin less red and pimply. She stroked his soft cheeks and caressed his tiny arms and hands, noting how long his little fingers were; all five fit neatly on her index finger. She lifted his hand and planted a feathery kiss. Her mother must get better.

Ellen settled in the rocker, relaxing for the first time since her brother's birth, when a loud moan followed by sobbing swept through the house like a gust of wind. She held her breath and sat straighter. The sudden movement caused the baby to grunt and twitch. His pink lips puckered as if he wanted a kiss, but he did not stir. She glanced at the ceiling, listening to her mother weeping and the midwife speaking in soothing tones. The old lady must have done it. Ellen cringed at the thought. Poor Momma.

Mrs. Langley opened the bedroom door and called, "Young lady? Come on now." The old woman didn't even know her name.

After Ellen put Wade in his cradle, Mrs. Langley, who wiped her blood-stained fingers on her apron, said, "I gave her some more laudanum. She shouldn't feel any pain. Now let's get these sheets off."

As they rocked Lenore's limp body from side to side, Mrs. Langley spoke. "Now honey, your mamma is plumb played out, and probably will be for awhile, so I'd say there ain't nothing else to do, but feed that baby cows' milk."

They looked toward the window when they heard a wagon. Ellen pulled back the curtains. Cal ran into the house. The midwife met him as he reached the bottom of the stairs. The old woman put her finger to her lips. "They're sleeping."

Cal removed his hat and ran a hand through his blonde hair. "I couldn't find Doc Prague. What should we do in the meantime?"

"I got her fixed until Doc gets back. You got any baby bottles?"

"A couple. We use them with the animals sometimes. Why?"

"Your wife isn't in any shape to be nursing. It's time for cow's milk."

Cal glanced at Ellen. "What did you do with the one you used with Ruby?"

"I think Mother stored it in the cellar with the others."

"Well, let's go take a look."

"Get some water boiling first. You'll need to sterilize them," Mrs. Langley said before sitting in the rocker with a grunt. "I need to cool this old body off for a moment."

Cal shoved more kindling into the stove and stoked its embers while Ellen went outside to the pump and filled a pot with water. Once that was done they headed for the cellar. Chickens fluttered about as they walked. Cal glanced at his wagon parked in the front yard. "The horses need to be unharnessed and put back in the barn, out of this heat. Can you manage without me?"

Ellen twisted the bottom of her dirty white apron between her fingers, dreading the idea.

“I guess so.”

“I’ll prop the door open for you. It’s a bit heavy.” When they reached the cellar, he unhooked the latch and pulled the squeaky metal door back. “There,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Be careful. It’s hot. Should be plenty of light though. Holler if you need help.” He turned away and jogged to the wagon.

Ellen watched him leap into the seat and lead the horses to the barn. She glanced down the wooden steps. Dark shadows loomed at the bottom. A spider scurried up its silk thread and disappeared on the cellar’s ceiling. She took a tentative step. Then another. When she stood eye level with the ceiling, she heard it and froze.

“Oh God,” she whispered. Though she’d never seen a rattle snake before, she remembered Cal’s collection of rattles. There was no mistaking the sound. Afraid to move her head to see exactly where the snake was coiled, she lifted one foot and touched her heel to the step behind her. Right when she was about to walk backwards, Turner came running to the cellar door.

Without another thought, Ellen twirled around and ran up the steps. “Get back.” She shooed her dog away from the opening and glanced at the sky saying a silent “Thank you, God.” The snake didn’t strike, or if it did, it didn’t bite her. She didn’t want Turner to get bitten either. The dog moved closer to the opening, sniffing the ground and whining, sensing what lurked in the shadows. Ellen grabbed the hot door, and with all her strength, slammed it shut with a loud bang.

Lifting her skirt, she ran to the barn, calling behind her. “Come on, Turner. Get away from there.

She met Cal at the opening of the barn as he led Lily into her stall. He turned toward her, eyebrows arched as the dust settled beneath her feet. “There’s a rattler down there. I heard it, but I didn’t see it,” she said breathlessly. “Where’s your shotgun?”

“Now hold on a second. Can’t use a gun with all the brick. Those pellets would ricochet and break all those jars you and your mother worked so hard on, not to mention killing someone.” He looked at her a second and flashed a weak grin. “Mainly me. Let me get Pumpkin put away and I’ll get my hoe.”

Ellen watched Turner prance around as she waited. “Silly dog.” The sheep dog panted and looked like he was smiling.

Cal came out with his hoe. “Better lock him in the barn. He’s liable to beat me to it and get himself bitten.”

“Come on.” Ellen tricked the dog into following her into one of the stalls. She cracked the gate open and squeezed herself out, shutting Turner in. The dog started barking.

Cal reached the cellar door. Ellen ran after him. What if he got bit? She couldn’t bear the thought.

He turned and smiled at her.

She returned a tired smile as she reached his side. “You ever killed a snake with a hoe before?”

“Plenty of times. Sometimes they get in the hen house and eat the eggs or they get stuck in a bale of hay. They’re not always rattlers. The king snakes look like rattlers, but without the rattle. They’re good to have around; they eat rattle snakes.”

Cal opened the heavy cellar door and let it land with a loud bang. Ellen flinched. He gave her a reassuring nod. “Calm down. Everything’ll be all right.”

With hoe in hand, Cal took the stairs one slow step at a time. Three steps down, he called over his shoulder. "I see him. He's a big one."

Ellen's pulse quickened. She crossed her fingers. Horrid thoughts of losing both him and her mother raced through her mind. She would be stuck here, all alone to take care of her brother, never seeing the two people she loved most. She wanted to cry. "Be careful," she called.

Cal moved lower. His muffled voice drifted up. "I have my boots on. Don't worry."

He took another step. Ellen could see the top of his blonde head. Clutching her shaking hands, she held her breath and watched as his arm rose and disappeared into the dark with sudden powerful thrusts. The sound of metal hitting brick made Ellen's jaw hurt. She realized she was grinding her teeth. Cal's muscular arm rose two more times and then he stopped. "Got the bastard! Oops! Sorry."

Ellen would have laughed if she wasn't so tense. She exhaled. This was the second time she heard Cal curse. Did he do it often when she and her mother weren't around? She stepped back as he climbed the stairs holding the dead snake. He held it by his side, looking at its headless body. "He's got to be at least four feet long. Why, he's as wide as my arm. The rattle is worth keeping." He shook the snake and threw it on the ground.

Ellen screamed and jumped back.

Cal chuckled. "It's not going to get you. It's dead now."

"Get it out of here! Where's its head? Did you leave it down there?" She clutched her chest and glared at him.

He waved a hand at her. "Don't worry. I'm going to get it."

"How did it get there to begin with?"

Cal scratched his head and looked at the snake. "It must have tunneled through. I'll need

a lantern to find where. I'll patch it."

Ellen folded her arms across her heaving chest. "While you're there look for those bottles. I'm never going down there again."

Cal shook his head, but he was grinning. "Okay, okay," he said and back he went.

Chapter Nineteen

As Ellen tidied the kitchen, she looked at the ceiling. She wasn't surprised her mother was still asleep, what with all the laudanum, but Baby Wade should be close to waking now. She poured some of the milk Cal brought in moments earlier into a sterilized bottle.

Even though exhausted, Lenore nursed him for the final time late last night. "My baby," she said as silent tears rolled down her pale face.

Ellen bit the inside of her cheek while she wiped her mother's tears away. "It's nothing to be upset about. He'll be all right. Mrs. Langley said cow's milk never hurt anyone." Ellen took the sleeping baby from her mother's arms, placed him in his cradle, and kissed her mother goodnight.

But it wasn't like him to sleep so long. She rushed upstairs. His eyes were closed. She rocked his cradle. When he didn't stir, she touched his forehead and cheeks. His skin felt fine, but still he didn't move. Her hands beneath his armpits, fingers supporting his neck and head, she whisked him high enough to put her ear to his chest. His feet started kicking. As she lowered his body his dark blue eyes opened. He yawned.

"My goodness, you gave me a scare," she said and set him back in his cradle, expecting him to start bawling. He just lay there yawning and staring at the ceiling.

"That's strange," Ellen said aloud. He didn't act hungry. She checked his diapers. The cloth was dry. She was about to pick him up again when she heard the back door open and Cal

saying, "Careful now. Don't scrape the leg."

Ellen peered down the banister. Seth was helping him carry a newly polished mahogany crib. Cal saw her and smiled. "Make way."

They headed in her direction. She backed into the room as they maneuvered the tall crib through the door.

"This here is going to be his night time bed," Cal said. "I'll move the cradle downstairs so we can keep an eye on the little fella while Lenore's resting."

Cal and Seth situated the cradle between the kitchen and the parlor while Ellen carried the baby. "Back to work," Cal said, slapping Seth on the back. Both men smiled at Ellen as they exited through the back door.

While all this transpired, Lenore never woke and Wade never cried. But the moment Ellen put him in the cradle he acted like his usual self. He started squirming and whining.

"It's about time." She took him and the bottle to the parlor where she sat in her mother's rocking chair. When she placed the stiff rubber nipple in his mouth he scrunched his face, shook his tiny fists, and pushed it away with his tongue. She stuck it in again, but he turned his head from side to side and whimpered. Every time he pushed the nipple out she thrust it back in. This continued for some time before his lower lip protruded and he burst into tears.

"What am I going to do with you?" She bounced him on her shoulder, patted his back and paced the floor to the kitchen and back. His crying grew louder. "You've got to eat," she mumbled as frustration swept through her body, making her hands shake. She wished Cal had not gone back outside.

When she couldn't bear a moment longer of his screaming, she lowered him into his cradle and walked out the back door, shutting it behind her. She rested against the hard wood and

put her hands to her head, trying to squeeze his cries from her ears. Her legs quivered. She sat on the step, elbows on her knees and head in her hands.

Turner ran to Ellen and sniffed at her hair tumbling from her bun. She lifted her head and petted the dog. "Are you scared, too? Why is he howling like that?" The dog licked at the tears on her face. She pushed him away with a weak laugh. "Stop that, silly."

Inside, the house grew quiet. Ellen struggled to her feet and pressed her ear against the door. Slowly turning the knob, she eased it open and tiptoed in. Wade looked asleep. She crept closer to the cradle, crouched on her hands and knees, to see if he was breathing. Once she was close enough to peer over the edge, his eyes popped open. He looked cross-eyed at her and started crying.

Ellen rocked backwards on her heels. She caught herself from falling with the palms of her hands. Untangling her skirts, she rose to her feet and lifted the baby. She grabbed the bottle off the kitchen table and marched back to the parlor. "You're going to eat if it's the last thing you do," she said through gritted teeth.

Once again Wade refused the nipple. She squeezed it and dribbled milk on his lips. He stopped crying, licked his lips, squinted and shuddered. She pressed the nipple again and squirted some into his mouth. He wrinkled his nose, coughed and spit it out.

"Come on now," she pleaded. She thrust the nipple in one more time and wiggled it around, pressing it against the inside of his cheeks and on his gums. He acted like he was choking at first, but then began sucking. As he surrendered to the cow's milk and the hard rubber nipple, Ellen took a deep breath and slowed her rocking. She looked at the ceiling and smiled. "Thank you, God."

After Wade drained the bottle, he spit up. The smell of curdled milk permeated the room,

but Ellen made sure to sling a rag over her shoulder this time before burping him. She would wear one from now on as a part of her wardrobe. After he was burped and changed, she rocked him in the cradle for only a minute before he fell asleep. “Wore yourself out, didn’t you?” she said as she lowered him into the cradle and tucked a light cotton blanket around his feet. “You and me both.”

Gazing at his sleeping body, she placed her hands on her hips and arched her back to stretch. She heard her spine pop, followed by a faint jingling of her mother’s bell, something she hadn’t heard since the baby was born. It was a good sign. She sighed and made her way up the stairs. With each step her feet grew heavier and heavier.

“I need the chamber pot,” Lenore said, her voice slurred, when Ellen opened her door.

Ellen was relieved her mother hadn’t wet the bed like she’d been doing, along with the bleeding. That contraption Mrs. Langley devised and inserted inside her mother seemed to be working. Perhaps this meant she was improving. As Ellen grabbed her hands and pulled her into a seated position, her mother winced. Ellen grasped her mother beneath her shoulders and held up her nightgown. Lenore’s legs shook as she squatted over the pot while holding onto the side of the bed. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You’re going to have to, because I can’t do it for you,” Ellen said, her jaw clenched tight, hoping her mother would get mad enough to fight back and return to her normal, healthy self. Bent at an awkward angle, Ellen’s muscles twitched and stretched like rubber bands about to break. She didn’t know how much longer she could hold her mother, but finally Lenore sighed and the cotton contraption plopped out and splashed into the pot of strong-smelling dark urine. Ellen averted her eyes, but not before seeing the clotted blood.

After she helped her mother, Ellen tried not to look inside the pot as she slid it under the

bed. She wasn't about to empty it; she felt sick enough. Cal would have to do it. Straightening her back, Ellen watched her mother's shaky hands fill the medicine dropper and squeeze the liquid into her mouth. "Are you supposed to have that now?"

Lenore nodded and handed the jar to Ellen. Ellen replaced the lid and sat the medicine on the nightstand. "Aren't you hungry yet?" It was past lunch time.

"Not now," Lenore said and closed her eyes. "I just want to sleep."

Her eyelids fluttered in her sleep and seemed to sink in her skull. With her skin as pale as milk she could easily be mistaken for dead. The thought lodged in Ellen's throat, suffocating her.

She hurried downstairs. Her insides churned and pounded like every vein in her body would burst from her skin. It took the last of her control to quietly shut the back door as she headed to the barn, her panic driving her legs forward. Cal was walking toward the house, holding his hat in his hand with his eyes watching the ground. She lifted her skirts and tried to run to him, but her legs kept tripping. When he glanced up, she started sobbing and stopped a foot away. Something felt broken inside her and the words rushed from her mouth.

"I can't do this anymore. I can't take care of both of them. You don't know what it's like." She collapsed on the ground at his feet. Her hands too weak to cover her face, she tapped her fists in her lap. "I just can't."

Cal bent, collected her in his arms and pulled her off the ground. Like a broken doll, she fell against him, unable to stand on her own. Her tears soaked his shirt where her head rested on his shoulder. Without a word, he lifted her and carried her into the house. He laid her on her bed. The mattress shifted with his weight as he sat next to her. He caressed her hair, moving wet strands off her cheek and behind her ear. "There, there. Everything's going to be fine. I'll see if I can find someone to help out, and until then I'll take care of your mother. But I need you to be

strong. I'll still need your help. Can you do that for me?"

She sniffed, nodded, and turned her head to the wall in shame.

* * * * *

Ellen woke to the smell of fresh brewed coffee. She blinked at the light shining in her window and fear fluttered through her bones. What time was it? Why wasn't Wade crying? She flung her quilt off, jumped out of bed and threw open her bedroom door.

Cal glanced up from the stove and smiled. "Good morning, sunshine. Your breakfast is ready."

"What?" She couldn't believe her eyes. Cal was removing a pan from the oven and the baby was lying in his cradle, wide awake, but seemingly content. "I didn't mean to sleep so long." A little more awake now, she became aware she was still in her nightgown; the thin white cotton hugged her chest and exposed her breasts. She took a step back behind the door.

"Don't worry. Get dressed and come sit. I fed Wade and I'm getting ready to feed your mother." Cal scooped a spatula-full of scrambled eggs out of the cast iron skillet and onto a plate along with two pieces of bacon and placed it on the table. "Eat before it gets cold."

Shutting her door, she stripped off her nightgown, grabbed her dress from its hook and yanked it over her head. She scarcely remembered cooking dinner and doing the dishes last night, let alone crawling into bed. Without bothering with her petticoat, she slipped on her stockings and laced up her shoes, and ran a quick brush through her hair. Strands of loose brown hair drifted to the floor.

When Ellen sat at the table Cal handed her a cup of steaming coffee along with a pitcher of fresh cream. She glanced at him. "Thank you. You must have gotten up at the break of dawn. I never heard a thing. You should have woken me."

“You were exhausted and needed the rest. Besides, I had a good night’s sleep. Wade only woke once last night. Cow’s milk must be filling because normally he wakes up every two hours.”

Ellen raised her eyebrows and paused before adding cream to her cup. “You mean he’s been waking up before I get him in the mornings?”

Cal smiled. “You aren’t the only one who’s been missing out on sleep around here. The last two days I changed him and handed him to your mother at least four times a night. But last night, I had a bottle all ready for him on the dresser and propped him next to me and dozed while he drank his bottle. When he was finished I put him in his crib. Easy as pie.” He lifted his fork to his mouth.

“I hope you don’t ever roll over on him or let him fall off the bed,” Ellen said and stirred her coffee.

Holding a forkful of eggs, Cal’s hand froze in midair. His mouth remained open, but he didn’t take a bite. “Why, I would never do that,” he said.

Ellen chuckled at the look on his face. “Well, I should hope not.”

She felt guilty for making Cal take care of her mother, but then again, he *was* her husband. If Ellen hadn’t been around he would have to take care of her all by himself anyway. But still, she hated being such a ninny.

The next afternoon, Ellen opened the front door to find an angel on the door step. She had to be an angel because the whole atmosphere of the house lightened as she walked in, wearing a shy smile and a dress as yellow as sunshine. A miniature angel was with her, a girl about seven-years-old stood behind her dressed identically, only her dress was turquoise and shorter. Her bare brown feet stuck out from underneath. They both had long silky black hair reaching the middle

of their backs. The woman stood aside to let the girl step forward. "My name Maria and this my Madre Juanita. She no speaks English. The man asks us to come."

Ellen shook the girl's hand and smiled. "Nice to meet you, Maria and Juanita. Do come in." She couldn't stop herself from combing her fingers through the little girl's glossy hair. "Your hair is so pretty, it's like silk."

Maria's large brown eyes twinkled as she smiled, revealing perfect tiny white teeth.

"Did Mr. Turner tell you what he needed your mother for?"

Her eyes downcast, the girl nodded. "Take care of lady. She not feels so good."

"Yes, she's my mother. Her name is Lenore. Follow me and you can meet her." Ellen led them upstairs. Lenore's eyes were closed when they walked in. Juanita sat on the edge of the bed, touched Lenore's forehead, and spoke softly to her. Lenore did not stir.

Ellen bent her head and whispered to the little girl. "What is she saying?"

"She say she take care of her and make her better. Juanita take care of everybody." Maria slipped her warm little hand into Ellen's and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Juanita remained with Lenore while the child followed Ellen into the kitchen. Dirty dishes soaked in a tub filled with sudsy water. Ellen began scrubbing, placing each soapy dish into another tub of clear rinse water. Maria tugged at her apron. "Maria help."

Ellen grinned. "Would you like to dry?"

The little girl beamed and nodded.

Juanita not only bathed and fed Lenore, but also she washed all the laundry. Maria became Ellen's shadow, always following and watching her every move.

