

Prologue

The wind outside was still, and the scent of sweet-grass drifted across the air, softly touching her senses. It was April seventh, nineteen hundred and three, a Tuesday, and things were as unstopplable as the looming day to follow.

The room was quiet, with only her sitting within it. The atmosphere drifted calmly as the minutes on the clock kept ticking in the background of her confinement. Her thoughts remained steady in the days preceding; however, they had become a whirlwind of fear and resentment, but it made no difference. After weeks of desperate pleas, nothing would have stopped this day, no more than halting the moon for an everlasting night.

Everything she would be bringing with her lay within one medium-sized suitcase, resting along the wall to her right, nearest the door. Besides its worn leather case, nothing much stood in the room. A painted picture of Jesus's crucifixion was to her left, with a small window just next to it. Before her, a mirror, small table, and chair, from which she hadn't moved since arriving, nearly forty minutes ago.

She had put on the dress, white of course, but she felt little to no virtue in it. Imagining the fabric turning darker and darker with every step she would take into her new life. Hating its perfect white emptiness, seeing its blank canvas fill with decisions that weren't hers and a future which she didn't want.

Facing into the mirror, her empty eyes stared back, having no more tears to shed, nor the hope to let them fall. In dreams of something better, and in the deepest part of her heart, a hope for love to someday grow. Or at least acceptance and appreciation. She fell far away, into the depths of the mirror again picturing her dress fading, turning darker, an ugly rough gray in its unhappiness and surrender.

Her hand made its move in a desperate attempt to push her along from her horrible imaginings. Grabbing the brush resting on the table before her, she wasted no time in running it through her hair. Its soft bristles weaving smoothly through the deep red of her looped strands, sweeping her soft curls down, over her shoulder and off, watching as their light spring bounced back again.

Her hands no longer trembled; after fourteen days, she had learned to control it, the first three days after the announcement being the hardest. After nearly five weeks of negotiations, she had hoped things would have ceased, but on March twenty-fifth, everything fell apart.

She let the brush fall through her hair one last time and made her eyes drift from the depths of the mirror and towards her reflection. There was no light looking back at her. Her face was tired, the bags under her eyes, giving away her restless nights, resulting in her need to hide it. Her hand moved smoothly. Setting down her brush on the crochet tablecloth and picking up the puff which sat within a tin of pale powder—the second of four items atop the table.

Lightly, she pressed the soft cotton into the fine powder and swiftly brought the thinly coated puff to her face, gently patting it below each eye. The dark circles slowly began to fade. Wishing the illusion this beautiful little tin held would be able to cover up her sadness and fear was a regretful one. Knowing nothing would change her fate, not a heavy coat of camouflage or anything else.

Placing the puff back into the round tin, she moved to the left and paused before grabbing the third item on the table. Its pearls and stones still dazzled. Remembering her eyes on it as a child within her Mother's small jewelry box, softly running her fingers over the smooth gems and pointed ends. The fine comb still felt strong and heavy in her hand. It made her think

to the many times she had held it precisely within her tiny fingers as a young girl, waiting and wanting to place it within her untamed red hair.

Her fingers touched it as they used to, bringing it towards her right side and up to her hair. With her right hand, she pulled back her soft curls while her left swept the jewelled comb up, pulling the red strands away from her ear and up off her neck. It held her thick locks firmly, having waited so many years to do so. She'd dreamed of this day and its coming, about the love she would find and the life she would have. All that waiting, and yet, in her heart, she knew everything about this supposedly perfect day was wrong.

She turned her eyes away from her reflection and down to the table and the items lying across it. Everything used but one. A small black tube sat on its own to her left, smooth and sleek from the light of the window, its golden ring catching the sun's gaze, making it shimmer.

Slowly she brought her hand to it and reaching out with her first two fingers and thumb; she picked up the small, glossy tube. A cool chill still held in the smooth polished black, even in a room that had already been warmed by the morning sun, somehow giving her the small reassurance of possibilities.

It had been one of the only things she'd chosen for herself and, despite everything, she absolutely loved it. Clasp it in her hand, she hoped to take in all that it had to offer, to make her strong, to give her something to stand on and help her get through the next fifty years.

Slowly grasping at the top of the black metal tube, she gently lifted, revealing the beautiful gold finish on the inside. Twisting the base, the true beauty held within came forward. A deep ruby shade that spoke boldness and strength and, for a moment, gave her the belief that she could do it, that she could walk down the aisle and into her life-to-be.

She brought the tube forward, the colour sweeping over her lips smoothly, and in that few seconds, the reflection in the mirror had changed. Its bold red pigments shone back at her from lips, which, when capable, gave the most wonderful and beautiful of smiles, but for today the lipstick would do. Twisting the base and sending the lipstick back down, she placed the cap back atop the golden cylinder. Locking it away, she wondered when or if she'd ever use it again.

Her hand shook as she set it back down on the table and rested her wrist against the hard-wooden surface before her, pausing until the shaking had passed. Her gaze had also fallen towards the table, watching as her hand still flinch against the faded white crochet. When it had stopped, she placed it within her lap, sending her other hand to hold — trying to keep her eyes from going back to the mirror and onto the reflection upon its glass. It would have to do all of it, and the only way she was going to live through it was to stop battling the current and follow it.

Her eyes were still empty, but since he hadn't glanced at her more than five times since she'd known him, she didn't believe he would see anything wrong. Besides, none of those times had he looked towards her face. Certain this day, her parents wouldn't either.

The powder created enough coverage on her dark circles. And her lips would be the focal point. Boh would distract from the sorrow visible within her face, forced to hide the truth while her heart was breaking.

There was a light knock at the door, grateful to look away from the mirror and turn herself back in her chair to face the door four feet behind her. She knew her mother would walk in with or without an invitation.

She waited and watched as the doorknob turned and slowly opened, seeing the back of her Mother's head first, as she was talking to someone out in the hall. She didn't get her hair from her Mother, no Charlotte's hair was fine, straight and nearly down to her waist. It was also

dark, almost black. She was English blood and was very proud of the fact. Her grandfather had brought his family to America to seek fortune back in the 1870s.

There were other things she had in common with her mother, like her stubbornness, taste, and rationality. But what people only ever saw in her was her Father. One look at Owen would tell you those fiery locks had come from him. He had come from a well-known Irish family. Arriving in America as a young boy with his parents, completely unknown and ready to start their new lives in the new world.

A sigh fell through her lips. Sure that both of them had had a choice at some point or another, to stay or go. But watching her mother come into the room, she knew her future was laid out before her.

Charlotte stood before her, hands clasped in front of her waist, her outfit, simple navy with a lovely pendant bringing the only bit of light to the outfit. Even in all her reserve and stature, she was a beautiful woman, something the years hadn't stolen.

She rose from her chair, knowing her mother would wait until she'd seen her dress and makeup in detail, hoping her Mother wouldn't notice her legs shaking as she stepped forward. Fortunately, the long gown had kept Charlotte from seeing it. She watched as her Mother's head rose and fell, carefully taking in the fantasy and, giving her head a slight nod, Charlotte was satisfied. Doing well herself, to hide the utter turmoil boiling inside her.

Standing before her, she watched as her Mother's arms came out, and her feet came forward, wrapping around her for a short, but tight hug. She hugged her Mother back, knowing she'd done all she could to stop it, but women never really had any part in these things, men made sure of it. Pulling away, she kept her face hidden, not wanting her mother to see her sadness and lack of will.

Charlotte didn't fight her, feeling much the same as her daughter, both afraid of what they would see as doubt and disappointment. Breathing a sigh, Charlotte turned back towards the door and into the mostly empty front room, stopping just within the door-frame to look back at her daughter.

"It's time, Marie."

~

The small church could only hold about sixty people, a few more if they chose to stand, but in the west, in these small towns, people were few and far between. Today, only a dozen had come to witness this union. With her parents and his father, Daniel, and brother, Abraham, the place was more empty than full, but most weddings were like that. For things other than Sunday Church and a weekly trip to town, there weren't many reasons for people to leave their homestead.

The building had been standing more than a few decades now and had kept its sturdy shape. With the walls still holding their bright colour of white in the odd place, letting those from far see its white purity from many miles.

Stepping out from a small room they used for many such occasions, Marie came again into the gathering room at the front end of the Church. Owen was standing just before the doors, waiting patiently for her. Walking closer and standing next to him, he felt her presence and turned to her, smiling, but his eyes couldn't hold hers. Facing the doors, Owen's arm moved around hers, catching her at the elbow and bringing his hand back over towards his stomach, locking them together.

He didn't look at her. He couldn't; he only stared forward, into the back of the doors leading into the hall, and to his daughter's new life. He had been able to go all this time without feeling the sting of shame and guilt, but, at this moment, he feared if his eyes laid on her, he would weep.

She was still a young woman, and he knew she had a few years yet to find someone more fitting, but after being in town as long as they'd been, he knew things didn't change that quickly. Nor did the opportunity to meet someone you could form a bond.

"I'll be inside." Charlotte's voice came from the right, watching her husband hook around her daughter's arm, but now she wanted away. Turning, Charlotte placed her hand on the door and pushed it open, walking through and without stop. Pacing down the aisle, she took her seat within the front pew without looking back.

Owen's grip tightened around Marie's arm, feeling his remorse getting the better of him, unable to tell her he was proud of her acceptance and understanding. It was not how he wanted it to be for her, but ultimately believed it was for the best.

There was a shuffle of feet on the other side of the doors. Followed by the realization their time was growing short and that everything was about to change. Each of them thought about the set, but uncertain, future ahead, both accompanied by visions saturated with foreboding thoughts. His seventeen-year-old daughter was about to be married and, tonight would be this man's wife. She would be sharing a home, a life and a bed with the man at the end of the aisle, a man she would soon call her husband.

The doors split away, opening wide to the hall and the few people within. Gradually they stood up and turned towards the bride and her father, waiting and watching.

With one more squeeze to her arm, her father stepped forward.

Again, her legs shook, hidden beneath her dress, but she followed him, walking down the well-worn aisle. Everything in her mind seemed to speed up and, at the same time, slow down, making her feel as though she would faint. But her feet keep moving forward, in pace with her father, never faltering.

The few people she passed all looked distorted. Unable to recognize any faces, a sudden black ball of fear well up within her. Forcing her feet to keep moving, if only to get by their shadowed faces.

Reaching the end of the aisle, she took her last step alongside her father. Feeling him give her a small kiss on the cheek, Marie pulled her arm away from him, and he reluctantly let go of her, taking a step back and finding his seat next to his wife.

Marie's eyes followed him a moment, before placing them on the man standing next to her, holding her gaze only a moment. He had on a dark-blue suit with his hair combed back. He wasn't a bad-looking man, but looks were a small part of the contract they were about to set out upon.

He saw her still looking at him, but he did not turn to her again, keeping his eyes straight ahead with his hands clenched together in front of him. He was nervous and was trying not to show it, even though it had been as he wished. Having watched her grow from a young girl into the beautiful woman she'd become, he had set this plan aside for when the time was right.

But even his preparedness didn't stop him from being nervous on his wedding day. Given the fact he was thirteen years her senior, he couldn't help but let his head get in the way. He may have been too old for her, but he wasn't too old to get married. Nor to the woman of his choosing. He had worked hard to earn that position.

He was a born and bred American, his parents had a noteworthy fortune in the new world, and as a young boy, he knew he would acquire the same. He had owned an expansive amount of land and was anxious to start a ranch there, and more, to have a wife and children around to help him do it.

Doing his best not to let his eyes fall on her face as he stared down to his side and towards her right hand, reaching out stiffly and taking it in his left before turning back to face their priest.

He never looked at her face, and the hope of his hand about hers deflated. The room grew perfectly silent as the Priest raised his arms to them, everyone hearing the man take in a great breath.

“Dearly beloved. We are gathered here today to join Marie Alice Fitzgerald and Lewis Archie Bensworth in the bonds of holy matrimony.”

The Holy Man's sudden words echoed throughout the closed room and came rushing into her ears, giving her legs one more chance to tremble against the fabric of her dress. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply, but calmly. She wanted to run, she wanted to get away, but mostly she wanted to love the man who would now and forever be standing beside her.

Instead, she stood still, not giving herself the chance to engage her rattling legs, and solemnly turned to face their priest and waited to become this man's wife.

Chapter 1

It was high noon, and the heat of the day would still gain a few degrees before the cool of the evening would take its grip over the land. But she had been through harder days. They had lived for over nine years on a large piece of land out in central Wyoming, having travelled from northern Nebraska right after their wedding.

It was a tranquil piece of land, not completely barren, nor lacking in water. They had a well and many strong, standing buildings to use within the property, and Lewis made sure to use them all. They had chickens and horses, and, for a few years, they'd even had pigs, but Lewis had opted-out after three seasons.

The house was built several years before they moved in. Even without inhabitants, it had kept up against the elements. The stable needed some repairs, as did a few of the more secluded buildings, but after the first year, things were running smoothly.

Her life was quiet, with Lewis often away in the fields. Leaving her to deal with the daily chores, tending the house, animals and garden. Being sure to always have a meal to set in front of Lewis when he'd finished for the day. It took some time before she had come to terms with her new life. Once she had, she'd built a home for Lewis and herself, and still pondered to know if she made him happy, or if he genuinely cared for her.

Almost ten years had passed since the day they said, 'I do.' She couldn't help but wonder if Lewis would do something to celebrate, even if the previous nine years had yet to yield any such merit. Still, she couldn't stop herself from feeling a small spark of excitement trying to ignite itself somewhere deep inside. She thought of her ruby lipstick and the green dress still wrapped within its tissue paper resting in the bottom-right drawer of her vanity. Of the softness of its fabric and imagined it against her skin. Marie thought of wearing that green dress, and red

lip-colour excited her, and she wondered if Lewis would enjoy it as well, only hoping things, that day, would bring her joy and not tears.

Their home lie over seven miles from Ashill. A small but prosperous town five hours from anywhere or anything within the dusty northern center of America. The town wasn't lacking, having more than fifty people within its population, and almost everyone one hundred miles out knew about this small place of refuge.

Over time, she'd come to meet most of her fellow townsfolk, but wasn't sure if she could call anybody a 'dear' or 'close' friend. And even though the woman she accompanied, rarely had good news, Marie never missed the opportunity to join in the gossip. It was her only option for conversation.

At home, speech was more than deficient, and coming into town on Fridays was her only vocal outlet. Lewis wasn't much of a conversationalist, nor did he enjoy sharing. They had never found a solid connection, and, for more than a few years now, she'd yearned for something more. More than anything, Marie wanted someone to love. But, having endured nearly a decade of lying next to her husband every night, she worried her time was slipping away, as was the chance of having a child.