She sat on the floor near Ellen's feet and watched as she fed Wade his bottle. Ellen could tell the little girl longed to hold the baby. He was barely four days old, what if she dropped him?

Maria hopped to her feet and stood by Ellen's elbow. She rubbed the baby's bald head and planted a kiss on his soft spot. "My Madre say one bebe no big deal. She had ten bebes."

Ellen raised her eyebrows and wondered what *that* was supposed to mean. Did they think she was a weakling because she needed help? She wasn't about to ask, so she said, "Ten children, that's a bunch. Like a whole schoolhouse full."

Maria walked around the rocking chair and rubbed the baby's foot poking out of the blanket. "Me the bebe. I have two sisters have bebes. They let me hold them."

Ellen laughed. "Well, I'll tell you what. After I've burped him you can hold him for a little while, but you'll have to sit down when you do."

Maria's eyes grew almost as wide as her smile as she bounced on her toes.

* * * * *

The sun made its slow descent, covering the sky with splashes of pink and bursts of gold. Ellen waved goodbye to Juanita and Maria Hernandez as they rode together on an old black mare, Maria leaning sleepily against her mother's chest as Juanita flicked the reins. Their silhouettes disappeared down the trail leaving the farm. Juanita had already prepared dinner: baked chicken with a spicy red sauce Ellen had never tasted before, along with boiled potatoes and turnip greens sprinkled with onions and bacon bits.

Ellen bathed and fed Wade and put him to bed by the time Cal came in. Dinner sat on the table. "Something sure smells good," he said. He hung his hat and poured water into the basin to wash his hands.

"You need to thank Juanita for that," Ellen said. She handed him an empty plate to fill. "She's a hard worker. Where did you manage to find her?"

He took the plate, sat, and waited for Ellen to pass the platters of food. "Mr. Horton

leases some land to Mr. Hernandez. They used to be considered peons, free men but still considered not much more than slaves. Hard working people, but low-paid. Ole Horton is letting him buy the land once Hernandez proves he can take care of the place. Said they could use money to purchase some livestock, so I've offered to trade a couple cows for her services."

"Well, the little girl is a real sweetie pie. This is such a blessing. I was kind of scared being alone with Mother."

Cal took a bite of the chicken and smiled. "Mmmm, she's a good cook, too. I'm happy to know she's going to work out. It's good to see you smile again. Now if we can get your mother well, everything will be perfect."

Maria and Juanita arrived the next day shortly after the sun rose. Ellen was just starting on breakfast. Without a word, Juanita smiled and began hauling in water to heat. "I will set table for you. Where you keep plates in this house?" Maria said.

And so their routines began. Ellen felt things would get better with the Hernandezs here. Her neck muscles were no longer tense, but she could still feel the place where Cal had rubbed between her shoulders. Though it felt fine, she wished she could feel his hands again.

Later in the morning, after Ellen placed a sleeping Wade in his cradle, a knock sounded at the door. Maria followed behind her as she answered it. Mrs. Leah and her daughter Virginia bustled into the house before Ellen could say a word.

"We're so sorry to hear about your mother," Mrs. Leah said. She glanced down at Maria who stood beside her, but didn't say a word to her. "Mr. Horton told us all about it."

Virginia, dressed in a brown dress with burgundy trim, held a cloth-covered baking pan. She scurried into the kitchen. Everyone followed her. "This here is ham, broccoli and rice casserole." She placed it on the table. "It's our family's secret recipe."

“This has been one of the hottest summers ever, I do believe.” Mrs. Leah fanned herself. She glanced at Maria again and frowned. The little girl stared at her with obvious curiosity. Ellen bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning.

The old woman turned her back on the girl and spotted Wade asleep in his cradle. “Oh my, the baby.” She clapped her hands silently. “May I hold him?”

Ellen hesitated. “Maria just rocked him to sleep—”

“Oh, I won’t disturb him. I promise. Please?”

“Well . . .” Ellen really didn’t want the old woman to touch Wade, but what could she say?

“Let me sit down first.” Mrs. Leah sashayed into the parlor, plopped onto the sofa, and patted her lap. “I just love babies.”

Virginia followed suit and sat next to her mother. Maria stood to the right of the sofa and watched the women. Both glanced at the child with apparent puzzlement and then back at the baby.

Wade still slept as Ellen handed him over. The old woman held him at arm’s length. As she looked at him her spectacles slid to the tip of her nose.

“He doesn’t look a thing like Cal,” Virginia said through puffy lips as she tilted her head closer to her mother.

“Well, it *is* a bit soon to tell,” Mrs. Leah said. “He sure is a big baby for under a week old.”

At that moment he opened his eyes and started whimpering.

“Here, Mother. Let me hold him.” Virginia took the crying infant from her. With a smug smile, she said, “Babies love me.” She stood and held the baby on her shoulder. “There, there,

now.” When his howls grew louder she handed him back to Ellen. “He must be hungry or something.”

“We best be going anyhow. Don’t want to overstay our welcome.” Mrs. Leah stood and glanced one last time at Maria. “We’ll stop by later this week to pick up the pan.”

“I hope you enjoy it,” Virginia chimed in.

“I’m sure we will,” Ellen said. “Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

From the doorway, they watched the women drive off in their buggy, a swirl of dust trailing behind them. Maria took hold of Ellen’s hand and leaned her head against her. Ellen looked at the girl and smiled. How could those women ignore the existence of such a sweet child? Whatever their reasons, Ellen was happy to see them leave. It would suit her fine if she never saw them again.

Later that day another knock sounded on the door. *Not the Leahs again already*, she thought. She had just changed Wade’s diaper which was runnier and smellier now that he drank the cow’s milk. She breathed through her mouth to keep from gagging. Rinsing the diapers off was even worse.

Opening the door she was surprised to find a red-headed woman she’d never seen before. It was difficult to judge the woman’s age, but she’d obviously seen her fair share of sun and hard work. She held a bundle wrapped in red cloth.

“I’m guessing you must be Ellen,” she said with a hoarse, scratchy voice.

“And you are?” Ellen could see the woman was missing a tooth on her lower jaw.

The woman cackled. “Where are my manners? Goodness me. I’m Mrs. Clark. Eula Clark.”

Clark? Mrs. Clark? For a moment, Ellen couldn’t place the name but knew it sounded

familiar. Then it dawned on her. This was Tom's mother. "Mrs. Clark, it's so nice to meet you. Won't you come on in?" Ellen opened the door wider for her.

"Well, for a moment. I heard about your poor momma. I reckon everyone in town has by now, so I baked you a loaf of bread." She handed the warm bundle to Ellen and spotted Maria sitting on the floor near the cradle, holding Wade. "You letting that filthy thing hold a baby?" Mrs. Clark frowned and moved closer. "Let me see that little feller."

Ellen tossed the bread on the kitchen table and hurried to the woman's side, placing a hand on her outstretched arm. It took most of her energy to keep her temper in check. "This is Maria. She is not filthy and she's just gotten him to sleep, so please don't move him. Perhaps you can hold him on your next visit."

"Next visit?" Mrs. Clark squinted at her. She gave Maria another passing glance, frowned, and turned to leave. "Perhaps. I've got to head back home now. I got three growing, hungry boys coming in from the fields any moment." She headed for the door, mumbling. "Cook, cook, cook. Seems that's all I ever do. Them boys will eat you out of house and home." She paused with her hand on the knob and eyed Ellen. "That Tom, he's the best of the bunch." She winked and smiled, closing the door behind her.

Ellen went to the window, parted the curtain an inch and watched the strange woman hop onto a gray rickety wagon pulled by a gray swayed-back horse. She glanced at Maria and shook her head. "Some people, huh?"

Chapter Twenty

Maria and Juanita were talking in the parlor. Their speech sounded like gibberish to Ellen. Maria was trying to teach her some Spanish, but so far she could only count from zero to ten. "Cero, uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez." She thought she did fairly

well, but Maria still giggled at her efforts. At the same time Ellen attempted Spanish, she was helping Maria improve her English. The little girl proved to be a faster learner than Ellen.

Poking her head around the corner, Ellen said, “What are you two talking about in there?” It was maddening not knowing what they were saying. Juanita smiled and nudged Maria, gesturing with her hands.

Maria stepped forward. “She said take rest of day, enjoy. You been working hard in hot kitchen. We clean and put jars in cellar. Your momma and baby are sleeping. We take care. You do something you like.”

Ellen hesitated, but only for a second, long enough to wipe sweat from her forehead with the tail of her stained apron. She had just finished sealing the last of the canning jars she’d slaved over for the past two days—batches of peaches, tomatoes, pickled okra, and black-eyed peas.

She worked like a mule since early in the morning, lugging in pail after pail of water with Maria’s help, and boiling large pots of it. First, she peeled and pitted the peaches, boiled them in water mixed with salt and vinegar to make the syrup. Next, she packed the peaches into the jars and poured the syrup on top before wiping down the rims, screwing on the lids and making sure the screw bands were on tight and even to hold the rubber sealing rings in place. Then she stood the jars on a metal rack in hot water, bringing it all to a gentle boil. She did the same thing all over again by skinning and coring tomatoes—Maria shelled the peas, while Ellen chopped the okra, and canned all the day before—followed by the same time-consuming process as with the peaches. It had been so much easier at the end of last summer when her mother was able to help.

“But what about this mess?” She asked Maria, shamefaced as she surveyed the pots and pans, the scattered pits and peels on the dirty floor.

“We can do it.” Maria grabbed a broom from the pantry and tried to shoo Ellen away

with it. She laughed and said, "Juanita say hurry before she change her mind."

It was obvious Juanita was more than capable of taking care of everything around the house. Ellen hadn't planned on putting up the jars anyway; she was going to make Cal do it. She had already vowed to never go down into the cellar again.

Now Ellen had one less thing to worry about. The first thought that came to mind was swimming. It was the last day of August and she hadn't gone swimming all summer. This might be her only chance. "If you're sure," she said. "I think I'll ride my horse." There was no need to tell them about her private swimming hole.

Juanita said something and waved her hands. Ellen looked to Maria for translation. Maria smiled and waved her hands like her mother. "She says, go, go."

Ellen didn't have to be told twice. For the first time in months excitement swept over her like rushing water, making her light on her feet. She'd been so busy helping her mother during her pregnancy and then with Wade the past week; since his birth, her life was nothing but constant turmoil. Practically skipping all the way, she was oblivious to the heat as she saddled Fairfax who acted eager as well. She hadn't ridden him in some time. He probably thought she had forgotten him. She led him out of the barn and stopped to check his girth and pat a panting Turner, who dashed between the horse's legs for a quick greeting, before returning to his resting spot in one of the stalls. As Ellen adjusted the stirrups she heard another horse approaching. Jacob was on his monstrous black horse. The horse had to be big to hold such a large man. When she first met him at school two years ago, everyone called Jacob the Ox. She wasn't sure if he earned his nickname from his size or his simple brain. He stopped next to her and took off his black cowboy hat, letting his sweat-soaked hair cool in the light breeze.

"Howdy, Miss Ellen."

“Hello Jacob.” She concentrated on her horse, not wanting to encourage any conversation.

“Going for a ride, I see. Care for company?”

Ellen glanced at his thighs thick as tree trunks and pushing the limits of his jean’s seams. His huge gut hung over his silver belt buckle. “No, thank you. I’d rather be alone, if you don’t mind. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone riding and had a chance to just think.” She hoped that was enough to discourage him.

He put his hat back on. “If you say so. Have a nice ride.” He turned his horse and headed toward the north pasture.

Ellen hoisted herself into the saddle and watched his retreating back. Why wasn’t he working out in the fields like the other men? She glanced up and saw billowy white clouds floating like balloons through the deep blue sky. Perhaps it was later than she thought and his work was done for the day. She flicked the reins, gave the horse a light kick, and said, “We’d better hurry before it gets too late.”

After Fairfax’s muscles warmed, Ellen kicked a little harder and sent him into a gallop past the crowded corn fields and the bountiful orchards. When they made it to the usual trail Ellen slowed the horse to a saunter. The pathway had overgrown since their last visit. Once they entered the dense brush the clicking sounds of cicadas hushed as if the insects watched them. The horse trampled through knee high grass and Ellen ducked several times to avoid low-lying branches. It took longer than the normal jaunt to reach the ridge that sloped to the creek bank. She eased Fairfax down an incline and watched his hooves sink into the ground softened from the previous night’s rain. They reached the group of oaks near the water where she tied the horse’s reins loosely to one tree. He grazed on the tall green grass, ignoring the grasshoppers

popping around him.

Ellen spotted the boulder she always used to place her clothes. When she sat down to untie her boots, the heat burned her bottom through her dress. “Holy Moses!” She jumped to her feet, removed the rest of her clothing and tossed them in a pile onto the huge white stone. Wading through the shallow warm water, she watched silvery minnows swirl around her pale legs as her toes sunk in the mud. It cooled quickly as the water deepened. At waist deep, she wrapped her arms around her breasts before ducking and swimming toward the deep end all covered in shade from the massive cottonwoods and cedar. Turning onto her back, she floated, her hair spilling from its bun and spreading around her like brown seaweed. She kicked her feet, sending water spraying into the air and raining on her face. She closed her eyes, tried to clear her thoughts of her mother’s health, and listened to the muffled sounds of her breathing. If she held her breath she heard a humming mingled with a tinkling sound, and even her heart beating. Her muscles relaxed making her weightless; she could float forever. When something tickled her stomach she opened her eyes and saw two blue dragonflies, their translucent wings quivering, one hovering over the other, its slender tail stuck to the pin-sized head below it. Her father used to say if a dragonfly landed on you it brought good luck. It would be nice if he was right. If there were two, and mating as well, did that double the luck? She could use a little of it, enough to share with her mother. When the dragonflies flew off, Ellen exhaled enough for her body to sink beneath the surface. The water, like soothing silk, caressed every inch of her. When she couldn’t hold her breath a second longer, she shot to the surface, gasping for air. She had never felt more alive. Diving under again, she turned somersaults, producing bubbles which traveled between her legs, tickling all the way to her breasts. She traced the trail with her fingers, noting how the water made her skin softer. Was this what it felt like to be touched by a man?

When she rose to the surface she thought she heard something cracking. Treading water, she strained her ears. Rustling came from the distance. She swam toward the shallow end. When her feet touched the muddy bottom she froze. A cedar bush shook as if a herd of buffalo were about to burst through. Voices followed the shuffling sounds. She shook her head to dislodge water from her ears. It sounded like men and heavy breathing.

Ellen struggled to get out of the pond as the mud sucked at her feet like quicksand, causing her to fall back in the water twice. She reached the bank when someone shouted. She turned to see two shadowed bodies through the trees, wrestling on the ground, one on top of the other. Fairfax whinnied and pawed at the ground. Dripping wet, Ellen reached her pile of clothing. She fought with her slip, which turned inside out when she undressed and was now hot as if freshly ironed. It stuck on her head, her hair tangling in its sleeves. She heard her horse's panicked sounds and another horse's hooves pounding the ground as if retreating at a gallop. As she wrestled with the material she resisted the urge to scream out her frustration. Once her slip was on she looked in her horse's direction.

Cal reached Fairfax as the horse reared on his hind legs, front hooves kicking in the air. Cal grabbed the reins and managed to calm him with his soothing voice. "It's okay, boy. Simmer down." The horse lowered his legs, shook his mane and snorted.

Frowning, Cal glanced at Ellen, his eyes traveling her body from head to toe, before he looked away. "Hurry up and get dressed," he called over his shoulder. "Your mother needs you."

Ellen looked down to see what Cal had seen—her wet, clinging slip outlining her naked body. She hurriedly put on the rest of her clothing, her hands shaking more from shock than from cold.

She squeezed the water from her hair as she walked toward Cal. "What in the world just

happened?” She was still too stunned to be embarrassed.

Cal handed her the reins without looking at her. “Let’s start walking.”

She followed him, leading her horse through the maze of tall grass and bushes. “Well?”

“I caught Jacob peeking through a bush at you.” He looked over his shoulder at her. “He got an eyeful, too.” He stopped and twirled around to face her. “What *were* you thinking?”

“I was swimming for goodness sake. I can’t swim with my clothes on.” Ellen felt her face flush. Everything seemed so strange, so wrong. “How did *you* happen along?”

Cal turned his back on her and continued walking. “Maria told me your mother was having a bad spell and you were out riding. I wouldn’t have known to head this way except I noticed hoof prints, two sets. Then I saw Jacob’s horse tied to a tree. It didn’t take me long to spot him. Good thing I came along when I did. No telling what he had in mind.”

Ellen was furious. Jacob had ruined her Eden. No longer was it a secret place nor was it safe. She hated him more for that than for spying on her. “I hope you beat the tar out of him.”

Cal flashed a brief grin and flexed his bloody knuckles without wincing. “I imagine he’ll have a black eye and swollen lip for a while. He won’t be coming back.”

They reached a clearing where Pumpkin stood, munching on grass, his reins dangling to the ground. Cal locked his fingers together and gave Ellen a boost up into her saddle, and then jumped on Pumpkin’s back. Cal clicked his tongue. Ellen followed behind, watching Pumpkin’s tail swish in Fairfax’s face. “What did Maria say about Momma?”

“Maria was beside herself. Said your mother was hollering for you. I checked on her and she’s not looking so good. Not sure if it’s an infection making her worse or the medicine. We best hurry.”

Out in the open they galloped to the barn where Seth stood waiting to unsaddle the

horses. “Thanks,” Cal said as he handed him Pumpkin’s reins. Seth nodded and glanced at Ellen. He raised his eyebrows, blinked, and managed a crooked smile. Ellen imagined she looked a mess with her damp hair loose and tangled.

They rushed to the house to find Maria standing at the back door, staring at the ground, her hands twirling a lock of her hair. As the child glanced up, Ellen ran a reassuring hand across her soft cheeks, and said, “Everything’s going to be okay.”

Loud jabbering came from upstairs, but as they moved closer the sounds became coherent. Lenore was yelling, “I’m not coming with you. You can’t make me.”

On her way to her mother’s room Ellen saw Wade sleeping in his cradle. How could he sleep through her mother’s screaming? Juanita stood by the bedroom door, frowning and touching her fingers to her forehead and shoulders, making the sign of the cross. She stepped aside to make room. Ellen sat on the edge of the bed and took her mother’s hand while Cal moved to the other side. “Mother, what’s the matter?”

Lenore looked at Ellen as if trying to figure out who she was; she blinked a few times and said, “It’s Frank. He wants me to go with him, but I won’t. He’s going to hell for what he did.”

“Hush now. Daddy’s dead.”

“He’s standing right there. Can’t you see him?” Lenore pointed at the window.

Ellen saw the setting sun glaring through the parted curtains. She got up to close them.

Cal glanced at Ellen. “It’s the medicine talking. She’s hallucinating.” He reached for Lenore’s hand.

Lenore screamed at him. “Don’t touch me! I don’t know who you are. Get away from me.”