The only days she looked forward too now, the ones where she mounted her horse, Jasper, and rode away, leaving the ranch behind her. It only happened twice a week, attending Church on Sundays with Lewis, which didn't often count as freedom, and Fridays. On those days, she had her chance to go unattended into town for supplies and groceries. Not to mention being able to leave the shackles of her life, if only for a few hours.

Closing her eyes from the hot midday sun, she leaned against the hoe she held in her hands. Usually, her garden work took some of her cares away, but today, it only seemed to add to them. Often, her daydreaming would fill the void with some mild form of stimulation, and she would work until the sun was to her back, but today would be a short day, she knew it.

Gripping the handle, she raised her head and straightened her aching back, feeling more than one place sharply object to the decision. Her eyes fell closed, and she tried to rid her mind off the doubts and woes of her own life and attempted to fix an idea of the future. She let herself dream, refusing to let her imagination take her too long from the ground or away from this barren land, to someplace green and exciting. It wasn't something she wanted to do to herself, to long for such an escape, so she held back, keeping her dreams simple and modest, always finding them happier than real life.

Slamming the hoe into the hard turf at her feet sent the strong realization aching up her arms: real-life had no escape. That's how it went, for many more people than just herself, seeing it in her day-to-day life. It was in the behaviour and gestures of other couples and, under her roof, things never appearing as rosy as she wished they were.

She thought ahead again to their tenth wedding anniversary and her twenty-eighth birthday later this spring, both staring her in the face. The idea that things would ever change felt old and broken. With so many years continuing along the same path, this life surrounded her in a haze of repetition. It had become more like a cage, a loveless, empty cage.

By four o'clock, she'd gone into the house to wash, leaving what remained of the gardening for another afternoon, only stopping to throw some grain for the chickens. With two hours before the sun's heat would finally release the day from its exhausting grasp, she stepped inside.

The air was cool and still, the light sting from the skin on her face giving thanks for being free from the blistering outdoors. The room was large, a fireplace with two comfortable seats before it, the kitchen, stove, table and chairs. She walked past all of it and into the bedroom.

Marie moved to her washbasin, which rested on a small vanity against the north wall beside their bed. She unbuttoned her top three buttons and cuffs, then poured some cold water from the pitcher into the bowl. Setting the half-empty pitcher down on the table-top, she placed her hands into the water, watching as the dirt pulled away from her palms and fingers. The water gained a dark tint, losing its crisp, clean view to the base of the bowl.

When her hands ran clean, she reached for one of the two washcloths, which hung across a bar at the back of the vanity, one blue and one rust. She grabbed the blue one, watching as the cloth slowly fell into the water, before lifting to the mirror and onto the tired and dirty face within it.

She could see the lines becoming more worn upon her skin and worried the fair glow of her cheeks would disappear within the next few years. Turning back down to the bowl, she reached into the water and pulled out the blue cloth and rung out the excess water, listening to the gentle droplets fall into their collective.

The cloth felt refreshing against her skin, as the dirt and sweat pulled from her face. She pondered on how she'd felt the same about it every time, as though she could wipe away her sadness and maybe clean away enough to find something bright inside. Lowering her hands, she slid the cloth back into the water and again out into the air, where she rang it out. She brought the cool material to the back of her neck, sweeping along her hairline and down her spine.

Her eyes went back to the mirror, and she peered over herself. Turning her head, she checked over her hair and saw the back-right side needed some attention, noticing more than a few curls that had come loose from her braid and bun. Finished with her washcloth, she set it back upon the rod on the vanity. Both hands moved to the back of her head and into her hair. Finding a few pins and quickly removing them, her bun began to loosen, releasing the tight pull of her hair.

A large, thick, red braid fell against her back, swaying slightly, to and fro, before her left hand came back and swept it forward over her shoulder. There was an orange ribbon tied at the end, holding her braid together and, as she pulled at its end, she could see the curls trapped within its hold bounce-free and become twice as thick. She would braid it again and place it back in a bun, knowing that was how Lewis liked it.

It was just before sunset when Lewis came home. Hearing Jackson's hooves pounding against the ground as they approached- picturing his black mane and tail flowing along behind him as he ran. Soon Jackson's hoofbeats slowed. They had reached the stable, and Lewis would only be a few more minutes with Jackson before coming inside. Her body was about the kitchen, waiting for the door to open and see her husband walk in. Still, before she heard his feet come up the porch, she distinguished another set of hooves approaching.

Turning away from the stove, she lifted her eyes out the kitchen window. Lewis came walking out of the stables, waiting for their guest to come into view of the window, certain it would be one of their neighbours. Around here, that's how the town survived, with any big news coming straight by horseback and word of mouth.

Leaning in and getting a better view, Marie saw Mr. Stealer ride up and stop just near the stable by her husband, standing just beyond the doors. Looking out the window, she watched as

Raymond spoke with Lewis, patiently waiting to see if Lewis would give any sign as to what Ray's visit was about. Good or bad.

Lewis's face showed no sign of emotion, even when responding to Mr. Stealer. He nodded his head, letting his ratty cowboy hat flap weakly as he did. She watched a few seconds longer and shifted to the right of the window to watch as Mr. Stealer rode away.

She turned back to her work and away from her husband, who didn't move for a long spell, finally facing back into the stable to finish up with Jackson. He would be a few minutes yet, giving her time to double-check all that was cooking, ensuring it would be ready once Lewis came in.

He burst through the door, Marie only hearing his footsteps hitting the porch a second before he'd done so. Stepping inside, he kicked off his boots, not bothering to watch where they landed. She kept her back to him, listening as each boot hit the floor in different locations. She wanted to sigh but forcing herself to hold it in. They would stay that way until she changed it. Placing them neatly before the door for him every morning, something she had done ever since they'd been living in their house.

He tore off his worn hat, placing it on a hook on the back of the door as his left hand closed it, locked with a click the moment it latched. Walking over to the table, Lewis sat down at its head, using one of the two chairs, which sat patiently at either end. She finished up his plate, making sure everything was left hot until the last second.

Marie placed the last piece of breaded chicken onto his plate. She decided to take the opportunity of his appetite to ask about Mr. Stealer's visit. As she turned around to him, holding his plate in hand, her words came freely, coming along his left side.

"What did Mr. Stealer have to say?" Standing next to him, she set his plate down and brought her hands together in front of her waist, waiting. She didn't move, not yet, not until making sure he was satisfied with his meal before going to retrieve her own. Besides, the more time passed, the better her chance for an answer between his many mouthfuls.

"Raymond..." Trailing off with only one word, she turned, moved to the stove to make her plate, hoping it would give him enough time to swallow and add to his plethora of words. Coming back to the table and taking her seat at the opposite end, she waited, turning from her food to look at him.

His fork dove into his mashed potatoes, sweeping a large scoop up and into his open mouth. His eyes lifted and looked across to his wife, then back down to his meal, taking another second to enjoy his meal and the silence. His fork went back to the plate for the chicken before choosing to speak. "Dick Roland passed away."

Chapter 2

It was the second week in April, and over six days had passed since she and Lewis had left the ranch to attend Richard's funeral on the fifth. When Friday's general store trip finally arrived, she was glad of her outing. Since Lewis had gone in himself the previous week, the day after they had watched Richard laid to rest. He seemed to be fighting with his demons, requesting the trip into town be handled by himself, leaving her trapped in the house another week. But today was for her.

For the next few hours, she would be able to let her mind roam freely, knowing she would find peace within. These quiet trips into town had, somewhat, become her therapy and, having missed last Friday, she was especially glad the shopping was down to her again. As painful as her life's routine had become, this was a necessary part of it, for her sanity. She had gone out to the stable after finishing cleaning up from their breakfast and her morning chores, seeing Lewis had already come and cleaned the pens for their horses. Everybody happily fidgeted when they saw her walk in.

It was cool and calm inside. Everyone stood peacefully within their stalls, their two horses and an old ass, Hickory, their donkey. He had a few promising years left in him, and both Marie and Lewis had grown fearfully fond of him. Neither allowing the conversation of his retirement into the discussion. The second pen belonged to his dark-haired thoroughbred Jackson, who still held his prime and vigour. Then, turning to the first horse in the row on the left, Marie smiled. She'd never take any other horse as long as he lived.

Jasper, a caramel colour, black-haired beauty, had been hers now for almost eight years, and she'd never had a closer companion. Unfortunately, that also included her husband. It was just over a seven-mile trip into town, and the two of them were exceedingly familiar with it, having crossed over the dirty terrain hundreds of times together. Only on Sundays did their travel become a burden, Lewis always wanting to attend Church with their wagon in tow. But today, it was just them, seeing her grab his harness from the wall, Jasper bounced with excitement, seeing as they hadn't gone in last week, he was mighty glad she was there today.

Opening the pen, Jasper stepped out calmly, bending his head down and in towards her awaiting her caress. Marie reached up and brushed his hair, running her hand down his nose. Stepping closer, she brought the bridle up and swept it over his head. He nuzzled against her and clasped the reins within his mouth as she brought her right hand with the leather strap atop his head and between his ears, ruffling his beautiful, black mane.

Turning back to the wall again, she grabbed a single strapped saddlebag. She placed it around Jasper's chest, buckling the straps together behind his shoulders. They were ready. With a few quick moves, Marie was seated atop him, picking up the reins and gently snapping them, signalling to Jasper, to take his steps towards the stable doors and out into the sun.

They rode out into the midday sun, the light of the day crossing over their bodies, assuring them of its relentless power and heat. Her hand had come to rest across her forehead as she turned her face towards the skies; there were no clouds, only blue for as far as the eye could see.

Turning back to the eastern horizon, her hand came back to the leather strap. With a gentle tug at the reins and a soft click of her tongue, Jasper eagerly went forward, already spurring faster. Leaning forward to Jasper's neck, she felt him gain speed and could begin to feel a coolness to the air as it whipped past her face.

They would run for a mile or so before Jasper would slow to a steady pace, happily taking them the seven miles into town, each enjoying those first few minutes of the ride, the most. The land was far-reaching, dry and dull, but it held its beauty. The days, while long and exhausting, were always the gateways to the night, with stars that blazed brightly and effervescently.

Marie herself had always enjoyed dusk and dawn most, with colours of red and gold, unlike anything she'd ever seen. There were a few times this near-desert made her feel the raw life within her, and those dazzling moments contributed the most.



Coming into town, Marie could see things were a little busier than usual. Noticing more than a few people standing within groups, their many eyes and voices rising and falling. Jasper trotted to one of the tie-posts near the general store and stopped, waiting for Marie to dismount, twitching his ears, listening to the multitude of voices around him. From what Marie could make out, most of the chatter seemed centred around Richard's funeral and by the sounds of it, his Will.

Grabbing her bags from Jasper's back, she headed towards the store's porch. Still, before she'd set a foot inside, her eyes caught sight of a tight group of women standing just beside the courthouse. She stopped at the sight of their expressions.

It was Susan Shaw, carrying a look of excitement and shock, two emotions which hardly ever crossed her face, that drew Marie in. Susan was one of the clerks at the courthouse in town, making Marie more interested than she should have been. Soon finding her feet leading her towards their gossip instead of into the store.

"...well, if he's anything like his uncle, maybe we won't see too much of him." Mrs. Beth Anders saw Marie approaching, and her face changed from caution to a smile, giving Marie the sense of impending news. "Marie, just the woman we wanted to see." Soon Marie saw the last face standing in the group belonged to Mrs. Abigail Brooks. The latter watched her and Susan push closer to Beth, opening their circle for her to enter the conversation.

"What's going on, ladies?" Marie tried not to sound anxious.

"Well, I had the privilege of overhearing the reading of Richard's Will."

Marie almost wanted to giggle at Susan's choice of words, knowing full well that she had this town rigged for all forms of information and juicy details.

"Richard has a younger nephew who will be inheriting his ranch."

Marie remained quiet a moment thinking about what Susan had recounted, feeling a wave of worry sweep through her. Being so far from anyone, or anything, but the late Mr. Roland's ranch could result in a problem.

"Since this stranger maybe your new neighbour, we thought you should know, Marie." Susan's face still seemed to be holding on to something else, but Marie knew she would have to work for it. "...given the fact you and Lewis are mostly on your own out there."

Beth spoke of a man in his mid-thirties, unwed, and living alone in the mountains.

"Mr. Brooks," Abigail smiled, "spoke to Mr. Douglas at the bank three days past, he told me a letter had arrived from our new Mr. Roland. The post-mark read Montana. He did not specify, but did mention it was from a small town along the mountain's edge."

The women stood in silence, each wondering about the new stranger entering their lives. All more compelling that his life was lived abroad in the mountains.

"I didn't catch the man's name, but if the stories hold up, I'm sure we will be able to find him easily once he has arrived." Mrs. Brooks adjusted her footing and placed her hands in front of her hips, still relishing the fact she could deliver such delicious gossip to the group in the first place.

Each of the women had their own idea of what the strange man's appearance may be. Beth's vision was of a middle-aged looking man, notably large (almost fat) and covered in hair, head to toe, a truly wild mountain man. Abigail's idea was of a tired man with old hands, worn skin, and a house full of furs and pelts. Susan was the cruellest in her thoughts, seeing an already grey-haired man, unfriendly, even mean-looking, dark and mysterious, toughened by the

wilderness. Marie's feelings weren't so unpleasant, seeing a tall, strong man, looking a few years older than herself, with a kind face and gentle, hard-working hands. Oddly enough, each of them shared one similarity between all their notions of the stranger, the image of a thick heavy beard on him. He was, after all, a wild man.

After a few more minutes of conversation, the women dispersed, each returning to their regular and required tasks. Susan went back to work at the courthouse for the day. Abigail retrieved her horse and left town, Beth walked south, just down the street, to the Inn she and her husband ran. Marie, moving the slowest, watched the others return to their day's intended plans before turning around to face the store. For now, she would try and focus on gathering and paying for her items and think about her newly-expected neighbour later.

Marie was able to complete her shopping, and, with her purchases in hand, she walked out of the storefront. Her left foot came off the porch and onto the ground, her thoughts shifting around the coming mountain man. It had captured her mind so wholly she'd hardly heard Mr. Newborn bid her a lovely afternoon from behind the counter. However, she was able to raise her voice and tell him likewise.