Grimacing, he pulled his hand back as if he’d been slapped. “Lenore, it’s me. Cal.”

Seeing him hurt made Ellen want to cry more than seeing her mother in this state. “It’s Cal,” Ellen said. “He’s your husband.”

“Get him away from me. My husband’s standing right there and he wants me to go with him.” Spit flew from Lenore’s mouth as she shook her head and cried. “He shouldn’t have done it. We could have worked things out.”

“I can’t stay in here right now.” Cal stood. “I better get the doctor.”

He made his way around the foot of the bed when Lenore screamed again. “Get out! Get him out of here.”

Startled, he paused for a second before hurrying out of the room.

Juanita nudged Ellen’s shoulder to hand her a damp rag. Ellen wiped the sweat from her mother’s forehead and the drying spittle around her mouth. Struggling for composure, she said, “Calm down, Mother. Now what on earth are you talking about?”

“He blew his brains out with a shotgun. Can’t you see?” She stared at the curtains and back at Ellen. “Oh, of course not. He’d have to turn around.” Lenore looked from the window to Ellen again. She blinked and frowned. The frown melted from her face. Her eyes opened wide. She put her hand to her mouth. “Oh God, oh God.”

Ellen stared at her mother. Could it be true? She shook her head. “No Mother, Daddy died from a heart attack. Remember? You told me so.”

Lenore’s head trembled. She sobbed in short agonized spurts. Grabbing her mother by the shoulders, Ellen shook her and cried, “Tell me that’s not true. Daddy didn’t kill himself. He would never have done such a thing. He loved us too much.” Ellen’s hands tingled as if blood was rushing out of her body through the tips of her fingers.

“Stop it!” She heard Cal yell from behind her. Ellen’s eyesight blurred, and through a

swirling black tunnel she saw Cal's pale face. His strong hands were pulling her away. She released her grip and glanced at her mother's gaping mouth, her eyes a muddy pool. The tingling shot through Ellen's hands again, up her arms, and into her head; she saw a blast of light before she began falling. She could not stop.

Chapter Twenty One

September 1898

"Are you ready?" Cal asked, his voice solemn, yet soothing. Ellen heard him, but didn't answer. She couldn't; she'd lost her voice along with her mother. When Cal glanced at her his face was engraved in sorrow.

Ellen wasn't ready. She could raise her hand only an inch off her lap to wave back at Maria and Juanita. The rising dust and heat made the woman and girl shimmer like mirages in the doorway. They were staying behind to take care of Wade. He would never know his mother, and Ellen would never know her better, woman to woman, as a friend.

Ellen sat next to Cal on the wagon and realized they were moving once trees started passing by. She held onto her seat to keep from falling even though the horses weren't walking fast. It crossed her mind to let go, it would be so easy, but her hands wouldn't let her.

She wished she had some of her mother's medicine to stop the throbbing in her head, but the liquid was lost in shards of broken glass after Cal threw the bottle to the ground. If Dr. Prague had been around at that moment Cal might have thrown the old man to the ground, too. He never had time to fetch the doctor, not that the man could have done anything. It was too late.

Her mother was already dead.

Ellen could not understand it was final. It was over. Lenore was gone. What would she tell her brother about their mother when he was old enough to listen? The pain stabbed at her

chest, making her feel helpless, abandoned. She didn't know how to pray for relief, but she tried. It did little to fill the emptiness, the desperation inside her. She wanted one last moment to ask her mother what to do, where to go. What would become of her now that she was an orphan? Swallowing the pain, Ellen tried to feel grown, as she should, but it was impossible.

There was no telling how long it took the wagon to reach the cemetery on the opposite edge of town, but by the time they arrived people were already there. Like shadows, they were standing in small groups around the gray and white headstones. Men in long-sleeved black coats and trousers strolled about, whispering and wiping sweat from their foreheads. Women wearing black dresses and hats stood in a circle, chattering like crows.

"Here they come," Ellen heard someone say. They all looked in their direction and swarmed to the grave site as the wagon came to a halt. Cal held out his hand to help Ellen down. She recognized a few of the faces—Dr. Prague, the midwife next to him, the Leahs, her old schoolteacher Mrs. Shoemaker talking to Mr. Horton, and some of the farm hands were there, and even Mrs. Clark. But there were plenty of people she didn't know, though she recognized the faces of some of the girls from school like Priscilla Hunt and Rebecca Stilts, the ones who never bothered speaking to her. Why were they there?

Seth, Ralph and three other boys approached the wagon. Seth shook hands with Cal and pointed at the others. "They've volunteered to be pallbearers."

As Cal shook their hands, Seth went to Ellen and looked at the ground. "I'm sorry about your mother."

Ellen nodded. Her head felt numb and heavy, like something she could remove and set aside.

Ralph came next and gave her a clumsy hug and pat on the back. "I'm awfully sorry," he

said before he choked with tears and returned to the group.

Ellen looked straight ahead as the young men headed to the back of the wagon. She winced when she heard the coffin scraping as they slid it out. They came around her side, their feet crunching on the graveled path, three men on one side of the coffin and three on the other, their hands and shoulders carrying the load. With the back right-hand side corner resting on his shoulder, Cal nodded his head, directing Ellen to follow them.

But she couldn't move her feet. She stared at the pale pine coffin Cal had made and thought it couldn't be very heavy. If it was, the burden would come mainly from the wood because her mother was a petite woman who hardly weighed a thing. Ellen saw her mother for the final time the night before as she lay inside the coffin before Cal nailed the top on. Lenore looked like she was merely ill and asleep. Ellen wanted to grab a book and read to her, wake her and make her feel better. As her hand hovered over Lenore's body, Ellen felt the cold radiating up before even touching her mother's arm; the coldness was like that of a metal bucket left outside too long in freezing weather. Even Lenore's beautiful brown hair cascading around her slender shoulders felt cold. Ellen thought about how over time her mother's soft skin would slough off to expose her small bones. She imagined the skeleton looking like an animal's carcass, scattered and starched white by the sun. The image gave her the chills, making her shudder even though it was scorching outside.

"Come along now, child. These things need to be done." Mrs. Langley was by her side, taking her by the elbow with a firm grip and leading her to the group of people by the open grave. The old preacher, a pale thin man, stood solemn near a mound of fresh dark dirt. Ellen stared at it, thinking how healthy the soil looked, the kind she dug up when looking for earthworms to use as fish bait. When she raised her head she saw the girls. None of them made

eye contact with her. They were busy gazing at Cal. She wanted to scream at them to go away; the vultures. Lenore was just a dead thing to them. Rage filled Ellen's chest. She opened her mouth when Cal clasped her hand and held tight. As she glanced at him he pulled her closer to his side and wrapped his arm protectively around her shoulder. The preacher began, "The Lord is my strength and son, and is become my salvation. The voice of rejoicing and salvation is the in the tabernacles of the righteous . . ." Ellen stopped listening to him, but concentrated on the sounds around her. Birds chirping in the distance, a cough or two, but she heard no sobbing, no sniffing back tears. And why should she? No one here knew her mother. They loved to talk about her, about how she'd bewitched Cal, but they never cared to know her. Why had they bothered to come?

The preacher's pious voice continued to drone on. ". . . The Lord hath chastened me sore: but hath not given me over unto death." What in heaven's name was he talking about? Was he chastening her mother? Ellen shook her head and gazed at the sanctimonious dry eyes all around. She looked back at the ground and tried to focus on the old man's words. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth." A fly buzzed by her ear. She tried to ignore it. "The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore." Finally, he was finished preaching.

Ellen became mesmerized by the coffin as they lowered it into the hole. Cal guided her to the mound to grab a handful of dirt; it was warm and gritty in her hand as she tossed it into the grave. The thuds of earth hitting the coffin sounded like someone knocking on a door. Could it be her mother? What if she was still alive? Terrified, Ellen turned to Cal to stop them from burying the coffin, but she couldn't make the words come out. Instead, she let him lead her past

all the people, oblivious to their consoling words, and back to the wagon where she looked back one last time at her mother's grave. The mound, with its white wooden cross, made Ellen feel guilty for never trying to understand her mother. Her mother had been emotionally absent up until her father died. Now it was too late to develop the relationship she wanted with a mother. Who could she talk to that shared the same history, who would understand her and where she came from and what she'd been through? No one.

She glanced at Cal, scooted closer to him, and placed her head on his shoulder. He wrapped one arm around her waist and used the other to hold the reins to take them home. Closing her eyes, Ellen let the sound of wagon wheels roll over her pain.

She awoke to murmuring and the smell of fried chicken and fresh baked apple pie. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep, but the sun was still shining through her open window, where a light breeze lifted her curtains. Someone said, "I'm so sorry for your loss," followed by the clinking of dishes. Footsteps and chairs scraping the floor echoed throughout the house. It was difficult to tell how many people might be there, but she wasn't about to leave her room to find out. Turning her back to the door, she put her pillow over her head and closed her eyes.

Sometime later she heard someone knocking. She didn't bother opening her eyes. Whoever it was could just go away. The door squeaked, followed by the patter of footsteps. Someone started tapping on her shoulder and whispering her name. Ellen rolled over to see Maria's face in the shadows only inches from hers. There wasn't much light left in the cramped room. Maria smiled and touched Ellen's cheek. "There is this plate for you. Come to eat, please."

Ellen smiled for the first time in days. She reached out and stroked the little girl's soft shiny hair. "I'm not hungry. I'll eat when everyone is gone."

"They are gone now, all of them." She took Ellen's hand and tugged. "Come, come eat."

Juanita says so.” She tugged harder. “*I* say so.”

Ellen allowed the girl to pull her to a seated position. “Okay, if *you* say so.”

When she shuffled into the warm kitchen she found Juanita with strands of damp hair sticking to her neck, drying a pan and stacking it on top of several other pans at the end of the table. Someone had opened the windows, but it was still muggy inside.

Maria stood behind Ellen and gave her a little shove. “Sit down. Eat.”

Like a small child, Ellen obeyed and found a plate filled with fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cream gravy and green beans. She glanced around the room. “Where’s Wade?”

Maria pulled a chair next to her and sat, resting her elbows on the table. “He’s already gone night night.”

Ellen couldn’t believe it was that late. “He’s already been fed?”

Maria nodded. “Yep.”

Taking a bite of chicken dipped in gravy, Ellen found she was hungry and the food tasted good. Her stomach gurgled and grumbled. She hadn’t eaten all day; she thought she would never eat again. When she was almost finished Cal came in through the back door. He smiled when he saw her. “Good to see you eating something.” He turned to Maria. “Tell your mother I’m going to tie your horse to the back of my wagon and take y’all home. Sorry to keep you so long after dark, but I sure do appreciate your help.”

After they were gone, the kitchen grew darker. Ellen lit another oil lamp but it didn’t brighten the room. Shadows hovered in places she’d never seen before, and when she turned her head she thought she saw movement from the corner of her eyes. Feeling uneasy, she grabbed one lantern and went into the parlor. All the chairs remained in the corners and against the walls where they had been moved to position the coffin in the center of the parlor for viewing. Leaving

the lamp on the floor, Ellen dragged the round table first, and pushed the chairs back into place, hoping she didn't wake the baby in the process.

With the parlor back in order, Ellen lit two candles on the mantel to brighten the unnatural dimness. She placed the lamp on the round table in front of her and sat in the rocking chair and waited, listening to the silence. Coyotes howled in the distance. She glanced at the window. The curtains fluttered. The clock on the mantel ticked loudly. It was ten till eleven. She stared at the candles. The flames illuminated her mother's porcelain figures. The dancing couple looked like they were moving the way the light flickered on them. When she couldn't bear another moment, she leaped from the chair, making it rock on its own. She reached out a hand to stop it, blew out the candles, grabbed the lantern and scurried up the stairs.

The room looked different in the soft glow of the light. She peered over the crib railing to see Wade sleeping in only diapers. He had kicked off his light cover. She didn't put it back on. It was almost as warm up here as it was in the kitchen even with the window open. For some reason she felt better being near the baby. If only she could hold him without waking him. Glancing at the bed her mother died in, Ellen hesitated to sit on it. She didn't want to be alone. She crawled on top of the covers and curled into a ball.

The next thing she knew Wade was crying. She heard footsteps running up the stairs. A light shone downstairs and the bedside lamp was burning low, about to run out of fuel. Right when she reached the crib, Cal appeared at the top of the landing. She turned to see his silhouette inside the door frame. He held a bottle in his hand. When he stepped closer she saw his hair was tousled, the look of sleep on his face. "I'll take him," he said in a drowsy voice.

"Did you just get back?" Ellen whispered.

He took Wade and put the bottle to the baby's lips. "No, I've been home for a couple of

hours, sleeping in your bed. I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful." He headed toward the door. "You go back to sleep. I'll take him downstairs. He can sleep in the cradle."

"No," she said with sudden fear and stopped him with her hand. "I mean, you stay here. It's your room. I'll go back to my bed." She didn't want to be all alone in this room, with her mother's ghost.

"But I've already messed up your bed."

"No, you didn't," she said and tried to smile. "Good night." She left before he could argue any further.

When she crawled beneath her sheets she thought she would have trouble falling back to sleep. After tossing and turning a few times, she hugged her pillow to her chest and noticed Cal's familiar and pleasant odor. She breathed it in, trying not to think about anything but the faint smell of him as she closed her eyes and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Twenty Two

September - November 1898

A week after the funeral, Virginia Leah, minus her mother, stopped by the house, bringing with her still one more pan.

"This is another family recipe, cheese grits with bacon bits. It's good for supper or breakfast. Add some greens or eggs, either one, and some biscuits, and you've got a filling meal." She handed it to Ellen. "Is Cal around?" Her narrowed eyes scanned the parlor, up the stairs, and past Ellen's shoulder.

Ellen headed toward the kitchen, her isolation following her. "He's either in the barn or out in the pasture." Her voice seemed separate from her mouth.

Virginia scurried after her, passing Maria as the child sat on a short stool rocking Wade's

cradle. She collided into Ellen's back near the kitchen table. "Oh goodness!" she gasped. "I thought he might be coming in for his noontime meal." She turned to face Maria. "Who *is* that child?"

At that moment, Juanita walked in the back door carrying a load of laundry in a large wicker basket. Ellen nodded her head toward the woman. "She's Maria, Juanita's daughter." Even if Ellen hadn't felt so detached from her mind she wouldn't bother giving Virginia more information. Lenore would have said they had started out on the wrong foot because of what Ellen overheard at the store, but Ellen knew to trust her instincts. These women were nothing but busybodies looking for others' faults to feel better about their own pitiful, boring lives.

Virginia straightened her shoulders and flashed a haughty smile. "Oh, hired help?"

When Ellen handed her the empty pan from the week before, she forced her mouth to move. "They help us, yes. Thank you."

"You are oh so very welcome, my dear child," Virginia said. She paused, looked around the kitchen, her eyes darting back and forth to the back door as if it would open any second, and then waved her hands in the air like a bird's fluttering wings. "Oh, I do believe we left another dish here after the funeral."

Maria spoke to her mother in Spanish. Juanita went to the cupboard and pulled out a glass pie pan.

"Why, that's it exactly." Her eyebrows raised in surprise, Virginia clapped her hands lightly before taking the pan. "So the girl understands English?"

Ellen focused on the woman's fat lips. "Yes, she's very smart," she managed to say.

"So now that your momma is gone, what will you do? Will you be going to live with her people now?"

As if a cold breeze rushed through the house, Ellen's body went rigid. She stared at Virginia for a moment. "My mother's people are all dead."

Virginia stood a moment longer, looking like there was more to be said. Lifting her skirt, she swirled toward the front door. "Well, goodness, that's terrible, just terrible. I guess I better get going. Tell Cal the next time he's in town he can stop by our house and return the pan then. He knows where we live."

Ellen stared at the woman without answering. She willed her mind to make the woman disappear. When that didn't work she walked her to the door. Virginia marched to her buggy and raised herself up. She frowned down at Ellen who stood silent on the front porch. "You take care of yourself now, honey." Flicking the reins, Virginia guided the slow-moving horse. The buggy lurched forward on the well-worn path.

Without responding, Ellen watched the woman leave. Instead of taking the circled path off the property, Virginia turned the horse in the direction of the barn. Ellen's gaze trailed them. Cal was leaving the barn and walking toward the house. He stopped when the buggy reached him and moved closer as the woman leaned near him to speak. Ellen couldn't hear a word they said, but noticed Virginia look her way, followed by Cal.

Later, when Cal came in for supper, he opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it, murmuring as he did so. He shifted his weight in his chair as if he was uncomfortable. Neither Ellen nor Cal said much to one another. She caught him looking at her often, and if he noticed her red-rimmed eyes, he said nothing, but occasionally patted her shoulder whenever he walked past. It was obvious to Ellen Cal wasn't sleeping any better than she was. Dark patches circled under his eyes. With Juanita and Maria still helping Ellen became idle yet restless whenever Wade was napping.

It wasn't until she wrote David, informing him of her mother's death and her brother's birth, she broke down and cried, allowing the pain to surface and accepting the reality and the loss. Dr. Prague said Lenore died from an infection and fever. The excessive blood loss didn't help her condition. Cal blamed the medicine. Ellen blamed herself. She shouldn't have shaken her mother.

She didn't mention in her letter what her mother said about Percy Cook being her uncle or her father committing suicide, something she wasn't sure was true. Mother had to be delusional. Or maybe she *had* seen his ghost. Ellen could learn to live without her mother, just as she learned to live without her father. She had to do that. She would teach herself, but she couldn't shake the thought of her father shooting himself. Why would he have done such a horrendous, thoughtless thing? It didn't make sense. He'd always acted full of life, loving every minute of it. Maybe when she saw Ada she'd question her and see if their old housekeeper knew anything. For now, all she could do was pray what her mother had said was nothing more than a hallucination.

Knowing Lenore's last thoughts were about her father made Ellen think perhaps her mother had truly loved him. By marrying Cal, Lenore did the only thing she knew to provide for them. Heaviness pressed on Ellen's shoulders, sinking into her chest, making her breathe faster. Did her mother know Ellen loved her? If only she'd told her or shown her more often.

Throughout the following days she would stop whatever chore she was doing, sit down, and bury her head in her hands. She cried silent tears all through the house, but one day, while Wade was napping, she escaped outside, far away from human ears. She ran until she was out of breath, past the pastures and into the cornfields, lost in the foliage, oblivious to bugs or possible snakes. She let loose a scream that echoed through the land, rattling leaves and startling birds out

of the trees, their cries mingling with hers.

“Momma!” she screamed. “I’m so sorry. I love you. I miss you. Please forgive me.” She collapsed, pounding her fist on the ground, plucking grass and flinging it in the air. That she had fallen in love with her mother’s husband only made the guilt and emptiness harder to bear. She wanted to pull out her hair, to inflict bodily injury to expunge the sorrow from her heart. Nothing she did eased the pain.