The sun was still hot and bright in the sky, and, walking along the southern edge of the building, she turned the corner to Jasper, his ears twitching at the sight of her. Coming to stand next to him, she used her free hand to hook the bag onto Jasper's belt, being sure everything was secure, both inside and out. Before she latched the bag shut, her mind had yet again ventured on towards Mr. Roland, the younger, and a picture of him appeared in her mind's eye.

He still had the beard, but this time a few things had changed about him, something in the face, maybe the eyes, but she felt it, deep in the pit of her stomach, wondering if it could have been excitement. It had been years since anything new happened in town—Let-alone, something that had intrigued and unnerved her this much.

Untying the reins, Marie lifted herself onto Jasper and adjusted atop his back, gently turning them around and pointing them back to the west. Taking their leave of town, they headed for home, following the hot sun.

They were about three miles from town when she could start to make out the late Mr. Roland's homestead and wasn't able to help herself. She let her mind wander to those things that had excited her, for this strange man was something different and would come from outside of this wasteland. The mountains came to her mind, and, with that, she began to marvel at his life. He was someone who had pushed outside the idea of reform and routine. The closer they walked, the more she wondered about him coming to live here after being so free, which in turn suggested that, if he did come, he wouldn't stay long.

She'd lived on these dry and empty prairies now most of her life and could only dream of getting away, of learning and seeing things she couldn't imagine. Of forests stretching on for miles, oceans moving forever over an endless horizon, mountains surrounding you while scratching at the sky. And snow, a cold glistening, white blanket as far as the eye could see. Having been burned by the sun for so long, to feel the icy grip of a snowy winter's night would be downright exhilarating.

At their closest, they were a mile north of Mr. Roland's ranch while riding past. From there, she could make out a few things within its gates. The now-vacant homestead had been like their own in many aspects, with a few sheds and well-worn house and stable. Now all empty of any inhabitants.

They had always known Richard Roland, Dick, as he went by. An honourable man, hardworking, but a near-hermit, hardly ever venturing outside of his house besides Sunday church, of course. He'd had a beautiful set up on his ranch, and, when it was running smoothly, he had all he needed. He had cattle, horses, chickens and sheep and, for the last few years, he had been gardening enough to support himself and his animals.

Now the place was deserted. Richards animals sold off, Lewis and herself taking on an extra half-dozen chickens. Now it lay battened down, in wait for its new owner and new life. And what a new life, her mind returned to the idea of living surrounded by mountains and wildlife and then choosing to come to an empty, near-barren place like this dead and dry land to do what?

Marie would never wish this life on anyone but secretly hoped this new-comer would find his place and hopefully come to enjoy it. Still, if he did not, it was likely he would pack up and go back to the wild by the end of the summer, knowing she would have probably been happier there herself. Not to mention that there weren't many available positions of employment nor opportunity in Ashill unless your life endeavoured was to be ranching on hard, rough lands.

Jasper's hooves etched into the dirt with every passing step. They lifted a light dust-cloud behind him, quickly dissipating with the passing wind. The sun was shifting to the front of them now, casting short shadows beneath them, the light and heat directly upon their faces. She had turned towards the west, trying to focus her mind, away from the farm a mile south, away from her vision of a mountain man, for it held no purpose. For all she knew, things would be different from how she pictured them, she was sure of it, things in life often were.



It was just past three o'clock when she and Jasper came into the gate, riding calmly, in no real rush. Her eyes fell over their house, standing firm and solitary along the blank line of the horizon, bringing a gust of loneliness sweeping over her.

Coming around the stable, Marie caught a glimpse of Lewis out in the field, south-west of the house and. For a moment, she felt that spring of hope jump in her heart. His hat kept his face in the shade as he worked some ground in the field just beyond the garden and house, his shirt unbuttoned but not off, lightly drifting in the wind.

He hadn't noticed her, she didn't believe he had heard Jasper's hoofbeats, given the direction of the wind, but maybe he would turn to look at her. Her eyes stayed on him a moment longer before turning towards the stables and their final stop. Jasper enjoying his last strides of freedom before being placed back in his pen and stuck there till morning. Marie was also enjoying her last moments of escape. She made herself breathe in deeply, although the dry, rough air clawed at her throat. Closing her eyes, she turned her face upwards, feeling the heat dance over her skin, aware of the power in every day's new sun growing brighter as the summer came closer.

She waited for the shadow of the stable to cross over her before lowering her head. Opening her eyes to see their two animals and their individual pens. She moved past Jackson and onto Hickory, his ageing white face and felt a smile move across her lips. He was a sweet old thing, reminding her, every time, why they still had him. Gently Jasper came to a stop, waiting for her to dismount before walking into his open pen.

Jumping down, still holding the reins in her hand, Marie quickly swept them over Jasper's ears and let them hang in front of him, undoing the strap across his head. With one

gentle pull, the leather straps slipped off his head and hung from her fingers, her right hand coming up to roughly rub him over his mane and crown.

He pushed into it, enjoying her fingernails running over his skin and thick, honey coat. He had always enjoyed her touch, feeling that sometimes Lewis was rougher with them, but she was still kind and gentle. Placing her hand on his cheek. Gently nudging him along and into his pen, to which he gladly obeyed, and, with a few giant steps, he was inside as she latched the door behind him.

The sun fell upon her skin as she stepped from the stables for the last time that day. As she began her walk towards the house, a new thought came over her. The news of their coming neighbour, being a young, unattached man may not have been news Lewis would enjoy hearing, even more so coming from his wife. Besides, she couldn't give him enough information to satisfy his curiosity. It would only lead him to investigate further, and Marie didn't want to be the recipient of the brunt of it. In time it would come up organically in town, most likely this Sunday, knowing the gossip which usually occurred there., Still, it would sound much less unpleasant if spoken in someone else's voice.

Marie's gaze shifted to Lewis, having moved from his hand tools over to his tractor. She felt herself let out a sigh, knowing she would hate herself later for lingering. She knew from where she was that he would have seen her out the corner of his eye, yet he did not turn.

Her green eyes remained on him until she'd walked out of view and onto the porch, where her feet froze. Her worn-blue dress blew in the breeze, floating above the ground, giving her the slightest of chills standing in the shade of the porch. Her hands came up and grasped onto her elbows, arms crossing-over her chest and pulling-in, trying to give her the comfort she was searching for, knowing it would not come.

He didn't turn to look at her; he never did. Her hands slowly let go and fell to her sides, giving the signal for her feet and legs to move. Taking three more steps, she came to the door and again stood still, thinking. What if there were a better place? A better life? Would she find it, or would the possibilities of life pass her by without a chance? Her hand wrapped around the door handle, she turned it and stepping into the house. Once inside, she turned and sat down at the bench by the door. She removed her boots and her jacket without hesitation before walking into the kitchen to start their supper.

Chapter 3

It had been nine days since her reasonably informative encounter with Beth and the girls and fourteen past their tenth wedding anniversary, both going without mention. But Lewis had caught word of their impending neighbour and chose only to mention it to Marie the night before. She pretended to know nothing. Adding, he would also have to be sure to introduce her on their behalf, meaning that Lewis would find out all he deemed necessary. She would receive only the information he wished to grant her, and nothing more.

No, nothing had changed. Ten years had come and gone, but they had done as all the others before. Uneventful and heartbreaking, as though it had been like any other day. He had spent it on the tractor out in the field while she had kept to the house, washing, and cleaning. He tidied the stables, and she spent some time in the garden, before coming inside to begin his supper for that evening. She had even put on that green dress in hopes of catching his eye. The minutes passed without a word, and the hole in Marie's stomach grew. By the end of their meal,

Lewis had excused himself to the fire, leaving her to clean up and change out of her crisp green, wasted opportunity.