As the days crept by in endless routine and habitual slow motion, Ellen’s thoughts ate away at her like flies nipping at cows’ hides. In the hours of darkness, images of her father invaded her sleep. A smile showed beneath his mustache. A small pinprick glowed in his pale forehead, but when he turned around a big hole gaped in the back of his head, oozing blood black as ink and matting in his thick brown hair. Her mother hovered around him in a blood-stained white gown, with her eyes wide in a blank stare, her mouth frozen in a grimace and her hair a frizzy mess of gray. Many times Ellen awoke from these nightmares, unsure where she was, feeling like she was about to fall off a cliff. Her small room was as dark as the inside of a coffin. To fall back to sleep, she tried to slow her breathing in the thick night air. Sometimes she heard faint footsteps above and knew Cal was awake. She imagined him either pacing the floor alone or while holding the baby. Was he missing her mother as much as she?

One such night, she woke to find Cal sitting at the edge of her bed, dressed in only red long johns and his hair disheveled, while a lantern glowed on her bedside table. He held her hand, whispering. “Hush now. You were only dreaming.”

She bolted in bed thinking he was part of the dream. “What?”

He was still there. “You were screaming,” he said.

Tears dampened her face. Cal pulled her to him and held her in a tight squeeze. She

wrapped her arms around him, feeling the hard muscles of his back through the thin textured material of his undergarment. “I keep having horrible nightmares,” she mumbled into his shoulder, trying to stop the tears from flowing. She pulled away from him to wipe her nose.

“They get worse every night.”

“I know,” Cal said. “I’ve been having some, too.”

“Did Mother ever mention that my father killed himself?” She held her breath.

He shook his head. “No, she never told me such a thing. She didn’t talk about him much; said he died from a heart attack. That’s about it.”

Ellen exhaled. Her body went limp. “Then what was she talking about?”

“She was hallucinating. The laudanum made her say strange things. Doc said it might. Wished I’d kept a closer eye on how much she was using.”

“Did she ever tell you how she met my father?” Ellen needed to know what her mother shared of her past. Now that it was too late, she wanted to understand her mother better.

Cal lowered his head, his face now covered in shadows. “Not really. We never were inclined to talk about personal matters.”

Ellen couldn’t believe it. She and David wrote about everything in their letters, or at least she did, and she wasn’t in love with him. She assumed Cal and her mother had become best friends. Wasn’t that the way marriage was supposed to be?

“You never told her about your parents, your sister?” she asked, wondering if she should tell him what she knew about her mother.

He glanced up. “Well, she knew they were dead.”

“You never told her about how close you were?”

“She didn’t ask.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t always easy to talk; maybe because she was

older than me. I always felt I had to be the man of the house with her.” Cal patted Ellen’s hand and stood. “Well, enough talking for tonight. Go back to sleep. Wade will be awake in a couple of hours and it’ll be time to get back to work.” He lifted his lantern. “Sleep tight.” Before he shut the door behind him, he looked back and smiled. “Sweet dreams, too.”

* * * * *

It wasn’t even two months her mother was in the ground when the Hartridge woman started sniffing after Cal. Virginia stopped by the house at least once a week, bringing food or collecting dishes. Other women also came and brought food.

Ellen always looked out the window when someone knocked on the door. She refused to answer it. Either Maria or Juanita would, accepting whatever dishes the women brought. When they left, Ellen peeked out the window again and watched as the women scanned the property, searching for a glimpse of its owner.

Maria stood by her side and whispered, “Juanita will like it if you do not worry so much. The mister does not care for these women.”

“What do you mean?” Ellen stepped away from the window, letting the curtain fall from her hand. Were her feelings so obvious?

Maria smiled and shrugged.

“They’re just trying to be hospitable,” Cal said when Ellen commented on it while she brushed Fairfax in the barn.

“They’re hoping to catch your attention,” Ellen said, hating the jealousy growing inside her, blending with her guilt. “You don’t need the food. You have Juanita. They all know that. They know I’m here, too.”

“They’ll stop soon enough, I reckon.” His eyes twinkled as if he found it all amusing.

She put the brush away and glared at him. “You shouldn’t encourage them, unless you’re interested in one of them.”

Cal shook his head and smiled. “Hey, it’s free food! Saves you and Juanita time, and me money.”

“I don’t think it’s funny.” Ellen folded her arms across her chest and walked away.

“Come on, Ellen,” he called. “Don’t be mad.”

They didn’t speak about it as they ate dinner that evening—a dinner provided by another faceless woman. Ellen had difficulty chewing and swallowing, knowing what the food symbolized. The fact Cal still saw her as a child made her feel even worse. She was losing weight, too. She could tell by how loosely her clothes fell on her.

On a sunny day in early November while working in the garden near the house, salvaging the last of the potatoes and carrots, Ellen spotted Priscilla Hunt, a girl from school who wore her blonde hair in a French twist with a large white bow pinned on top. Ellen detested the snobbish girl. Her older brother Phillip, a skinny young man with a large Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, drove the wagon while Priscilla sat straight-backed, holding a pale yellow parasol to block the sun from staining her lily-white skin. They bypassed the house, never once looking Ellen’s way, drove straight to the barn and walked out into the brown pasture where they saw Cal with his mules. The blonde picked her way through the dying grass, lifting her starched pink skirt, her polished white boots targeting her dainty steps to avoid the hundreds of cow patties scattered throughout. She stopped along the edge of the plowed earth.

After they left, Ellen lifted the ragged hem of her work dress and ran to where Cal was planting winter wheat. The late afternoon sun flared off his back. She put her hand to her forehead and squinted, trying to read his face. “What did *they* want?”

Even though it was mid-November and growing cooler with each passing day, he removed his hat to wipe the sweat dripping from his hair. “They invited me for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“You?” Ellen said with a smirk. “I guess *I* wasn’t invited?”

Cal hesitated and adjusted his suspenders.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Ellen rolled her eyes. “I knew it.”

“You’re invited, too.” Cal put his hat back on and looked at the ground.

“You’re a terrible liar. They didn’t mention me, did they?”

“Well, no, but I did. So they said you could come, too.”

“I don’t want to, but you can. I’ll stay here and keep Wade. Maybe I’ll have Thanksgiving dinner with Juanita and Maria.” Ellen felt her blood rise to her face. With all the women coming around, it was obvious Cal was the most sought after bachelor in Hartridge. She would lose him soon. Turning her back on him, she stomped through the pasture, heedless of manure, back toward the house.

“Wait!” Cal called from behind her. “I’m not going if you’re not.”

A smile bloomed on her face. She didn’t want him to go anywhere without her. That was wrong, she knew, and made her feel more guilt-ridden. Her smile faded as she reached the house. She wasn’t being fair to Cal. He needed to get on with his life. She needed to do the same.

Ellen had to keep telling herself this over and over again. Especially when Cal accepted Priscilla’s invitation for Thanksgiving.

“You come, too,” he suggested as he sat on the front porch, shining his boots.

“No, I wasn’t invited.” Ellen pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders after a breeze almost swept it away. She couldn’t believe he was going after he said he wouldn’t.

“Yes, you were,” he said without looking up.

“By you, not her. Besides, I don’t want to go.” She held up her hand to stop him when he looked up, ready to argue with her. “But don’t worry about me. I’ll watch Wade. You go and enjoy yourself. We’ll be fine.” She rushed inside before he could say a word, leaving him with his mouth hanging open.

Chapter Twenty Three

February - March 1899

Today Lenore would have turned thirty three years old. Though Cal didn’t mention it, Ellen knew he remembered; he always remembered birthdays. It was Sunday as well. Juanita and Maria did not come to the house on the day of the Sabbath. Devout Catholics, the Hernandez family attended mass and did whatever else Catholics do on Sundays.

The only joy in the day was when Ellen fed Wade his first taste of solid food—oatmeal and apple sauce. Cal leaned over her shoulder to watch. She was aware of his warm breath on her neck. Six-months-old and with a full head of golden curls, Wade sat in the new highchair Cal built. His plump legs kicked at the bottom of the tray while his pudgy fists pounded the top. He slid down the first time they sat him in it. Cal placed a small pillow beneath his bottom and loosely tied a leather belt around his fat belly to the back of the chair. “There that ought to keep him in it until he’s a bit bigger.”

Ellen giggled and lifted the small silver spoon to the baby’s lips. Wade crinkled his face, his long lashes fluttering, and let the sauce drool from his mouth. Cal and Ellen laughed at the sight. “Come on, big boy, eat. Your momma, I mean, big sister made it especially for you,” Cal said.

She couldn’t see Cal’s face, but imagined he was blushing. She guessed it was only

natural to make such a slip. She pretended not to notice, took the spoon and scooped the mess off Wade's dimpled chin. She placed it back in his mouth. This time he moved it around with his tongue and swallowed. He opened his tiny mouth for more. Ellen smiled and turned to Cal.

His eyes wide with pleasure, he said, "I think he likes it." He squeezed Ellen's shoulder. Cal's touch was the best feeling she could ever imagine. If she could be granted one wish it would be for this moment to last forever. But that could never be.

She needed to speak to her mother.

"I'd like to go to Mother's grave today," she said before Cal headed back to the barn.

He paused at the door with his hand on the latch. "Okay, I'll hitch up the horses."

"I'd prefer to go alone, if you don't mind. We could all go together later, take Wade with us, when the weather warms and the flowers are in bloom. It'd be nice to take her some fresh flowers, but for now, I just need some time alone."

Cal looked at the ground, silent for a brief moment. "I understand." Then his face brightened and he said, "I'll saddle up Fairfax for you. You better bundle up good. It's still chilly out."

Ellen wore every woolen thing she owned: stockings, dress, coat, hat, muffler and mittens. After Cal gave her careful instructions—she didn't remember much of how they got there the day of the funeral—she headed to the cemetery. Though the sun was shining, the air remained crisp from the winter's freezes. Puffs of cold air escaped Ellen's mouth and Fairfax's nose as they made their way down the barren roads, passing only a few houses with chimney's streaming gray smoke. The only sounds she heard were Fairfax snorting and his hooves clicking the ground. Ellen was relieved to arrive at the cemetery alone. She tied Fairfax to a peeling fence post outside its gates.

It didn't take Ellen long to find her mother's grave; the only one still brown dirt, not covered in dead grass. In time, it would blend with all the rest. Standing at the foot of the mound, staring at the cross, reading her mother's name, Ellen didn't know how she was supposed to feel. Before Lenore's death, Ellen came close at times to hating her mother, but she never quite crossed that line. It was only anger, anger a child cheated would feel. Lenore was a self-absorbed woman. Maybe that really was true. Ellen hadn't trusted her. Why should she have? Lenore allowed Frank to be the center of their lives, leaving him or Ada the chore of mothering. When Lenore finally had the opportunity, Ellen made it difficult for her, paying her back for all those years of being ignored.

"I'm sorry, Momma," Ellen whispered, hoping her mother's spirit could hear. Ellen had never taken into consideration that Lenore's life had not been an easy one before marrying Frank. Once Lenore knew what it was like to be the mistress of the house, she must have acted like a child in a candy store. Tired of working, she reveled in Frank's special attention. It had to be difficult for her to lose her husband and start over, to revert back to a life of labor. But at least she had met Cal.

"I'm beginning to understand a little better now, Momma." Ellen allowed her anger to subside, let the grief fully surface. She dropped to her hands and knees. "I wish I'd understood sooner." She wanted to scream, but the cold air caught in her throat, making her cough. Ellen thought of all the tantrums she'd thrown and felt ashamed. But she couldn't change the past; she could only try to learn from it. "I'll do better. I'll make you and Daddy proud of me. I promise."

When she had exhausted her tears, Ellen wiped her face with her muffler and stood. She had to do right by her mother, but she wasn't quite sure how. She thought of Cal. Why did her mother have to marry someone younger, someone kind and handsome? Why did Ellen have to

fall in love with him? She guessed none of that really mattered. He obviously had loved her mother and still saw Ellen as a child. She couldn't stand that thought. She pondered what action to take as she made her way back to the farm.

* * * * *

Ellen continued thinking of Cal, her love for him mixed with guilt. She reasoned over and over again it wasn't her fault she felt the way she did; it was a fact of nature, pure and simple. It didn't mean she didn't love her mother, or miss her, or wish she was still alive. Ellen would give anything to have her back. There was nothing wrong with loving Cal—she didn't even know if her mother had actually loved him. The main problem was he could never love her.

It was only a matter of time before he took a new bride. He had brought back leftovers for Ellen from Priscilla's house on Thanksgiving, though she barely touched the food, and had dinner over there two other times, one of which was Christmas Eve. Christmas had been a depressing day. Cal had given her ink to refill her inkstand from the Christmas before and more writing paper. She had given him a picture she had drawn of his farm.

To Ellen's chagrin, Cal was now spending time at the Leah's house, having dinner there once a week. She didn't know which was worse: him falling in love with the snobby, but pretty Priscilla or with the rich, but ugly Virginia. Ellen detested them both. But even if he was courting a good woman, one whom she liked and respected, Ellen couldn't bear the thought of seeing him with another love.

These musings followed her around day after day as she went about performing her chores. The empty days spurred her on to do what she'd been putting off. Toward the end of March, she waited one evening until dinner was over and the dishes were done. Cal put Wade to bed and came downstairs where Ellen sat on the sofa in the parlor rereading a letter she just

finished composing.

“Another letter to David?” he asked. “You’re getting a lot of use out of that ink I got you for Christmas.”

It might be easier if she could smile, but she couldn’t. She delayed speaking until he was seated in his chair in front of the fireplace. “This should be the last one. I’ve written to tell him I’m ready to move to San Antonio. I’m asking for details on when he or his mother could fetch me from the train station. When I know an exact date, you’ll have to take me and buy me a ticket.”

Cal stared at her for a moment before blinking. “What? Wait a minute. I thought you got all that foolishness out of your head. You don’t need to go.”

“Yes I do. You have Juanita to take care of everything. You don’t need me.”

“I wasn’t planning on keeping Juanita indefinitely.”

“So you thought I’d just stick around and be a nanny? I have to get on with my life and so do you.” Ellen’s heart raced, partly from anger and partly from dread. How dare he take her for granted?

“It’s not like that. We’re family.” Cal’s tone raised a notch along with the color of his face. “You belong here.”

Ellen sighed. Why did he have to make it so difficult? “I’ll visit when I can. You and Wade can come visit me, too. I need to make a life for myself. I can’t do it here.”

“And why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“Yes, you can! This is your home. I’ll take care of you.” He leaned forward, his hands gripping the armrests, his body like a bullet ready to propel through the air.

Ellen set her letter down on the table with a flip of her wrist. "You don't understand! I can't be here when you take a new wife."

"A new wife? Who said anything about that?"

"It's only a matter of time. What, with all the women in Hartridge groveling at your feet, every one of them bringing you food and inviting you to dinner or to tea."

"But I've turned most of them down. I only go to the Leahs out of common courtesy. They've been good to us," Cal said. "And why does that matter? No one's going to boss you around, if I should ever remarry."

"That's not even the point." She sighed.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Just wait until I'm gone before you marry one of them."

Cal jumped from his chair and towered over her. "I don't want to marry any of those women. If I did, I would say so."

Ellen sighed. "You will one day. Or you'll put another ad in the paper." She saw him wince and wished she could take back the words. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

He sat next to her, took her hand, and shook his head. "Oh Ellen, you've had such a hard time for someone so young. You don't understand. If you could stay just a little longer, I promise I'll make it up to you."

"It's you who doesn't understand. What's the point in me staying longer, it won't change a thing?" She tried to pull her hand away but he tightened his grip. "Please, let me go."

"I can't. I don't want you to go, ever. Damn it Ellen, I know this isn't the right time, but can't you see that I need you." His eyes searched her face looking for clues that she could read his mind.

“You don’t need me. You need a nanny or a wife.” As she looked into his eyes she felt the room grow warmer like the walls were closing in.

He lowered his gaze, but didn’t release her hand. “I was hoping . . . after the proper amount of time for mourning passed . . . that . . .”

Ellen thought her heart had stopped with his words. “Hoping for what?” she whispered.

“If you’d just wait—”

“Hoping for what?”

He took a deep breath. “That someday . . .”

“Someday what?”

“Someday *you’d* be my wife.”

Ellen’s jaw loosened and her mouth dropped open. She couldn’t make it shut. She didn’t move. She couldn’t move. She looked at his bowed head, the dim light highlighting his yellow hair like a halo. She loved how it curled at the edge of his collar exposing a tiny scar from when as boy he’d cut it on barbed wire while chasing after a cow. Her heart quickened. She glanced around the room looking for balance. Her eyes lit on the porcelain figures on the mantel, the gifts he’d given her mother.

Cal’s voice was little more than a whisper, but she heard him clearly. “You’re mother was a good woman. I respected her and tried my best to love her, but . . .”

He glanced up and Ellen noticed how young he looked.

When she said nothing, he grimaced and said, “If you still want to leave, I’ll understand.” He let go of her and turned his head away.

Her thoughts swirled. Wasn’t this what she’d dreamed of? But she was confused. “Why me?” she asked.

His face went pale and he swallowed. “Well . . .”

“Convenience? I’m already here?”

“It’s not that.”

Needing to put some distance between them, she stood and walked to the fireplace. She held the mantel for support. She looked at the figurines. Could she have what was once her mother’s? “It’s all wrong. What about Wade? We’d be deceiving him like my parents deceived me. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Your leaving would be just as hard on him. We wouldn’t deceive him.” Cal scooted as if uncomfortable and sat on the edge of his seat.

Did he realize it was more than about Wade? “It would be awkward. You’ve only known me as your stepchild. What would people say?”

“I don’t care what others think. And I’ve thought of you only as my friend.”

Ellen shook her head. So that was all. “It just sounds to me like you don’t want to disrupt your life. It can’t be helped.” Any hopeful feelings she’d had drained out of her. “I won’t leave until you’ve made arrangements for someone to watch over Wade.”

Cal put his head in his hands. “I’ll be lost without you.”

She walked back to where he sat and placed a hand on his head as if he were child. Caressing his silky hair, she wished there was some way to make him see her as the woman she wanted to be. “You’ll be fine without me. Once you remarry you’ll forget I was ever around.”

His head shot up and he grabbed her hand. “Stop talking like that.” He pulled her down to sit beside him. “How can I get it into your fool head I don’t want another woman?”

Her eyes began stinging as she lifted her hand and caressed his cheek, delighting in the feel of his stubbly whiskers. “Maybe this is wrong, but I’ve been in love with you for a long

time. I know to you I'm just a kid. But I know my own feelings. Wanting me around is not the same as loving me. I want to marry for love."

His worried face relaxed into a bright smile that lit up his eyes. "You silly fool. What have I been telling you?"

"That you want me to stay." Her pulse quickened. She could feel the blood rushing to her head.

"I guess I haven't made myself clear." He grinned and shook his head. "Ellen, I, I. . ."

Grabbing her hand from his cheek, he pressed her palm to his lips. "I love you. Don't you see?"

Still feeling the warmth of his kiss, she curled her fingers around the spot. She was afraid if she spoke the spell would be broken and she'd awaken to find it had all been a dream.

"Ellen, will you marry me come spring time?"

Ellen's body went numb. She nodded.

"You don't know how happy you've made me." Cal pulled her to him and hesitated but a second, looking deep into her eyes, before covering her mouth with his.

As Ellen melted into his embrace, her body came back to life. Tremors tingled down her spine like feathers tickling skin, muscle, every crevice in her body, all the way to the tips of her toes. She wrapped her arms around him, stroked his neck and ran her fingers through his hair. How many times had she dreamt of doing this? She wanted to burn into her brain how he felt at that moment, every inch of him, the texture of his skin and the silkiness of his hair.

His hands roamed up and down her back as his mouth pressed harder, searching hers. He clutched her waist, pressing her closer. Abruptly, he pulled away. Breathless, he stared at her for a moment, his eyes half-glazed as if with fever. "We better stop until we're married."

Running a finger across his lips, Ellen smiled and shook her head. "I don't want to wait."

She tried to kiss him again, but he took her hands and peeled them from his neck. “We can get married in May. That’s not too long of a wait.” He smiled and kissed her forehead. His eyebrows arched. “Where,” he said as he held her at arm’s distance, “did you learn how to kiss?”

She grinned and felt her face flush. “You already knew I kissed Tom a long time ago.”

“Yeah, I remember.” He frowned. “That better be all he did.”

She moved closer and nuzzled her head against his neck. “That was all. You don’t need to concern yourself with him anymore.”

“It’s getting late.” He stood and gave her his hand to help her off the sofa.

Ellen wrapped her arms around his waist. Now that she held him, she didn’t want to let go. She moaned. “I won’t be able to sleep after all this.”

Reluctantly, she went to her room, donned her nightgown and braided her hair. By the time she finished, Cal was already upstairs. Once under the covers, she tossed and turned hearing every creak in the house as it settled. Finally, she dozed but awoke sometime in the darkness to the sound of footsteps above her. She guessed Cal was having a difficult time sleeping as well. She hoped he wasn’t reconsidering his offer. What if he was haunted by guilt?

Hating the suspense and torture of her doubts, she fumbled in the dark for a match and, with shaking hands lit the lantern on her bedside table. She had to know.

She crept up the stairs wondering if she was doing the right thing. When she reached the top flight, she froze. This was all wrong. Just as she was about to flee he opened the bedroom door. He was fully clothed, but without his boots. “I thought I heard something.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.” She turned to leave.

He grabbed her elbow. “It’s okay. Stay,” he said and opened the door wider. He touched her hair, smoothing loose strands behind her ear, and sighed. “You can sleep up here.” Taking

her lantern and placing it by his bed, he pulled the quilt back for her.

She crawled in. “Aren’t you going to get under the covers?” she asked after he tucked her in and lay next to her. “You’ll get cold.”

“I’ll be fine. Now go to sleep.” He blew out the flame and draped an arm around her waist and closed his eyes.

Later that night, she felt him cuddled next to her, her back against his chest. Long, slow, even breaths of air escaped his lips, caressing her neck. She shivered thinking she’d never known such happiness. May seemed a long time to wait.

The next morning they woke to the sound of knocking. Ellen gasped and sat up, looking around the room in confusion. Cal was putting on his boots. Wade stirred in his crib, gurgling and cooing like a dove. Ellen could see his chubby legs kicking at the air through the slats in his crib. Cal stood, straightening his shirt and pants. “Must be Juanita. Better run to your room and get dressed. I’ll grab Wade.”

Ellen did as she was told, her bare feet pounding the wooden planks like a drum as she ran. She dressed as fast as she could, discarding her nightgown on her bed, not bothering to fold and put it away. She heard Cal answer the door and Juanita’s soft voice.

When she came out of her room, smoothing her hair into place, Ellen glanced in the parlor and found Juanita sitting on the sofa, changing Wade’s diaper. Maria, who was standing nearby watching her mother, looked up and smiled. She waved and said, “Buenos dias.”

With a quick wave in return, Ellen hurried to the kitchen, heated water for oatmeal and opened a jar of apple sauce. So far the baby seemed content, but she knew that wouldn’t last long.

Maria followed her and watched. “You behind today?”

“I overslept,” Ellen said. This had never happened before. Both Wade and Cal were usually up at the crack of dawn, waking her before daylight flooded the house. Last night was the first time in a long time they had a sound night’s sleep.

Walking into the kitchen with Wade in her arms, Juanita spoke to Maria in hushed tones. Maria pulled out the wooden tray of the highchair while Juanita sat the baby in it. As Ellen began feeding Wade, Juanita opened the cupboards and pantry. Ellen listened to her shuffle bowls and pans around on the table near the stove, the room growing warmer as she stoked the fire. The woman was whisking through the kitchen with incredible speed. When Cal returned with milk and eggs, Juanita had bacon frying and coffee percolating. After Wade finished his oatmeal, Maria approached, holding his bottle. “I feed him for you. You go eat.”

Ellen followed the child to her spot on the floor near the cradle and waited for her to sit before handing her the baby. By the time Ellen turned around, breakfast was ready. She glanced at Cal who was already seated at the table. “You think I’ll ever be able to do that, to work that fast?”

Cal leaned back as Juanita placed a plate in front of him and said, “Gracias.” He turned his head and grinned at Ellen. “When you’ve been doing it for as long as she has, I imagine.”

Ellen found herself smiling all day and unable to concentrate. Several times, Maria tapped her on the arm to remind her of something. “You forgot to add sugar,” she said while they made bread dough. By the end of the day, before she and her mother left, Maria said, “Juanita said your head in the clouds.” She giggled as if that was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

That evening, Cal and Ellen lay on the bed with Wade between them. “He’s growing so fast,” Cal said as he held his son’s foot. The baby clasped Ellen’s finger in his tiny fist. He gurgled at them, drool dripping from his fat pink lips. It seemed he was trying to speak.

“I bet this is how you looked when you were a baby?” Ellen reached her free hand over and touched Cal’s cheek. He smiled and turned his head to kiss her fingers.

They stayed that way until Wade drifted to sleep. Once they tucked him in his crib, they cuddled in each other’s arms, and spoke in whispers.

“So when did you know you were in love with me?” Ellen asked.

Cal gazed at the pale circle of light playing on the ceiling, his eyes searching for a memory. “I’m not for certain. You kind of grew on me.”

Ellen elbowed him. “Tell me. Tell me! I want to hear it like a story.”

“I’m not good at storytelling. I guess before your mother became pregnant.” He traced her face with his index finger, gliding it across her forehead and down her cheeks, circling around her nose and mouth. “I fought real hard to not feel this way. I knew it was wrong and thought it would eventually fade. When you gave me that advertisement to place, I never felt so sick inside. I thought if I could just keep you here on the farm, I’d be happy at least being near you. I know I’ve sinned, but I can’t help it.”

They were quiet for awhile until Ellen turned to him. “It’s not a sin to love someone. We haven’t done anything wrong or unnatural.”

“But what would your mother think of us? Would she hate me?”

“How could she hate you? Don’t you think she would want you to be happy? I think Mother would understand and forgive us.” She kissed him and pulled him by the waist closer to her. As their lips pressed harder, Ellen ran her hands down his spine until she found herself grabbing the hollow of his back, pushing her body against him.

He lifted his head and gasped. “We should wait.”

She grabbed his chin and nearly bit him in her eagerness for their lips to reconnect.

Moaning softly, he surrendered to her persistence and rolled her on to her back. He began unbuttoning her blouse. His hands shook as they struggled with the tiny pearl buttons. “I’ll do it,” she said breathlessly and brushed his fingers out of the way. While she removed her blouse and skirt, she watched him stand to undress. His muscular body glowed in the soft flickering light.

She smiled, thinking love was far better in reality than in any romance she ever read. Without hesitation, she allowed him to show her what books and her imagination never could.

Chapter Twenty Four

March - April 1899

“Do you think Wade will be confused?” Ellen asked Cal while she removed the lunch dishes from the table. She’d been dwelling on this ever since they’d started talking about their wedding plans. “What if he starts calling me Momma?”

Cal handed her his empty plate. “Let him. We can tell him the truth when he’s old enough to understand.”

“You don’t think he’ll find that strange? First, I’m his sister and then I’m his step mother?” She turned from the wash basin to face him.

“The only other thing we could do is not tell him anything. Let him grow up thinking you’re his mother.”

Ellen gasped. “I couldn’t do that! That just wouldn’t be right.”

“Well then, let’s cross that bridge when we get to it. Wait until he’s old enough to understand and pray that he does. I’m sure this isn’t the first time this ever happened on earth.”

Ellen thought for a moment. Could it be other women had raised their siblings as their own children? Was it common for people to keep so many secrets? She couldn’t stand the idea.

“My parents withheld information from me. I wouldn’t have known about my father’s family had I not threatened to move away. I’m sure there are still some things I don’t know about.”

Ellen had already told Cal what she knew of Lenore’s past, none of which seemed to disturb him. “So, your parents had relations before they got married. Now we’re guilty of the same thing.”

“It doesn’t bother you she was a maid?”

“Why should it? I’m just a lowly farmer.” He teased and grabbed her by the waist, pulling her close to him. “You sure you want to marry me? You’re the one who comes from a highfalutin family.”

She placed her hands on his shoulder, her fingers kneading his muscles through his crinkled cotton shirt, and smiled. She loved to look at his handsome face and drink in every feature now she no longer had to worry about hiding what were once forbidden feelings. Her mother had looked into this face and kissed it many times. What had she felt? Her mother had loved her father, but had she loved Cal? Would she hate that her daughter loved him now? Ellen brushed the thoughts aside; she saw no sense in torturing herself over them. “I wonder what my uncle Percy would say if he knew about me?”

“Why don’t you write your friend David and tell him everything. Maybe he and his mother can find out something.” Cal bent his head to kiss her, but stopped when Maria walked into the kitchen.

They pulled away from each other. Though they continued to sleep together, Ellen and Cal made sure to rise before the Hernandez’s arrived. They thought it best to keep their relationship a secret until it came closer to the time of their marriage.

“I thought you were upstairs with your mother and Wade?” Ellen said and bit her lips. She hadn’t intended on sounding testy, her surprise simply came out that way.

Maria shrugged with a sheepish look on her face. “The baby, he is sleeping now. I have come to help with the washing of the dishes. Juanita be down soon to make me lunch.”

“Oh.” Ellen felt her face burn. “I can make you something.”

Cal chuckled and walked over to ruffle Maria’s hair. “You’re a good little helper. You go right ahead and help Miss Ellen. I’m headed back to the fields.” He glanced at Ellen and winked. “I’ll see *you* at supper time.”

* * * * *

“April showers bring May flowers,” Ellen said as she turned from the foggy window after wiping moisture from the ledge. Silently, she added, “*And a wedding.*” The steady trickle of rain didn’t dampen her spirits. She smiled at Maria, who, with rag in hand, busily polished the round parlor table.

“April showers bring May flowers,” Maria repeated.

“That’s correct. Now which words rhyme?” Ellen was still teaching Maria proper English, along with word patterns and how to write. It was something she planned to do with her own child if she ever had one. She would definitely do so with Wade. What else was there to do when it was either too wet or too cold to go outside?

“Showers and flowers,” Maria said with pride shining on her smiling face. “Powers, towers . . .” she trailed off into the kitchen, her voice rising and falling with the rhymes as she played with the words, stringing them along like ornaments. “Cowers.”

“Cowers?” Ellen followed after the girl. “What on earth are ‘cowers’?”

Maria shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe they something that belong to cows?”

Ellen laughed. "I don't think it's a word, but it rhymed."

At the school house, Ellen hated teaching. Working with Maria was different. She was only one child, and a sweet child at that. It was probably what it would have been like if she had become a governess, Ellen mused as she swept the floor. Being a farmer's wife would be much more satisfying, especially since the farmer was Cal.

When the rains let up, the sunshine beamed down through the cotton thick clouds like God's embrace, scenting the air with the perfume of new beginnings. Ellen pranced to her gardens to check on what was sprouting. Raising her head towards the sun's warmth, she took a deep breath and let the fresh smell cleanse her lungs. She said a silent prayer of thanks. With the birth of spring, her spirit grew to the point she thought she would burst with happiness. Even with her mother being dead only eight months now, Ellen found it difficult to keep from smiling. Only a hint of guilt crept through her thoughts for wearing her mother's old dresses, but hadn't Lenore always said, "Waste not, want not?" Cal gave Ellen all of her mother's things, including her jewelry, all except the gold wedding band. "I think she would have wanted you to have these."

At first, the dresses were sad reminders, but then Maria told her that Juanita said mothers want their children to carry on and live a good life. So, Juanita helped Ellen change some of the dresses' necklines and sleeves to make them into something new. Sometimes she caught faint whiffs of her mother's flowery perfume in the material and half-expected Lenore to be standing near her. Ellen would stop what she was doing and glance around, but her mother wasn't there. She had to believe her mother was happy; she was with her first love now. And hadn't she always wanted Ellen to get married? Ellen sat down and drew a group of boxes, one for each day until May, so she could count them off. She had to look ahead because there was no point in

looking back.

As she went about spring cleaning, she thought of what it meant to be the woman of the household and tried to think of ways to make the farm house more her home. She ordered a pearl gray cotton dress for her wedding: something lovely enough for special occasions, but not too fancy to wear once the honeymoon was over. Also on order was a sewing machine, her wedding present, so she could make new curtains and quilts. She stood in the middle of the parlor, looking about and dreaming of ways to rearrange the furniture, when she heard horses' hooves cantering up the drive.

Juanita and Maria's voices drifted through the open windows as they aired out the house. They came bustling in through the back door. "It's a man," Maria announced with surprise. Ellen figured the child had gotten used to only women arriving on their property.

"Probably someone here to see Cal," Ellen said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"No!" Maria seemed more agitated now. Her eyes were wide. "He's here to see you."

"What?" Ellen went to the window and saw a man standing on the steps to the front porch, with his back to the house. When he turned around, she frowned.

She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. What was she going to say to him? She opened the door and tried to smile. "Tom? Why heavens, what brings you here?"

Tom looked older. His auburn mustache had grown fuller since the last time she saw him. He approached her with his hat in his hands. "I'm so sorry to hear about your mother. My mother told me all about it. I would have come sooner, but I couldn't get off work. How are you?"

Ellen stepped out onto the porch, closing the front door behind her. She had to find a way to get rid of him fast and for good. "I'm doing well, Tom. Thanks for asking."

Placing one shiny boot on the porch, Tom didn't move any further when Ellen walked

toward him, closing the distance between them. He leaned forward with his elbows planted on his knee, twirling his hat between his fingers. "I came here to see if you'd given any more thought to my proposal?"

Ellen looked past his head at his gray horse tethered to a tree, reluctant to look into his watery blue eyes. She didn't want to hurt him, but there was no way of avoiding it. "I've given it plenty of thought, but I can't marry you."

"May I ask why?"

"I don't love you." She hoped she'd said enough for him to leave the matter alone.

He glanced at the ground before he looked at her, his eyes registering surprise and disappointment. "You could learn to love me. I'd take real good care of you. We could live wherever you wanted and I'd buy you a fine house. I'd hire you a maid." He sounded like he was pleading.

She sighed. Why couldn't he take no for an answer? "I'm already spoken for and we're getting married next month." Surely now, he'd stop pestering her.

"Who?" His voice grew threatening as his face contorted with sudden anger.

Ellen stared at him. He had always been so mild mannered. She'd never imagined him capable of strong feelings. "I don't see how that concerns you."

"It concerns me when I've invested all my time and energy loving you." He stepped onto the porch, only inches from her, standing taller and glaring down at her. "I have the right to know who's stolen you from me."

She couldn't help but let out a small laugh. "How can anyone steal me when I was never yours to begin with?" She turned to go inside. "I'll get your bracelet. You can have all the charms back."

He grabbed her arm with a rough hand and spun her around. "I want to know who you're going to marry."

"Let go of me." She jerked her arm away from him and ran inside, slamming the door behind her.

Juanita and Maria were standing at attention in the parlor like little toy soldiers, frozen wood statues looking pale and startled. Maria whispered, "I should go get Mr. Turner?"

Ellen shook her head and went to her old room. She removed the heart-shaped box from the dresser drawer—she had never bothered to wear the charm bracelet after that Christmas Eve—and stormed back out onto the porch. Thrusting the box at his chest, she said, "Here. Now get off my property."

"*Your* property? Last I recall this place belonged to Mr. Turner," he said, his lips curled in a snarl, and snatched the box out of her hand.

"Would you like me to go fetch him and have *him* escort you off?" Ellen had reached her limit and felt compelled to slap the living daylights out of him, but he moved away before she could swing her lifted hand.

"I'm leaving." He jumped off the porch and stomped toward his horse. "I can only guess who the mystery man is. All I can say is you'll be sorry."

"Not as sorry I ever met you," she yelled at his retreating back. She had just been feeling pity for the poor fool, and now he was acting like a bully. With her arms folded tight across her chest, she stood her ground watching him ride away in a tempest of rage.

"Poor fella, I've been in his situation before," Cal said at the dinner table after Ellen mentioned Tom's visit. "Nothing like being in love with someone who doesn't love you. He'll get over it though. Time is the great healer. He had no right to speak to you that way, though. No

right at all. I always thought there was something a peculiar about that boy.”

“How long did it take you to get over that girl who ran off with the salesman?” Ellen was curious about this other woman.

“About a year, I guess. I don’t recall when I stopped thinking about her.”

“Were you thinking about her when you married my mother?”

“I reckon that was around the time I forgot her.” Cal shifted uneasily in his chair.

Ellen sensed she was making him uncomfortable, but couldn’t resist. “What was her name?”

“Susanna.” He bowed down to his plate and shoveled food in his mouth as if he was starving.

“Did you make love to her?”

Cal gasped and began choking.

“Are you all right?” She said when she noticed his face turning red.

He shook his head no and reached for his water, knocking it over, splattering water across the table and onto the floor. Ellen leaped from her seat and reached his side as his face turned purple. She pounded on his back until he started coughing. Picking up his overturned glass, she refilled it from the water pitcher and handed to him. She grabbed a rag and began cleaning up his spill.

His coughing ceased. He cleared his throat, inhaled deeply, and took a long drink of water. “Ah,” he said as he put the empty glass down. “That’s better.”

Ellen went back to her seat and set the sodden cloth by her plate. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get you all choked up.”

“It’s not your fault. I just swallowed the wrong way.” He scooted his chair from the table

and stood.

“Well, did you?” she asked again.

He sat back down. “No, I did not.”

“So my mother was your first?” Ellen found this difficult to believe for a young man who certainly acted like he had plenty of experience, not that she had anything to compare it to.