That night he made use of his husbandly rights but again never stepped outside the usual routine. When he had finished, he kissed her and turned himself away and went to sleep, nary a word spoken before only his snoring. The tears she shed falling asleep were also something that had not changed and, turning over to her side. She thought of things that could be, thinking about her ignored dress, stored, again inside the bottom drawer of her vanity. Still feeling its crisp, green fabric against her skin, her dreams arrived in force, sending her far from her real-life and high among the mountains and untouchable skies.

~~

When Sunday came, those mountains still held fresh in her mind, somehow propelling her into the days to come. Giving her both the feeling of hope and possibility, but, like most days, the path they rode together seemed long and quiet.

They came into town in their wagon, neither touching, his hands on the reins and hers in her lap. Jasper and Jackson pulled them along, carrying them towards the bustling Church's courtyard. Marie and Lewis noticed the great commotion running through the people, with Lewis pulling at the reins and their horses slowing to a stop. Still, twenty feet from the church, the voices of the crowds were dense, and foot and horse traffic was heavy. Getting any closer to the carriage was pointless.

Wasting no time, Lewis laid down the brake as Marie rose and stepped down from the wagon, grabbing its handle for support. Walking into the courtyard, Marie moved to the south of the building and straight to her group of women, intent on hearing what had them so enthralled. Lewis followed suit and stepped off towards the western side of the building, bringing him to the church doors and nearer Mr. Stealer and a few of the other men standing together. As Marie came closer, the women opened their circle to her immediately, and without hesitation, Beth turned to her anxiously.

"Have you seen him?" Mrs. Anders, Mrs. Shaw, and Mrs. Books all watching her closely, but Marie's face was blank, and as she shook her head in confusion, the group's excitement was palpable.

"She hasn't heard." Susan's voice broke their stares towards Marie, their faces changing swiftly and suddenly, Marie, now a little worried about what may be said.

"Heard what?" Her voice felt unsure and quite out of place, anxious for the women to share their information. Watching as Mrs. Abigail Brooks leaned in closer, her expression hardly able to hold her excitement.

"Richard's nephew is here, but no one has seen him yet." Beth's eager voice stepped in with the details, taking any breath in the conversation as her own. "The whole town is buzzing with the news, thanks to Mrs. Brook's husband." As Beth's lips closed, Abigail turned towards Marie smiling, herself now eager to divulge the details.

"When Mr. Brook's came into town early this morning, he said he'd seen a wagon strewn with boxes, supplies and furs. He never saw who rode it, but he was almost certain it belonged to the new Mr. Roland." Abigail smiled gleefully. Applauding the fact her husband had been able to obtain such delicious information, and for the fact that Mrs. Anders had let her supply it.

“Did you notice anything at the house?” The two other women glanced towards Beth upon hearing her voice then back to Marie, waiting to listen to any details she may have had. Unfortunately for them, Marie had come without any knowledge of Ashill's newest resident.

“No, I didn't look as we passed.” It was true, Marie's mind had been elsewhere as Lewis steered them into town. Hoping if there was anything out of the ordinary, Lewis would have mentioned it after his intended visit, if at all. Being that this new Mr. Roland was now their closest neighbour, she wished to be informed of more, or at least not be one of the last.

Mrs. Shaw would have had the next word, but Mr. Clark halted them, calling them to go inside the large white double doors, as most had already joined the congregation within the church. The women quickly walking up the steps and into the large hall, scattering down different pews, joining their already seated families.

A dull hum hung in the air as voices raised and lowered, speaking into the ears next to them, waiting for the sturdy thud of Mr. Clark closing the doors. The echoing bang bounced forward and back within the halls, Mr. Clark taking an empty seat at the back row, as he had done now for three years. Now the room waited, continuing their chatter until Reverend Reynolds made his presence known.

With his eyes closed and head down, standing only inches from the grain, the heavy wooden door stood closed before him. His hands held the Good Book with his fingers and thumb wrapped around the spine and well-worn pages. Arthur could make out the hushed voices on the other side of the heavy door, leading into the hall, his pews, his podium and to where his people sat. It had been many years that they had come together before him every Sunday. His voice spreading the word of God onto the people of Ashill.

His right hand lifted from his left and went for the handle on the door, giving it a quick turn and pushing forward, opening the wooden barrier between him and his flock. Almost immediately, he heard the whispers within the room die down. Only a few could see him from where he stood just beyond the threshold of the wooden frame. As he stepped forward, coming into view of the whole room, he watched the few remaining heads and voices turn their attention and minds towards him. He was, after all, their Carrier their Salvation and Forgiveness.

Slowly walking up to the podium, his feet came together at its base. Turning his face upward, he looked over the room and its people, now completely silent. His left hand came up and gently placed his frayed book down in front of, opening to the pages he had marked for their pleasure. Again, he closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in deeply, readying himself and his words, feeling the room and breath they all shared. With one last gasp, he raised his hands above him, opened his eyes, looking out into the many eyes looking back into his.

“In this place... we find our solitude and refuge. Many believe your true self is revealed to us, when.” The Reverend's voice broke as the doors of his Church suddenly came open. His eyes lifting towards the sunlit frame and onto the darkened-figure standing within it. His shadow drew out over the floor, not quite able to reach the front of the stage where Reverend Arthur Reynolds stood before his people. All of them had now turned their attention from him and to the stranger standing just within their Church.

The place was silent, more so than the Reverend had ever achieved himself. He was secretly repulsed by the shadowed figure, leading him to assume who this person was. Taking a single step inside his boots echoed throughout the hall, each pace seeming to grow louder. Every eye in the room was on him. With the sunlight finally drawn back, people finally beheld their newest addition in town.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but when they did, he was suddenly aware that everyone was looking at him and that his boots couldn't have been louder. Even at thirty-one, he couldn't stop himself from feeling self-conscious and having to hold back from letting his hands fidget across his body. From where he stood, they were looking at a problem, and he knew he was a package-deal.

Coming into town, he was late, jumping off his horse out front of the church and seeing its vacant yard, hoping his delay was only by a few seconds. Looking around the room now, and up towards the displeased face of the Reverend, he knew otherwise.

Unable to stand the creaking sound of his boots against the wooden floorboards any longer, he stopped, coming just before the last row of pews. Quickly he let his eyes look round the room, in search of a place to sit, but found mostly expressions of irritation and a little curiosity. The small church was tightly filled. Turning back, he was fortunate to find a single row of empty pews along the back wall. Turning his body away from the staring crowd, he took a seat. He faced forward, waiting as the room slowly focused their attention back to their Reverend, waiting for him to speak to them.

The stranger never let his eyes settle, meeting their gaze for mere seconds, the few willing to look back to him anyway. A small child and her mother, an older gentleman with an already disinterested wife and a couple, maybe sitting only three rows in front of him. The husband took no time in offering a grimace before looking back towards the front of the room. Still, the wife lingered a moment longer, long enough for his passing eyes to catch her face, and to pause a moment on her eyes. The woman wasn't afraid to look back at him but was first to turn back to the Reverend.