Cal took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. “Yes, your mother was my first, but you’re my last, and my only true love. Now can we put this subject to rest?”

“So you learned all *that* from my mother?” She still found it hard to comprehend.

He stood and smiled. “I guess she was a good teacher.”

Chapter Twenty Five

May 1899

“What *did* you tell Tom?” Cal asked after he returned from town. Ellen and Juanita helped unload the supplies.

“I said I was spoken for and getting married. And I got angry he was so rude to me and told him to get off my property. That’s about it.”

“You didn’t say who?”

Ellen followed him into the house, carrying a box of coffee. Juanita quietly carried cartons in, placing them on the table for Cal and Ellen to put away. “No, it’s none of his business. Besides, he’ll find out soon enough. Why? Did you see him?”

“No.” He took the box from Ellen and placed it in the pantry. “But I sure got a lot of strange looks from people on the street and Mr. Horton acted peculiar.

“Like how?”

“He kept staring and stammering. I could tell he wanted to ask something, but didn’t

quite know how.”

“Well, he’ll get his answer soon, now won’t he.” Ellen glanced to make sure Juanita was back outside, before standing on tiptoe and planting a kiss on Cal’s sun-warmed cheek. Though Juanita and Maria now knew of their plans, she and Cal thought it only right to behave properly in front of them.

“Seeing how this town reacted to my marriage to your mother, I don’t think they’re going to be overjoyed with me marrying you, especially so soon. It’s best we keep it a secret until more time has passed.” He pulled her closer and returned her kiss. Then he reached inside his denim jacket and retrieved a manila envelope. “Your birth certificate arrived.”

Ellen opened it and read the document. “I’ve never seen one of these before. Does this mean we can get married now?” She smiled and waved it in the air. “How about tomorrow?”

“I’m waiting to hear back from the Bexar County Courthouse. It takes some time after you file for a marriage license. I’ve been checking on hotels in San Antonio for our honeymoon; got two in mind. I’ll buy you a ring while we’re there.”

“As soon as you know the dates I need to send a telegram to Ada and David: invite them to the wedding. I’m getting so excited, I can barely control myself. Juanita’s helping with the finishing touches of my dress. She does such intricate lace work. And Maria translated for me. Juanita agreed to stay with Wade while we’re gone. I think she realizes she’ll be out of a job soon after we’re back. I wish we could keep her.”

“I do, too, but at a dollar a day, I can’t. I’m not a rich man. Maybe someday.”

Ellen would never admit her anxiety about tending the house and baby all by herself. She knew she could do it, but she also knew it would be hard work. Her new sense of place in the world gave her courage. Though she missed her parents, with each passing day, surrounded in

the afterglow of Cal's love, the loss became easier to bear, making her stronger.

That night, after they made love and cuddled in the soft candle light, they heard a rattling noise. "What was that?" Ellen whispered. Her first thought was of her mother's ghost coming back to haunt her. She held her breath. Her body tensed with fear.

Cal put his finger to his lips. They strained their ears and heard the sound again. It came from the dark corner of the room. Ellen blinked her eyes, expecting any moment to see her mother's apparition soaring out at them, screaming in anger and agony. She reached for the bed sheets, but before she could cover her nakedness, Wade pulled himself up to stand, smiling at them from his crib. He gurgled and cooed and lifted his leg, trying to gain leverage to climb over the railing.

Both laughing, Cal donned his long johns while Ellen, relieved, pulled her gown over her head. "Why, you little rascal you. You're trying to escape," Cal said and lifted his son high in the air. "Man, you're getting heavy."

Ellen reached Cal's side. "He's growing up so fast. I guess if he can stand on his own, it won't be long before he's walking." She tickled Wade's chubby foot. He jerked his foot away and giggled. As Ellen leaned in closer, trying to tickle him again, he seized a handful of her long flowing curls and aimed for his mouth. "Help," she cried, grabbing her hair by the roots, above the baby's hand, her head following his pull.

"Let go, son." Cal pried the baby's fingers loose. "You're going to yank your momma's lovely hair out."

Once she untangled her hair and smoothed it behind her back she looked at Cal. He didn't seem to notice what he'd called her; he kept talking. "It's about time I convert Carrie Ann's old room into Wade's. Boy doesn't need to be spying on his parents."

“You called me his mother.”

Cal bounced Wade on his hip and shrugged. “As far as I can see it, you are. You and I’ll be raising him. Might as well get used to that right now.” He leaned over and kissed her. “We’ll worry about the details when the time comes. For now, let’s just fill this house full of love, shall we?”

Ellen laughed. She’d never heard him speak in such a way before. “Yes, we shall,” she said and kissed him and then Wade.

* * * * *

Seth and Ralph were plowing the fields at the break of day. Ellen could see their shadows in the distance encircled in a dark cloud of dust as she loaded the wagon with her suitcase. Did they even have a clue as to where she and Cal were going? Juanita and Maria brought a few of their belongings to stay the three days with Wade while Ellen and Cal headed to San Antonio.

Ellen was so excited her hands shook. If only they could go by train and get there faster, but the unnecessary expense and the need for secrecy made traveling by wagon more practical. She didn’t know why she was so nervous. She felt like she was already married.

The day before Ellen made peace with her mother and with herself. While Cal was outside working and Wade was taking a nap, she went to her old room by the kitchen, reached beneath the bed, and pulled out her trunk. She rummaged through her books and writing materials until she found the Bible Ada had given her. Though she didn’t open it, Ellen held and rubbed it between her palms, its warm leather making her feel closer to God, and knelt in prayer. She asked God if He would let her speak with her mother and, uncertain if He heard, confessed anyway. “Momma, if you can hear me, I hope you will forgive me for what I’m doing and about to do,” she began, wondering if praying was akin to begging. “I love Cal deeply. I couldn’t help

it. He was a good husband to you, and now, I hope you'll understand and be happy that he's good to me. I promise to love and take care of Wade with all my heart and soul. I miss you so much, Momma. I hope you're at peace and with Daddy." She meant to say "amen" at this point but her sobs choked the words out of her throat. The tears washed away the guilt like a baptism, and made it easier for Ellen to sleep that night. In a dream, she saw her mother smiling and waving at her. She felt forgiven.

Dawn's light glowed copper on the sleepy town as Cal's horses trotted through the center of Hartridge; its night's shadows stretching and yawning while the day, like a shiny new penny, peeked from beneath the thin morning fog and reflected off all that it touched. The few people out on the wooden walkways stopped and stared as the wagon rolled down the silent dusty road leading out of town. From the corner of her eye, Ellen caught movement and turned in time to see Tom glaring at her, his red hair ablaze in the early morning sun, as he scurried toward Mr. Horton's store. She would have liked to stick her tongue out at him, but that wouldn't be ladylike.

By the time they reached San Antonio the day was turning to night. All Ellen could make out of the big city were the wide open streets faintly aglow in lamplight, crammed with people milling about and wagons clanking past shadows of tall buildings, some as high as five stories. Their hotel was a square three-story structure, small compared to ones nearby. A boy emerged from a clump of dark oak trees near the entrance to take the horses and wagon. Cal signed them in as Mr. and Mrs. Turner, seeing how they would be the following morning. Ellen stood by his side, quietly surveying the hotel. She'd never been to one before. The main desk was a long and shiny redwood that gleamed with polish. In the lobby, gracefully upholstered chairs and settees were surrounded by soft glowing lamps covered in pearl shades with rosy tassels—something

her mother would have loved. Covered in plush red and green carpet, with large leaf patterns like a trail through a forest and so thick no footsteps could be heard, the lobby led to a large dining room. Dim crystal chandeliers sparkled in the short distance. Ellen couldn't wait to go to dinner.

Cal turned to her with the key. "We're on the second floor."

A bellhop, a tanned boy in what looked like gray military attire, carried their baggage up a grand staircase. "Follow me this way, please." The boy led them down a dim narrow hallway and ushered them into their room.

Once inside Ellen stood transfixed in front of a four-poster bed. She peeled back the coverlet and ran her hands across the crisp cream linens. "How can you afford such luxury?" she asked Cal as she stared at the dressing table with its cut crystal glass decanter of water.

"Well, the calves born last spring brought in a pretty penny and the ones being born this season are going to bring in even more. Crops aren't doing so badly either." He smiled when she turned to look at him. "Life is pretty good."

She spotted a door behind him and rushed to open it. "What's in here?" It was a bathroom with a large claw-footed tub. "Indoor plumbing! I think I've died and gone to heaven."

Cal came behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, planting a kiss on her neck. "You deserve only the best. After dinner, how about seeing if the two of us can fit in that tub together? We best not eat too much or we'll never have a chance."

They ate a light meal of creamed potato soup sprinkled with cheese and bacon bits. Each with a glass of red wine, Cal made a toast. "To a long and happy marriage, and to Ellen's first taste of wine."

Ellen giggled as their glasses clinked together. She licked her lips after she took a sip. "Um, this tastes good."

“Well, don’t get to liking it too much. It’s expensive and a rare treat that has led many a soul to ruin,” Cal said and winked. “That tub upstairs is sure calling to me. Can you hear it?”

“As for myself, I’m looking forward to those linens on that fine bed.” Their journey had taken its toll. Ellen’s bottom and lower back were sore from bouncing on the wagon all day.

Back at their room, Cal rushed to turn on the faucet to the claw-footed tub, unbuttoning his shirt as he waited for it to fill. Ellen stood by the door, smiling at his eagerness. He acted like a little boy at Christmas time.

When he realized she was watching he went to her and twirled her around to unhook the back of her dress. He pulled the material away from her neck and down her shoulders as he kissed her back. She closed her eyes and sighed, relaxing into his touch and soft kisses. When the dress fell limp around her ankles, she stepped out of it and stood before him in her slip, corset, and stockings. He helped her unlace the corset, setting her free from its constraints, making her heavy breathing easier. She raised her arms allowing him to pull the slip over her head and toss it to the ground. His tongue followed the lines of her neck, her collar bone and traveled down to linger on her breasts. Then he dropped to his knees and unrolled her stockings slowly, kissing her thighs as he did.

Ellen opened her eyes in time to see the tub was close to full and gasped.

Cal’s head shot up and followed her gaze. Jumping to his feet, he rushed to turn the faucet off. He looked at her and grinned. “I’d say we’re good and ready now.”

The next morning, Ellen carefully combed and swept up her hair away from her face in the fashionable pompadour she’d seen in the latest catalogs. She checked her look in the large mirror over the dresser. Juanita did a lovely job on the white lacework of the neckline of her pearl gray dress as well as around the ruffled shoulders and down the tight-fitted sleeves to the

wrist, giving it just the right touch of grace. Cal came up behind her, his eyes approving her through the mirror. “You look beautiful, Ellen.”

Ellen beamed and turned to him. “Well, look at you. Don’t you look handsome?”

Cal wore a light gray coat with covered buttons and matching waistcoat, dark trousers, and a black floppy bow tie. “I’ve never seen you in such fancy duds before.”

Cal grinned, straightened his shoulders, placed one hand in his pocket, and drew back his coat with the other. He thrust out his chin and asked, in a stilted accent, “Do I look like a gentleman, my dear? I had these specially made for the occasion.”

Ellen giggled. “We should have our pictures taken.” She placed a gentle hand on his chest and raised her lips to kiss him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and devoured her mouth with his. His kissing grew so intense, she had to pull away. She gasped, “My goodness, Cal. Think you can wait until this evening?”

“I reckon I’ll have to, seeing how long it took you to get that dress on and then do up your hair. Are you ready now?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Downtown San Antonio looked different in the morning sunshine. It was early, but the heat was already radiating off the brick and concrete walkways and buildings. People swarmed the streets like bees looking for their hive. Women, dressed in all assorted manners, some simple and plain, others in fancy embroidered traveling suits, strolled about, and bearded men in dirt-covered clothing walked among clean-shaven men in white stiff collars.

Ellen took all this in while they walked to the courthouse. Their hotel wasn’t far from the Main Plaza where all the business revolved, and the courthouse was just one block north. There

were all different types of wagons on the roads, too: large and simple carriages, some with hoods drawn to protect its inhabitants from the harsh sun and some laid back to allow for more of a breeze. The sights and sounds of the city were dizzying to Ellen. She was on an adventure.

They stopped at a jeweler on their way. Ellen wanted to ask Cal what he had done with her mother's wedding ring, but didn't want to ruin their special day; she'd ask him later, when they returned home. As they browsed, the jeweler approached them with his sales pitch. "We are leaders in wedding rings. These are the finest quality solid gold rings around and are absolutely seamless, absolutely one piece rings, as wedding rings should be. Now, may I suggest this Tiffany style set here? They're matching 18-karat gold wedding bands with tiny gold braids around the edges. The man's ring is slightly wider than the woman's. I can make you a deal of six dollars for the pair."

Ellen gasped. "Why that's outrageous."

Cal stammered. "I wasn't planning on getting me one."

"Man's got to prove he's married, too! Keep all the husband hunters at bay." The salesman laughed. When Ellen and Cal remained quiet he spoke again. "I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. Seeing how you're the one who's going to have to chase off the fellows wanting to steal your lovely bride, I'll sell you the pair for five dollars."

"I'm a farmer. I don't need a ring. How about just hers for two fifty?"

The salesman frowned. "Three dollars is as low as I can go."

"It's a deal then. Put it in a box and let's get this show on the road," Cal said and slapped money on the counter.

The salesman hurried about his business and smiled when he handed Cal the box.

"Congratulations, you two. May you have a long and happy union."

Ellen saw the courthouse a half a block away. It was a massive red sandstone building with a tall menacing tower. She had never seen anything like it. Surely, this must be what a castle looked like or maybe even Thornfield Manor in *Jane Eyre*. She was so overwhelmed she didn't see Ada and David Janowski standing beneath an old oak tree until they yelled her name.

Ellen turned to see her former housekeeper, wearing the same soft combed up hair, but this time with obvious gray, and her once smooth face now etched with a few fine wrinkles, a vague map of the last four years. "Ada!" Ellen called and ran to the woman.

After they embraced, Ellen turned to the boy who was now a teenager. "David? The last time I saw you, you were still in knee britches. My, how you've grown."

"I can say the same about you. Shoot, you're a grown woman." David stood taller than Ellen now. His skin had darkened from the sun, but his hair was still a pale blonde. His powder blue eyes remained the same, sparkling with mischief.

Ellen introduced Ada and David to Cal and they went inside. The ceremony wasn't much different from when her mother married Cal except there was a pause when the old judge raised his bushy white eyebrows and said, "You mentioned you got her a ring?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, I'm not going to give any long orations about its symbol, so you can give it to her now and kiss her, if you got a hankering to." The judge winked at Cal and grinned. Ellen heard David snicker behind her.

Once the ceremony was over they all walked back to the hotel to eat lunch. "The food here is wonderful," Ellen said, feeling anxious over what to say. She remained quiet until they were all seated.

She sat across Ada and remembered how she once wanted this plain woman in her simple

pale blue dress to be her mother. The air surrounding Ada still carried a scent of pureness like clean laundry fresh from the sun. Ellen wanted to hug her and be smothered in her sweetness. She reached across the starched white table cloth and took her plump hand. "I'm so glad you and David could come. It means so much to me."

Ada squeezed her hand in return. "We wouldn't have missed it for the world. As soon as we got notice, I asked Mr. Percy for the day off. I'm so sorry to hear about your poor momma. Such a dear woman." She glanced at Cal, smiled and returned her gaze to Ellen. "So tell me about this brother of yours."

Ellen told Ada and David of Wade's latest accomplishments while Cal sat quietly listening. The food arrived in time to fill an awkward pause in conversation.

"Will you look at this grub," David said as his eyes widened at the sight of all the silver dishes placed upon their table: a shiny platter packed with slabs of roast beef, alongside a gravy boat full of rich brown gravy, a bowl of creamed potatoes, and another of English peas and carrots. He fingered the hotel silverware and licked his lips. "We're eating like rich folks, like Mr. Percy."

"Tell me about Percy Cook," Ellen said as she forked a slab of beef onto her plate and passed the platter to Cal.

David, with his mouth already full, shrugged and nodded at his mother.

"He's a decent man," Ada said, with eyes downcast. "He's good to me and David."

Ellen exchanged glances with Cal and noticed Ada and David doing the same. "There are some things I know, you might find interesting," Ellen began, not sure how to bring up the subject.

David laughed. "Yep. And there are some things we know, you might want to know."

Ada scowled and elbowed him. “Shush your mouth.”

Ellen took a deep breath and let it all out. She told them everything her mother told her about Percy Cook being Frank’s brother. When she was finished everyone at the table remained quiet for a moment. Ellen hoped Ada could somehow pave the way for her to connect with what was left of her family, her blood relatives.

Ada fidgeted in her seat. “I wouldn’t know how to approach the man about . . . about such matters. I’m afraid. What if he doesn’t believe me? I can’t afford to lose my job.”

“Of course, you can’t, Ada. That’s perfectly understandable,” Cal finally spoke, placing a reassuring hand on Ellen’s. “Perhaps Ellen could write him later. All he can do is refuse to believe her. At least, she’ll have tried and he’ll know his brother is no longer living. It’s not like she’s asking anything of him.”

The lines on Ada’s face relaxed. She smiled. “That’s a good idea, Mr. Turner. It would take the load off me.” She looked at Ellen with pleading eyes. “You forgive me, don’t you?”

Ellen hopped from her seat, rushed to the other side of the table, and gave the woman a hug. “Of course. I could never be upset with you. You’re like a mother to me. The only mother I have left in this world.”

Tears formed in Ada’s eyes after Ellen returned to her seat. “Your poor mamma. She went through so much. She was such a brave, strong woman. She held it all together . . . for you.” Ada lifted her napkin and dabbed at her eyes. “I’m sorry. Honey, this is your wedding day. It’s supposed to be a happy time.” In an obvious attempt to change the subject, she added with animation, “Have you had a chance to stroll down by the river?”

“We were thinking of doing that this evening,” Cal replied, smiling, looking relieved to be on safer territory.

Ellen knew deep in her heart now was not the time, but she had to know. She couldn't wait any longer. "Ada, did Daddy shoot himself?"

Ada's napkin slipped from her hand into her lap and David dropped the fork he was holding, sending it clattering loudly on his plate, splashing gravy onto the white table cloth. A couple sitting close by turned and stared. Cal grabbed Ellen's hand. "Ellen, please, not now."

Ellen pulled her hand away. "Did he?"

Ada's face turned white. "Let's not talk about your parents anymore right this moment. We can go over this later."

"I don't know when we'll see each other again. I need answers now, and by your not answering me is answer enough. He did kill himself, didn't he?"

"Ellen, lower your voice. People are staring." Cal placed an arm around her chair as if he expected her to fall out of it any minute.

She tried to slow down. Never taking her eyes off Ada and David's stunned faces, Ellen took a sip of water, trying to stop her hand from shaking as she held the crystal glass. "Why?" she asked again, this time in a choked whisper.

"He ran out of money," Ada said, her voice a whisper as well.

"But he was the head of a bank?" Ellen couldn't believe what she was hearing. It didn't make sense.

Ada, looking older and fragile, squirmed in her seat and shrugged. "He lived beyond his means. He was so deep in debt. People kept coming round and taking things, left and right. I guess he felt disgraced. He hated letting your mother and you down. He always wanted to give you nice things. The man wasn't thinking straight or he wouldn't have done it." She reached across the table and placed her hand on top of Ellen's. "You got to forgive him."

Ellen's shoulders sagged with weariness. She tried so hard not to believe what her mother had said, but she always had some ache inside her that knew it was true. She couldn't fight the truth anymore. "I do forgive him. I just don't understand, that's all."

"There are some things in this world we will never understand. I'm sorry, baby," the old woman said. "I am so, so sorry."

Chapter Twenty Six

"So, they knew all along. Percy was my uncle and they didn't even tell me," Ellen said later that evening after she slipped into her nightgown, and she and Cal sat propped against the thick pillows in their hotel bed. They skipped their plans of exploring the city, too tired to think, let alone walk, and went to their rooms where they closed the heavy curtains to block out the noise and light of big city life.

Cal reached for her, pulling her closer. "It wasn't their place to meddle in your life." He squeezed her shoulder and kissed her forehead.

His tender gestures opened the flood gates. Ellen sobbed in Cal's arms for half an hour. He said nothing, but held her tight and caressed her. When she was finished, he brought her a handkerchief and crawled back in bed beside her.

After she blew her nose, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"For ruining our honeymoon." Here she was crying her eyes out when they should be making love. Maybe she wasn't the best thing for Cal, although it was a little too late to worry about that now. She would do whatever it took to make it up to him. He deserved that much and more.

He gathered her back into his arms. "You haven't ruined our honeymoon. We've been

celebrating for some time now.” He chuckled.

She wrapped an arm around his chest, snuggled closer to the safety of his warmth, and closed her eyes, feeling them beginning to swell. “I love you so much, Cal,” she mumbled as she kissed his smooth skin. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I love you, too, Mrs. Turner,” she heard him say before she drifted off to sleep, melting into his arms, assured in his love and protection.

They rose early the next morning, leaving San Antonio while the city still slept under a dark sky scattered with stars. She wore her pearl gray wedding dress, wanting to look nice on the long ride back, knowing it might be awhile before she had the occasion of wearing it again. By midday, she regretted her decision as the lace around the neckline began to cling to her sweaty skin and itch. She wished she could roll up the tight-fitting sleeves to her elbows like Cal had done with his shirt.

On the long ride back to Hartridge Ellen mulled over her family’s history. Why did everything have to be so complicated? Some things just didn’t make sense. She glanced at Cal. His gaze was straight ahead, focused on the golden horizon. “Why didn’t he just ask his family for help?” she thought out loud.

“What?” Cal sat up straighter, seemingly startled out of his own thoughts.

“I was just thinking why my father didn’t ask his family for help. They have plenty of money.”

Cal rubbed his hand across his face as if trying to wake up. “If they disinherited him, I reckon they wouldn’t have given him a dime,” he said, “but I doubt he’d have even wanted to ask for their help.”

“But once his father died he could have asked his brother. Surely, his brother wouldn’t

have been so cruel.”

Cal shrugged. “No way of knowing. No sense in trying to figure it out either. What’s done is done.” He reached across the seat and patted her knee. “It’s time to let it go.”

She knew he was right and she would try, but it wouldn’t be easy. If only she’d been raised in a simple household, one without secrets, where it didn’t require much thought just to exist.

Cal timed their ride back so they would reach the farm before sunset. A few people were still out in downtown Hartridge: a boy sweeping the walkway in front of the post office, a woman closing a blind, and Mr. Horton locking his door. Mr. Horton glanced up as they passed and Cal waved. Mr. Horton didn’t wave back.

“That’s strange,” Cal said.

“Maybe he didn’t see you.”

“He saw me all right.”

As the wagon passed the point where the walkway ends and the country road begins, something whizzed through the air past Ellen’s cheek.

It was a rock. Then another one.

“What the hell!” Cal yelled.

Ellen watched in horror as a scattering of rocks flew through the air, hitting Pumpkin’s flanks. The horse bolted, causing Lily, the other horse, to panic, and both horses charged down the dirt road, bouncing the wagon like a toy. Ellen, clinging tight to her seat, heard them braying like donkeys as they raced off, their hooves flinging dirt in the air, sweat flying from their manes.

“Whoa,” Cal screamed, his veins straining through his muscles on his neck and arms as he pulled.

The wagon started to tilt, the wood creaked and moaned, and Ellen had a sickening feeling they were about to tip over, when the horses slowed and finally stopped, their eyes stricken wide with terror and their breathing labored.

“There now, there now,” Cal’s calming voice caressed them. He handed Ellen the reins and got out to examine them. Terrified the horses would take off again and she’d be trapped in the wagon alone, Ellen watched as Cal stroked the animal’s faces, reassuring them. Once they seemed under control, Cal inspected the wagon. Ellen followed his gaze. They had traveled a long way from where the rocks first hit. Whoever had thrown them was long gone. Cal hopped back on the wagon. “Everything looks okay.” He grabbed the reins and sent the exhausted horses walking.

“What do you think that was about?” Ellen had her own ideas.

Cal shrugged. “Could be some kids playing around.”

Ellen could see Cal was trying to hide his worries from her, but what happened was far more dangerous than a child’s prank, and no matter how hard he tried Cal wasn’t very good at concealing his concerns. “You think it was Tom? Being mad because I spurned him?”

“Maybe. Or Jacob for me beating him and firing him to boot.”

They both took a deep breath at the same time, and realizing they did so, laughed nervously. “Well, let’s just hope that’s the end of it,” Ellen said, though something, some little nagging voice of doubt, whispered it wasn’t.

Ellen sensed something was amiss and knew Cal did too by the way his body stiffened the moment they pulled into the yard. Turner, normally barking at anyone setting foot on the farm, was nowhere to be seen. No lights were on in the house either. They both jumped from the wagon and ran to the front door. A note was nailed to it and it was unlocked.

Opening the door, Cal called into the gloom, “Juanita!”

“Maria!” Ellen called behind him, her body tense with alarm.

No one answered.

As fast as they were able, Cal lit one lantern while Ellen lit another. They ran through the dark flinging open doors, their footsteps loud and vibrating through the hollow house. No one was inside.

“Where are they?” Ellen cried. “Where did they take Wade?”

Cal, holding his lantern above his head, was reading the note off the door. His ashen face, yellow in the lamp light, registered confusion.

“What does it say?” Ellen came to his side. Without a word, he ripped it off the door and handed it to her.

She read it out loud, “Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes. You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags.” Ellen looked up to see Cal scratching his head. “What does this mean?”

“Hell if I know. It’s scripture. But that doesn’t tell us where Wade is. Let’s head to Juanita’s house. Maybe she took him there.”

The sky had turned purple and red while they searched the house and now the land was covered in its bruised shadows. Ellen’s lantern, swinging with her movements, illuminated her path to the wagon, the only thing that looked real in the night. Cal was ahead of her carrying his own lantern. He stopped abruptly, holding his hand up in warning. “Shush.” He turned slowly and whispered, “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Ellen swiveled her lantern around, straining her ears. Crickets clicked their

wings in the night. An insect buzzed close by her ear, but that was all.

Cal walked toward the barn. Ellen followed close behind, too frightened to let him get far from her. He stopped near the cellar. She grabbed his elbow. Dead silence. Then she heard it. A baby cried.

The darkness made her feel vulnerable as if something lurked unseen, watching and waiting to leap out at her. Ellen's heart pounded in her ears as Cal rushed to the cellar and heaved the door open. It banged to the ground, sending an echo cracking through the night loud as thunder. Ellen jumped backwards. The crying intensified. Cal's lantern illuminated the terrified eyes of animals in the dark, but as the light descended the cellar's depths the images became clearer. Huddled together with eyes open wide, Juanita held Wade on her shoulder and Maria clutched to her waist. When they recognized Cal they scurried up the cellar steps. With chubby hands clutching at the air, Wade reached for Ellen as tears streamed down his face. The moment she took him in her arms his cries softened as he buried his face in her neck.

Words immediately flooded from Maria's mouth. "They were shooting. We heard cows making awful noises. The dog chase them. They shoot him, too. Momma grab Wade. We ran here while they were in the pasture. We didn't know what to do."

Cal bent down to Maria's level and took hold of her hands. "Calm down, now. You're safe. Did you see who they were?"

"Two men. Big, fat man, used to work here. The other tall. Red hair. The man came by last week." Maria's pupils were dilated with fear, turning her brown eyes black as oil.

Cal rose from his crouched position and glanced at Ellen. His eyes spoke to her. Now they knew who the culprits were. "How long ago was this?" he asked.

"A long time. It was still light out. Wade not eat yet."

“Did I hear you right?” Ellen asked. “Did you say they shot Turner?”

Maria nodded her head and burst into tears. Juanita placed her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and spoke reassuringly to her. With a pained expression, Juanita pointed toward the barn. Ellen handed Wade back to Juanita, lifted her lantern and hurried in that direction.

“Ellen, wait a minute,” Cal said as he rushed to her side. “Let’s get everyone situated inside the house first.”

“What if he’s just hurt? He needs me now.” Ellen kept walking. She heard everyone else follow her.

She saw her dog before she reached the barn door. Turner was sprawled out, blood covering his splotchy brown and white coat, his eyes, like lucent marbles, open in a vacant stare. Ellen fell to her knees in front of the sheep dog. She touched the only place not covered with blood, and caressed his floppy ears. “Oh no, no, no. Why did they have to kill you? You wouldn’t have hurt them. You were always all bark and no bite. They knew that.” Her chest heaved with sobs bubbling up inside, but she fought them back, almost choking as she did. She thought she’d used up all that was left inside her last night, but she now knew pain was endless, a bottomless pit. Letting the anger surface and replace the sorrow, Ellen rose to her feet. “They’re going to pay for this.”

* * * * *

“Mr. Hernandez just stopped by,” Cal said to Ellen early the next morning after he came in from the barn. Neither one had slept. Ellen sat slumped, with her elbow on the kitchen table, chin in her hand, feeding Wade. “Said Juanita and Maria can’t come here anymore.”

Ellen lifted her head and groaned. “Not that I blame him.” It took all her concentration to spoon the oatmeal and applesauce into Wade’s open mouth without dropping it in his lap.

“He said Mr. Horton threatened to take away his land if his wife continued working for you.”

Just as she put another spoonful in his mouth, Wade sneezed. Ellen frowned and picked up a napkin to wipe the splattered cereal from her face. “Mr. Horton? What does he have to do with all this?”

“Other than he owns half of Hartridge, I don’t know, but I’m determined to find out.”

When Cal continued standing in silence Ellen looked up. He was covered in dirt, soot, and dried blood from head to boots. He leaned against the back door, his hat loose in his hands, as he stared at the floor. “What else?” she asked and wonder what could be worse than what had already happened.

“They shot the old bull and two cows,” he said. He sighed and rubbed his hand across his weary face. “Saved what I could, to smoke it, and I buried the rest. I buried Turner, too, near your garden.” He hung up his hat. “Seth and Ralph didn’t show up today.” He sighed again, this time heavier than before. “I’m going to the creek to clean up, and when I get done, I’m heading into town to talk to the sheriff. I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

Ellen dropped the napkin and stood. “I’m going with you.”

“No, you stay here with Wade,” Cal said as he headed for the stairs for a change of clothes.

“I don’t want to stay here alone,” she said to his retreating back. “What if they come back? Besides, I need to tell the sheriff who I think it is.” She didn’t like the idea of being left there alone to protect Wade; the thought was terrifying.

“I can tell him myself. I’ll leave a loaded shotgun out for you. I doubt they’ll be coming back today.”

Cal left the shotgun by the front door. “You remember how to use one?” he said as he prepared to leave. “It’s been a long time since I showed you. I’d hate for you to hurt someone, including yourself.”

“If Tom or Jacob shows up shooting here again, I’m planning on doing more than hurting them.” Ellen grabbed the gun and slapped the barrel against her palm.

“Put that down,” Cal chided. “You don’t need to lug it around with you all day. Now stop worrying and let me get the law on this.” He took the gun and placed it back by the door. Taking her by the waist, Cal brushed his lips across her forehead and her eyes.

“Be careful, Cal. I never imagined those boys could be so vicious.” Ellen didn’t know what she would do if she lost Cal.

“Don’t you worry your sweet self about me. Keep the doors bolted shut and I’ll be back before you know.”

Ellen watched from the open doorway as he rode off on Fairfax. When she could no longer see him in the distance she shut the door and locked it.

Ellen paced the floors, stopping every once in awhile to peek out the windows. She tried to keep her mind occupied by playing with Wade, laying out a blanket on the floor, watching him crawl toward her as he attempted to take the wooden spoon she held to tease him with.

When Cal returned, Ellen carried Wade on her hip and rushed outside as he led the horse to the barn. She stopped short of him when she saw his face. His thin-lipped, downturned mouth twisted in indignation. She was almost afraid to ask. “What?”

“Sheriff said there’s nothing he can do without proof.” Cal unhooked the cinch of the saddle.

“But Maria saw them!”

“Yea, and he doesn’t think much of the testimony of a little Mexican girl. If anything’s going to get done, we’ll have to catch them in the act, plain and simple.” Cal heaved the saddle off the horse. “I just hope those boys have had their fun and are finished with us.”

That night at dinner, Cal, his face worn from fatigue, placed his hand on Ellen’s arm. “More bad news, I’m afraid.”

Ellen’s food lodged in her chest. “What now?”

“I talked with Seth and Ralph. They can’t come back to work.”

“What? Why?” Ellen dropped her napkin, losing what little appetite she had left.

Cal took a deep breath. “They’ve been threatened not to come back, not until you’re gone.”

Ellen nearly jumped out of her seat. “Until I’m gone? Who said I was going anywhere? I don’t understand. What’s this all about?”

“Seems folks know about us getting married and aren’t too happy about it.”

“But it’s none of their business. Why should they care anyway, for heaven’s sake?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it. I’ve lived here my whole life and never knew there were so many malicious people. I don’t know what to do.” Cal bowed his head, and for a moment, Ellen thought he was praying. At last, he looked up. “I’ll think of something.”

The next day Ellen jumped when she heard a horse trotting toward the house. After she peeked out the window, she picked up the shot gun. Where was Cal? He couldn’t be too far off in the fields.

Rolling her shoulders back and taking a deep breath, Ellen tried to control her trembling, and thought of her dog.

Before he had a chance to dismount his horse, Ellen threw open the door and bounded out

onto the porch. She lifted the gun to her shoulder and aimed at his head.

“Whoa! Ellen! What are you doing? Put that gun down,” Tom said, raising his arms in surrender. “I’ve come here to talk peacefully to you. I’m unarmed. You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man, now would you?”

“I would if he was the one who came here killing livestock and my dog. Why did you do it, Tom? There was no call for you to behave in such manner. You’re nothing more than a murderer.” Ellen kept the gun steady and followed Tom’s every move.

He lowered his arms and slowly slid off his horse. “I heard about that. That’s why I’ve come. The sheriff said you and Cal accused me and Jacob of doing some nasty things around here while they two of you were off on your little honeymoon. But I didn’t do a damned thing. I swear.”

“There were witnesses.” Ellen didn’t believe one word he said. How could he be the same boy who used to come around here and bore her to death?

“Witnesses? I hear it was just some Mexicans who can’t speak a lick of English. Some kind of witnesses.” He moved closer to her, grinning like a mule.

“Don’t come any closer, Tom. I *will* shoot you. Those witnesses can speak English and they described you and Jacob to a ‘t! Now get out of here. Leave us alone and let us live in peace.”

“Oh, let the little love birds live in peace?” Tom removed his hat and held it in both hands in a mock stance of respect, his hair shining a golden red in the sun. “Well, the thing is, Ellen, what you two have done is plain wrong.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, she wished she could go ahead and shoot him. She raised the gun higher. “We aren’t hurting anyone by being married.”

“From what I understand, I’m not so sure if your marriage ain’t against the law, but I’m going to find out.” A cloud crossed his face and Ellen saw a man she’d never seen before. He was revolting, despicable.

“Well, you just do that. In the meantime, get off my property before I have to bury you on it.” She pulled back the hammer.

Tom thrust his hat back onto his head and rushed to his horse. “God almighty, Ellen. You’re crazier than shit. I’m going, but this ain’t over, you can guarantee that. If you’d only married me.” With reins in hand, he turned the horse away and looked over his shoulder and called, “It’s not too late to get this sham annulled.”

Ellen didn’t know what to do once she had cocked the gun, so she went ahead and shot it into the air, sending Tom’s gray horse into a terrified gallop down the road. She smiled at the sight and glanced at the gun in her hands. It felt good. She decided she liked the smell of gun powder.

Chapter Twenty Seven

As days passed May rolled over into June, and uneasiness settled on the farm like thick layers of ashes. Every little sound—a tree limb brushing the house, an owl hooting in the distance or the floorboards groaning—set Ellen and Cal on edge. Even when Cal came from behind and touched her unexpectedly, Ellen jumped. When she stepped outside she kept expecting to see Turner running and panting in circles around her legs.

Night time was the worst. The sounds intensified and the darkness shielded whatever might lurk outside. They tried to return to a ritual of normalcy, sitting in the parlor after supper, entertaining a book, but neither could concentrate enough to remember what they had just read. Their lovemaking became tense and hurried as if any moment demons would rush in to tear them

apart.

Cal waited as long as he could before he was forced to go into town to get more supplies. They were completely out of sugar and flour and down to a handful of coffee beans. "I'm going with you," Ellen said as Cal made out his list.

"You did just fine without me the other day. I imagine you scared ole Tom away for good." He looked up from writing and flashed a tired grin at her. "Stay here with Wade. I won't be long."

Ellen was growing weary of the way he was treating her as if she were still a child. Who did he think he was? Her father? She stomped her foot on the floor, feeling her temper getting the better of her. "I am not staying here alone again. I am going with you, and that's final. I'll bring Wade with me."

On the ride into town, Ellen held on tight to Wade as he bounced in her lap with each bump the wagon wheel hit. Nine months old now, he was heavier and harder to hold. Squirming, wiggling and grunting, he wanted down. Cal shook his head at her, clicking his tongue. "Should have kept him at home. You're going to be worn out by the time we're finished."

"Maybe he'll fall asleep before it's all said and done. If not, he and I can ride in the back on our way home. Then he can move around a bit." She readjusted her skirt and moved the baby closer toward Cal's side. In case he broke loose, he'd be sandwiched in between them, less likely to fall.