He was welcomed by her glance, finding only curiosity and compassion within her eyes. His stare, however, proved too much for her, pushing her away. His eyes remained on her, only now taken in by the hair pinned beneath her hat, captivated by its stunning shade of red, a colour he had never seen in his life.

Marie turned her head back, passing her husband and back up to Reverend Reynold's at the front of the church. Fighting the urge to look back at the stranger again, certain his eyes were still upon her. He had finally shown, and to the superb satisfaction of the town, making his arrival spectacularly known.

It was strange finally seeing him, after spending a fair amount of time building a picture in her mind's eye of how he looked. Now she felt she might have been close, in the few moments she had to look him over, as the rest of the room had, he'd checked off most of the criteria. He was tall with broad shoulders, and from what she could make of his face, he didn't have a bad disposition. The rest of his features lay hidden beneath his worn jacket, hat, and beard, which reached down to his chest.

Still, she wanted more time to get a better look at him to satisfy her interest. Knowing she would hear more about him; eventually, she needed only to urge herself to be patient. Her eyes shot over to her husband and recalled him telling her of his intentions in meeting the young Mr. Roland. She didn't dare give much hope to gain anything in that affair.

Her time would come through word of mouth or in meeting him herself. Either way, his life would become an open-book in this place and, quite possibly, a cog within the workings of the town. Like everything else here, become a part of the more significant design or die outside of it.

Again, Arthur took in a deep breath, letting his eyes close for a moment of clarity, then out and over his flock. He caught many eyes but held only those unafraid of judgment or persecution. With that thought hanging in mind, his eyes fell onto their newest resident and let them rest on him. The young man's eyes, first turning over the pews, sprung up towards their Reverend. At that moment, the Holy Man's arms lifted, as did his voice.

"Solitude. A way of life here, but many of us believe it is a way to find one's self. A path well worn, but heavily laden with obstacles. And one certain truth, that faith will help guide you there." He spoke uninterrupted for the remainder of the morning, holding them longer than he usually would have. Given the disruption they had all suffered, he felt a little repentance wouldn't hurt anyone. When he neared the end, much of the room was pushing their tongues against the backs of their teeth.

The anxiety could be felt among the pews and was only relieved when Arthur reluctantly let his congregation go. Watching the stranger remain seated at the back of his room. The rest of the town was eager to pour out the doors and divide into their groups and engage in their most-anticipated gossip. The churchyard erupted with whispered chatter and the glances of many eyes looking back towards the hallowed entrance waiting for the young Mr. Roland to step outside.

The hushed voices and footsteps bounced off the walls as the last people filed out two-by-two, all walking slower than usual, but nobody would have said anything to speed-up the march. The stranger sat quietly on the narrow pew, his hat resting on his knee, and his face turned up towards the passing bodies. He would wait, if anything this would help move things along, giving them what they wanted, a chance to look at him unhindered. He had stopped counting when he reached forty sets of eyes looking back at him willfully. Still, he hoped it would suffice until he became a part of the community if he chose to stay that long.

What people saw gave strength to the things they had already been hearing about-town, his past, his family, his habits, knowing one look could influence a lot. His right hand held his beaten cowboy hat on his knee, and his shirt had seen a thread and needle more than once, but was clean and fit well, and his slacks were new. But what caught most everyone's eye was his beard, it was full and thick and down to his chest, darker blond than his head and a little more unkempt. He certainly made them aware he was from out of town, and they made sure to treat him that way.

Outside, whispers shifted through the crowd. Depending on the group you stood with, talk of Mr. Roland varied from his checkered past and his mysterious appearance to speculation into his new lifestyle here in Ashill. Most were wary about what to believe, but many had formed firm opinions of him already, given his earlier introduction. But there were a few, mainly the best souls about town, who would wait, watch and learn. To search for more of the truth hidden within everyday acts and motives, instead of rushing to the easiest or worst conclusions.

Still, you couldn't blame them, this place worked on a person, more so than other towns and cities. Leaving anyone struggling against erosion to become harder, having to witness their softness slowly wear away. While those few stood back to see the full picture, the rest stood on tiptoe, waiting for their mysterious mountain man to appear to them again.

The last dozen began to file out, among them the woman with the beautiful red hair. He could see her arm was around her husband, and the two of them didn't slow their pace much while passing him. The man didn't look, but she did.

Lewis tightened a little around Marie's arm and pushed them forward, having had enough when the stranger had walked in and disrupted The Reverend. But Marie tried to take in all she could, looking at his clothing, hair, pants, and boots, seeing quickly he was not unknown to this form of life. Lifting her eyes to his face, Marie noticed his bright blue eyes, wondering how she had missed them before, suddenly catching his stare. She did her best not to look away too quickly, not wishing to offend, finding his gaze both alluring and forbidding.

In a second, it was over. Passing over the man as her husband kept them moving, walking until they were outside within the courtyard. Lewis's grip around Marie never let up, she wouldn't be stopping today to speak about the young Mr. Roland with anyone.

Mr. Roland still sat within the large hall, picking up his hat and slowly rising from the pew, the small prick of embarrassment and alienation within his gut. The worn rim of his hat fell onto his head, having spent much time there. Turning towards the doors, he began to walk out. The doors shut, as the last person out of the church before him did not wait, and why would they? He stood as an outsider in their minds and could harm the delicate fabric of their little town and simple ways of life.

He wanted to groan, knowing it wasn't necessarily personal, but it didn't stop the feeling of estrangement from festering. As he stepped up to the white painted doors, he paused, turning back to the podium and the Reverend, still standing behind it. He couldn't deny his guilt for disrupting the Holy Man's sermon and knew that doing so had brought about the negativity that had followed. His right hand grasped the door handle and turned, sending a beam of light streaking across the floor just before his feet, sending relief as well as a full breath of will-power flooding into him.

Stepping out of the church, he took in the cloudless blue sky, as the weight on his chest lifted, as did the freedom from Reverend's judging eyes. But as his eyes roamed over the Church Yard and its many faces, that changed. People had scattered, all eager to spread the news about his arrival, now that he walked among their township. He didn't wait to move himself along and out of the way, not wanting to hesitate in fear of overhearing them. His eyes swept over the few gathered together in the yard and those heading down the streets. Hoped to catch sight of the woman with the red hair again.

Arthur watched the room empty of its last person as the door shut behind him. The only soul who remained in the Church was himself — still standing in front of his podium, gripping each side of the board, where his open book rested. He had waited to see if the new Mr. Roland would turn back to look at him, hoping to catch a glimpse of what kind of man he was. If he had remained, he would have seen. Arthur shut his eyes and lifted his head back to the heavens in prayer for the young man. After all, a man who disrupts a Clergyman's sermon was a man to keep your eye on. At least in Reverend Reynold's book.

It was some time before he moved from the podium, slowly taking the same path he'd walked coming into the hallowed halls, heading to the back of the room. The door pulled open smoothly, taking him to a narrow corridor and the few rooms the church kept private. The largest room, at the end of the hall, held his few belongings: a bed, chair, and cross, and little room for anything other than himself and God.

His eyes fell to the stone floor before his feet, marching him quickly down the hall to his chambers, heading east. In three swift motions, he had unlatched the door, stepped in and closed it again, isolating himself within its solitude. It was where he found himself most at ease,

somewhere the calm allowed his temperament to drift away as he recited the Lord's Prayer. Moving to sit on his plain gray woollen blanket, his hand clenched to the Good Book, still thinking about the mountain man.