By the time they reached the store and parked the wagon they had already received a few curious looks and glaring stares. Mrs. Leah and Virginia were leaving Horton's store as Cal took Wade from Ellen so she could hop down. The women paused for a moment, appearing uncertain of what to do. Virginia, looking more and more like her mother, a nondescript vestal virgin only

wearing black like a widow, ignored Ellen and gazed at Cal. “That boy of yours sure is growing.” Her mouth, always the feature that stood out the most, peeled back into a wincing smile. Her eyes were still set on Cal.

Mrs. Leah grabbed her daughter’s arm and pulled her on before Cal could respond. Ellen heard the old woman muttering, “That poor child. Scarred for life.”

The door chime jingled their arrival. Mr. Horton glanced up from wiping off the counter when they walked in. He looked back down and scrubbed furiously at some unseen spot. His bald head gleamed with beads of sweat. Ellen followed Cal about the silent store as he collected groceries and placed them on the counter. Without a word, Mr. Horton made notes of the items as he placed them in a box. When finished, Cal said, “If you’ll put that on my tab, I’d appreciate it.”

The store owner’s beefy hand shot out from behind the counter and grabbed the box as Cal reached for it. “That’ll be five fifty-five.”

Cal’s expression went blank. “I always pay you at the end of the month. What’s the problem with putting this on my tab for now?”

Still not speaking, Mr. Horton pulled out his ledger and thumbed through it. “You still owe me seven dollars for previous purchases. You’ll have to pay me before I can sell you anymore.”

“But that’s not how we’ve always done it.”

“Well, times are changing, now ain’t they? I can’t run a business giving credit to every so and so around.” He placed his hands on his hips, assuming the posture of a man in control, but the twitching of his moustache revealed otherwise.

Red-faced and shaking with anger, Cal dug through his pockets, counted out his money,

and threw it on the counter, sending the change clattering across, a few coins dropping to the floor. "I'm not every so and so. My family's been doing business with you and yours for a long time now. Our fathers were friends. I know full well what's going on here. It isn't right." He picked up the box. "Let's get out of here, Ellen."

Before they could walk away, Mr. Horton pointed at Ellen. "Don't ever bring that she-devil in here again."

Ellen glanced nervously at the two men, seeing Cal so furious. He looked ready to lunge over the counter and hit the man. "That's my wife you're talking about."

"First her mother, then her daughter. And to top it off, incest is a sin."

"It isn't incest, you old fool."

"It ain't right, that's for certain. And there's talk that she," he pointed his finger at Ellen, "might even have had a hand in her mother's death. Your folks were God-fearing people. I imagine they're turning over in their graves. We'll pray for you Cal, for your soul. But if I were you I would get her out of this town."

"Oh you would, would you? Maybe we'll both just pack up and leave this God-forsaken place. And you call yourselves Christians. Ha!" Cal trembled with rage.

Ellen touched his elbow. "Let's get out of here. No sense wasting your breath."

More people waited outside, standing around their wagon, murmuring among themselves. Cal raised his voice when he saw them, "What do you folks want? Haven't you ever seen a wagon before?"

Mrs. Clark stood in the back of the crowd. "She thinks she's too good for my boy. Ha! She ain't good enough to spit on."

"Move out of the way," Cal thundered through the crowd, "before you get run over." He

heaved the box in, grabbed Ellen by the waist, lifting her as she held Wade, and deposited them in the wagon bed with the supplies. The people parted like pigeons under fire as Cal sent the horses running, leaving the crowd choking on the dust. Ellen watched them disappear as flecks of hay swirled out the back and floated through the air along with the flurry of her tormented thoughts. How could anyone think she had anything to do with her mother's death?

Later that night Ellen woke to the sound of women chanting. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but she knew they were threatening. A gun went off, followed by the sound of wagon wheels and horses snorting. It was dark in the room, but she could see Cal wasn't there. She threw the covers back and ran to the window. A strange light lit the scene below her. Cal was out front, running frantically with a bucket of water toward a small brush fire. Heart pounding in her ears, Ellen ran barefoot down the stairs, her braid and gown flying out behind her. She grabbed a bucket from the kitchen and rushed outside to the water pump.

Cal nearly ran into her on his way to refill. She handed him hers. "Here, take this one." They switched buckets. She pumped with fury as he hurried back. By the time she lugged the water to the fire, Cal was smothering it with a blanket. Tossing her water on the smoldering mound, she grabbed both buckets and raced back to the well, oblivious to the grit and gravel pinching at her feet. She couldn't run on her return trip; her load was too heavy and the smoke was making it difficult to breathe. Cal had the fire under control, stirring the embers with a rake, when she reached him. The last two buckets finished the job.

Cal wiped his sooty forehead with his arm and shook his head. Though she couldn't see his face in the shadows of the night, Ellen could read the language of his sagging shoulders. Why did these people hate her? All they had to do was talk to the doctor to know how her mother died. Tears stung her eyes. What would they do next? There was no way she and Cal could

continue living this way and the townspeople knew it? She moved closer to Cal. He put his arm around her shoulder, squeezing her into his side. He was shaking.

“Oh Cal,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around him, encircling him with her love. He laid his head on her shoulder and sobbed silently like a lost child.

The next morning Cal went to town to speak with the sheriff again. Ellen waited by the window the entire time Cal was gone, clutching tight to her shotgun, watching the road, flinching at every gust of wind.

When Cal returned Ellen scooped Wade out of his high chair and rushed to the barn.

“Well?” Ellen forced the word out, reading and fearing the discouragement on Cal’s tired face.

“He said he’d do some talking around, see who’s behind it all, but I doubt he’ll do a thing.”

“But someone could get killed! Did you tell him that?”

“I said the blood would be on his hands. He just laughed and said it wouldn’t come to that.”

Ellen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “He’s protecting them.”

“I reckon you’re right. It’s all just a game to him. I imagine someone’s paid him to stay out of it.”

Before Ellen could respond she heard the far off sound of horses approaching. She and Cal saw them coming in time to run back to the house and lock the doors. Ellen took Wade upstairs and placed him in his crib. Cal moved the wardrobe to block the window. “Just in case any bullets go astray.”

“You think they aim to kill us?”

“No, just frighten us.”

Ellen peeked out the window. Some of the townspeople were sitting in their wagons and on their horses, some watching, some shooting like target practice, aiming for cows in the pasture. Fortunately, Cal had already moved most of the herd further north and the stragglers ran in that direction, away from the surge of shooting from the roadside.

Cal loaded first one shotgun and then another. He handed one to Ellen. “I’m not planning on shooting. Just scaring.”

He ran downstairs and out the front door. Ellen inched the curtain back to watch, her breathing quickening as fear raced through her body. Cal was near the road now. She closed her eyes for a second to say a quick prayer for his safety.

“You all get off my property, you hear, before someone gets hurt. There’s no call for this nonsense. I spoke with the sheriff.” He was yelling at them now. Ellen had never felt so proud of him than at that moment.

“I spoke with him, too. That’s why we’re here. We’re not out to hurt anyone, just trying to get our message across, Cal. Get rid of the little harlot and we’ll leave you alone.” It was Mr. Horton’s voice.

“Don’t talk about my wife that way.” Cal raised his gun in Mr. Horton’s direction. “She’s a good woman and never done you any harm. Why are you acting this way?”

“She and her mother led you away from the church and what you’re doing now is a mortal sin—incest.”

“It’s not like she was my daughter, for crying out loud.”

“But there’s a law says you can’t marry anyone related to your wife and with her being your step daughter that’s pretty darn close.” This time Ellen could tell it was Tom speaking.

“Make her leave!” A woman’s voice shouted. “You should have never brought her or her mother to our town. You could have found you a nice Christian woman here.”

By this point, Ellen had had enough. She’d made up her mind. She grabbed a shotgun and a handful of shells, placing them in her apron pocket, just in case she needed to shoot and reload.

No one said a word as they watched her storm out of the house, slamming the door behind her. Their eyes burned into her as she crossed the distance to them. It grew so quiet they could hear bullfrogs croaking from as far as the creek. Ellen stopped when she stood next to Cal. His presence gave her confidence in what she would do next. Facing the crowd, she raised her voice to make sure they all heard her. “You never gave me or my mother a chance. I love Cal. We are rightfully and lawfully married. There’s nothing you can do about that.” She paused, waiting for her words to sink in, waiting to see what they did next.

They remained silent, watching her and eyeing her gun. She continued, “But I won’t stay here and let you destroy everything Cal has worked so hard for. So you win. I’ll leave . . . as soon as I can find a place to go, but in the meantime, if you don’t get off our property someone is liable to get shot.” She aimed the gun at Tom.

Tom flinched, making his horse take a step back.

Mr. Horton, sitting in a little buggy that looked like it would collapse under his weight, cleared his voice and said, “We’ll take your word, Miss Ellen. And you can take ours.” He turned to the crowd, waved his arm and shouted, “Let’s move out and leave these folks be.”

Ellen’s arm started to shake. She didn’t lower her gun until everyone was out of sight.

“You can’t leave me,” Cal said from beside her.

She lowered the gun, silent and resolute, and walked back into the house. Upstairs, Wade wailed from his crib. Leaning the gun against the fireplace, Ellen raced up to get him. When she

came back downstairs, Cal waited for her, his face filled with anguish.

Sighing, she handed him the baby, grabbed a blanket from the back of a chair and spread it on the floor. Still without speaking, she took Wade back into her arms and placed him on the blanket, allowing him the freedom to crawl. He was happy now.

Cal took Ellen into his arms, spreading his fingers through her hair, pressing his face next to hers. "I won't let you leave."

Staring into his eyes, she knew what had to be done. "Cal, honey, they won't leave us alone until I do. You heard them. I've thought all about it. I'll go to San Antonio, like I originally planned. I'll work with Ada, save up some money. In the meantime, you can try selling this place. We'll start over, somewhere else; where no one knows us and will let us be." She kissed him long and hard, never wanting to let go.

Cal took hold of her wrists and pulled away. He looked like he would cry, but no tears came. "I've always lived here, Ellen. It's where my family has always lived. When I look out at the pastures I don't just see grass, dirt, and cows. I see my sweat and my father's sweat. I see the ghosts of all those I've loved. They're walking around, plowing the fields, picking flowers or apples, or hanging laundry, or swimming or fishing in the creek. I see my life and its meaning. I don't know what I'm going to do without it."

"Then you don't have to leave. I will. I'm sure Juanita can come back after I'm gone. I'll start a new life, without you if that's what I have to do."

"If there was just some way we could prove our marriage is not a sin." Cal's hands dropped to his sides.

"Well, it isn't. We know that. They've made up their minds. I guess Tom has convinced them of that. Why they would listen to him is beyond me." Ellen had never seen him as a

prominent figure in this town. Mr. Horton, yes, but Tom? And what about the Leahs? Mrs. Leah's husband had been a major landholder, but he was dead. Virginia was definitely keen on Cal. Could that have something to do with it?

Cal lifted his head with new resolve. "I'm going to talk to Tom tomorrow. Then I'll talk with Mr. Horton. I'll make them see how ridiculous this all is." He grabbed Ellen and hugged her, squeezing her tighter than he ever had.

Chapter Twenty Eight

June-July 1899

When Cal returned, Ellen had most of her things packed, things she wouldn't need for the next couple of weeks. A few dresses would see her through until it was time to depart for San Antonio. She would leave Hartridge with just a few more items than she arrived with four years ago. She already planned what the telegram would say to Ada. Convincing Cal to send it would be another matter altogether.

Cal removed his hat, ran his fingers through his dusty hair, and sat heavily at the kitchen table.

"They wouldn't listen to reason, would they?" Ellen never believed they would.

"Nope. You were right. Tom just wants us to annul our marriage. He seems to think the town would forgive us both if you up and married him. Mr. Horton says it's the women in town who are making all the stink, pushing the men to make a stand for what they call 'decency.' He thinks I should have married Virginia Leah and could still do if . . . Well, I told them none of those things was going to happen."

"And what did they have to say to that?"

"Mr. Horton said he would think about buying my land."

Ellen rushed to Cal and squeezed his shoulders. “Well, that’s good news. Isn’t it?”

“If he offers a fair price, I guess.” Cal stared at his hands. His fingers clasped so tight his knuckles turned yellow.

“You guess?”

Ellen could barely hear him. “I don’t want to sell.”

Her hands dropped from Cal’s shoulders. She was afraid this would happen. Leaving Cal meant leaving the best friend she ever had. It broke her heart to think of a life friendless. Oh, there was Ada and David, but it wasn’t the same. And then there was her mother’s grave. The thought of never being able to place flowers on the grave made her ache all over.

Ellen turned away from Cal and paced the floor behind his chair. “I already told you, you don’t have to sell. We’ll do as Tom wants. We’ll get our marriage annulled. You can send Ada a wire tomorrow, informing her of my arrival. I’ve already packed. With me gone, I’m sure you can get Juanita back.” She stopped pacing when she heard Cal’s chair scrape the floor. She glanced at him. He was still seated. He was staring at her; his face now as yellow as his knuckles. She held out her hands and said, “See? I have it all figured.”

He stood, knocking over his chair. Grabbing her upper arms roughly, he shook her. “Just because I don’t want to sell, doesn’t mean I’m not going to. Damn it! I love you, Ellen. You’re not going to walk out on me that easily. We’ll do everything you’ve mentioned, except annul our marriage. Once I get the money I deserve for this place, I’ll buy us some more land. We’ll start over.” He crushed her to his chest, nearly knocking the breath out of her. Then he buried his face in her hair.

* * * * *

Trying to ignore the racket of the train’s wheels as they screeched into the station, Ellen

was silent next to Cal as he held Wade. Juanita and Maria stood behind them. The train was on time. She was not ready.

Clutching the skirt of her gray cotton wedding dress, Ellen tried to steady her hands and her heart as she struggled to catch her breath in the thick hot air. It was difficult to believe it had been four long years since her first train ride. How she was terrified of the changes about to take place in her life back then . . . and now. She'd come full circle.

If only she had been kinder to her mother. Lenore must have been as nervous and grieving as Ellen was now, but never showed it. Her mother had been a strong woman. Ellen would try to be strong, too. She was her mother's daughter after all.

Glancing around the platform, having already said what she needed to say, Ellen saw two women in summer dresses depart the train. She was surprised the town, especially Virginia Leah, didn't show up to gloat and watch her leave.

The conductor called, "All aboard."

Cal squeezed her shoulder. "It's time."

She turned to him. There were unshed tears in his beautiful blue eyes. She tucked her ticket into her sleeve and placed her hands on his flushed cheeks. "I love you," she whispered.

He grabbed her with his free arm, pulling her close, and kissed her long and hard. Fear tore at Ellen's insides with such intense agony she thought she would double over with the pain.

When Cal pulled away a single tear fell down his face. Ellen touched it, wanting to keep it with her forever. "Be brave," he said. "Write me every day. I'll be with you before you know it." Cal forced a smile. He looked at Wade. "Say bye-bye." He leaned the toddler down so Ellen could plant a kiss on the baby's smooth round cheek.

"Bye, bye, baby," Ellen said, trying not to break down in a fit of hysteria in front of the

boy. If only she could take him with her, but he was Cal's son and there was no way she could get a job working with Ada if she had a child tagging along. Juanita would take good care of him. It wouldn't be long before they were reunited as a family once again . . . as long as Cal didn't change his mind. She had to stop thinking like that.

Ellen turned quickly to Juanita and Maria, giving them each a big hug and kiss. With tears in her eyes, Maria latched onto Ellen's dress. "I wish you not have to go."

"Me too, honey. Me, too. But I'll write and see you real soon, I promise."

"You better hop on board now before they take off without you," Cal said.

Ellen wished they would, but knew that wouldn't solve their problems. With one last swift peck on the cheek, she hurried to the train; afraid to look back for fear if she did she wouldn't be able to take another step.

Scurrying to her seat, not bothering to glance at any of the other passengers, Ellen wanted one last look at Cal from the train window. He lifted Wade's chubby arm to wave. Juanita and Maria waved. Cal's smile was strained. Recalling her last train ride, she remembered the first time she saw Cal standing on this very same platform, reminding her of a scarecrow. He still wore the same red suspenders, but he looked like a man going off to war. Though she was the one going off, she imagined they would each have their own battles to conquer while away from each other. Determined not to cry, she placed her hand on the cool, grimy glass.

When the whistle blew this time Ellen didn't jump. Her eyes were so fixed on Cal she couldn't see or hear anything else but his face and his words earlier this morning: "When you get there, remember, you're just there for the job. Keep your ears and eyes open, play along and save your money. Don't take any chances. If you let on who you are Mr. Cook's liable to throw you out on the street, thinking you're there to get at his money. We don't need any more problems to

deal with right now, especially you being homeless. You'll have plenty of time for mending family ties once we're together again with a place of our own."

Cal was right. All she had to do was bide her time even though she was terrified. Had her mother felt this way when she had to leave her family to go work for the Cooks? What if something happened? Something went wrong? Cal got hurt or worse? What if he decided he loved the land more than her? What if she remained hired help for her relatives for the rest of her life? No, she shouldn't let her mind think such thoughts. She thought she'd felt alone before in her life, but it was nothing like what she felt now. She said a silent prayer for strength.

The train jugged forward, the movement jostling enough for her hand to slip on the window, smearing the grime with the fog from her breath. Someone sat beside Ellen, but she didn't look to see who, she was too intent on keeping Cal in her sight. Peering out, she kept her gaze on Cal as he began shrinking in the distance. She wanted to sear his image into her brain, something to hold onto in the dark days ahead while she waited. She would wait as long as it took and keep reminding herself Cal would wait for her too.

It wasn't until she could no longer see Cal or Hartridge when Ellen noticed the faint odor of perfume, the slight hint of honeysuckle mingling with another flower, either lavender or rose. Ellen glanced to her left and saw a woman sitting beside her. She wore a white high-collared shirtwaist and a navy blue skirt. Pinned on the woman's collar was a pendant similar to Lenore's cameo. The woman's head was turned. All Ellen could see was her light brown hair piled neatly in a bun, the contour of a smooth cream-colored chin and a dainty ear.

Momma? Had she come back when she needed her most, knowing how alone she felt, how afraid? Ellen felt dizzy as her heart pounded in her throat. She didn't realize she had stopped breathing until the woman turned and smiled at her.

The smile froze on her lovely face. “Honey, are you all right?”

Ellen blinked. It wasn’t her mother. The woman was pretty, not as pretty as Lenore, but she could have been her younger sister. Ellen took a deep breath before she tried to speak. “It’s just that . . . you look like someone . . .” Tears she had been holding back for so long threatened to escape. Right now, she really wanted her mother.

“Well now.” The woman’s face softened. “Looks like you could use a little cheering up, and heaven knows, after having been on this train for as long as I have,” she said as she patted Ellen’s hand. “I sure could use a friend.”

Ellen did her best to compose herself. There was something in the woman’s voice that made her body relax. A feeling of hope seemed to ignite in her soul. It took her but a second to find her voice. “Thank you,” she whispered and smiled. “I guess there’s nobody on earth who couldn’t use a friend.”

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