Chapter 4

Anticipating Friday's trip into town, Marie eagerly rode away from the ranch. The few hours of freedom and the sound of Jasper's hooves beating against the ground as he carried her away. Lewis had been more than usually slow that morning, increasing her eagerness for escape. By the time he finished his lunch, it was close to two o'clock. Marie was quick to gather his plate and cutlery setting and bring it back to the kitchen sink, cleaning it immediately. As her hands submerged his plate within their water basin, she listened to Lewis sat down to put on his boots, grunting while doing so. Then standing up, he would reach for his hat, which hung on the back of the door and place it atop his head.

Marie rolled her hand over the plate she held, unsure if she wanted to turn back and look at him, doing so too late. Lewis had turned to look at her before walking out, following the line of her legs up along her neck and hair. But he looked away, forcing himself to reach for the door handle and head back out to the field. Not planning to return till dark.

Marie made herself standstill until she heard the door shut behind him, glancing back she pulled the dish she still held from the water and listened. His heavy boots thumped along their narrow porch until he had come to the south edge of the house, and with the last thump of his boot, Lewis stepped to solid ground.

The place had fallen silent except for the wind blowing outside, making its way into the few creaks within the wood surrounding her, whistling quietly. It was strange how a man of so little words could make such noise. It was his overbearing way, and after ten years, she knew it was who he was, the strong and true, silent type.

Lewis was a large man, hovering a full 10 inches above her height. He wasn't overweight, nor was he unattractive; on the contrary, she would admit Lewis was a handsome man. With dark eyes and dark, thick hair, hard-working and decent, even without the ability to show to her. He had never been ungentlemanly to her either, but a lack of kindness can feel much the same as cold, anger or hate.

There was more to him, of course, there was, he only needed to break down the walls and show her. But after so many years, she still knew very little about him and his inner-workings, pulling a regret-filled sigh from her lips. Marie knew of his likes and dislikes and some of his attributes and aspirations. She knew they had no common ground upon which to build a large or inviting foundation.

So here she stood, carrying the guilt of not loving her husband the way she should have, and for the hate surrounding the decent life she lived. For the man he was, who worked hard to keep food on their table, even if the other aspects of their marriage fell flat, it shouldn't have mattered, because it should have been enough.

Lewis had glanced up once from the soil for a moment, catching the last glimpse of Jasper as he ran with Marie astride his back. Out of the gate and soon out of sight. Most days,

his eyes would have remained down on the ground before him, but today something was different, and he found himself watching until the dust from Jasper's hooves had dissipated.

Turning his eyes back down to the unturned path of earth before him, he wasn't able to stop himself from sighing bitterly. He thought of the green dress she had put on for him, now over two weeks ago, and his regret in not saying anything to her. She had changed out of it so quickly, almost thought it had been a dream.

The hoe in his hand came crashing down into the dry crust, breaking apart and giving-way, sending an image of his marriage to blow through. If the surface ever broke, all the pieces would fall into the cracks and vanish. He did love Marie and always had, all the way back to their wedding day and even prior.

He had made a deal with her father, Owen, three years before her seventeenth birthday. Lewis had prospects, land, wealth and plenty to offer, also believing to be a rather good-looking man. But Lewis knew Marie didn't love him back, she cared for him, but not in the same way he did, and after ten years he never believed she would. His feelings had never diminished; they had changed over time but never faded.

As another sigh escaped his lips, he couldn't deny that he was not particularly good with conversation, being a reserved, private man and without a tongue for gossip. They knew each other well enough, but it didn't change that his love had no purpose, it just was. Maybe if he'd been a braver man, remembering when he had turned twenty-five, the fear that he would never find someone, nor sire a son had pushed him to ask a father for his young daughter's hand.

He could still remember Owen doing what he could to spare her time. Even asking for Lewis to wait until Marie had turned seventeen, and he had done so thoughtfully. He was twenty-eight when they married, and as of late, the memory was fading from a fond one.

Even after ten years, it still felt so close. His guilt and desperation were tangled up in desire, even now making his knees shake. Unable to look at the woman who would be his wife, for want of forgiveness, having placed her beside him in the first place. He knew it was never what she had wanted, though everything proceeded in an entirely civil manner; he was neither blind nor stupid.

It was hard not to notice how things between Marie and her parents were different, even if they all portrayed a mask of happiness around him. Still, it had been as he wished and to deny her feelings of resentment and possibly anger towards him would have been unfeasible.

It was hard, and they were never without stumbles along the long and dusty road. Adding the knowledge that anything he did or didn't do, altered her choices in her marriage over the years. To know what could bring them back to a fresh start and maybe a new beginning, if there had ever been one.

Letting a deep breath out of his lungs, he knew the truth. Most of the blame fell to him for not making it easier for them, for being so silent and withholding. At every moment, he found his guilt and shame holding him back, even when given every chance. It made him feel terrible, but like in his youth, he was unable to express his emotions. Even when they lay just beyond the surface.

Looking down at the broken soil lying about his boots, seeing the crippled earth, he thought it resembled married life. With every passing day, things would continue as they always had, even if he did want to change it, he didn't believe he knew how or if there was anything to be done.

When Jasper had reached a mile out, Marie pulled herself forward and tightened her grip on the reins. Feeling her shift atop him, Jasper understood in a second, and his pace quickened. In three strides, he was running across the horizon, his legs beating fiercely against the dusty soil.

The hot wind blew over Marie's face and skin, then over her tightly braided and pinned red hair, taking in a deep breath, as it swept past. Jasper wore no saddle. It had been that way for over five years now, and as long as Marie's hands held the reins, Jasper would not falter.

They flew over the earth's hot surface, Jasper striding as though his feet never touched the ground, and soon they were into town. To their south, they would come as close as they would to the new Mr. Roland's ranch, a little less than three miles from their own home. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw the bright shine of his windmill as it turned gently, her eyes scanning over the property for any sign of life. From the distance they stood, the place still looked calm and deserted. Yet, after Sunday's production, Marie knew better than to jump to any conclusions.

It had been five days since Church and nobody, including herself, had been able to forget the memorable day it had become. Her green eyes remained on the distant buildings, watching for any news indications of its new owner, but saw nothing other than the constant turning of the windmill. It made her wonder where its new inhabitant may have been and where he would belong.

Turning away, she tried to pull her thoughts from the strange mountain man, but still had questions to which she wished answered. Marie looked ahead to town, its small number of inhabitants giving her the hope that more than a few of her queries may be answered, most likely without the need to ask. As Jasper neared the town limits, he began to pace himself, slowing to a trot and bringing Marie back from her consuming speculation.

Ashill was an island, forgotten in an endless plain. They were well off with a town hall, courthouse, bank, saloon and, of course, the Church. With enough to keep most in work, giving everyone a part to play. They entered the town by the westward road, coming in along the church's south side, a piercing-white beacon leading into town, its cemetery around to the north.

The general store was another three-hundred feet, looking south out its front door, the saloon lay across the street. Its doors open to the east. The westbound road came to the only intersection, a dirt path leading north and south. Here was the main street, extending outwards in either direction. The dirt path became a standard route between nothing and nowhere, all roads reaching out into oblivion.

Jasper took them past the Church and along the general store, stopping by one of the many resting-posts along the western wall. Jasper waited, eager to socialize with the two horses also tied-off to his left. Marie ran her hand over Jasper's head, sweeping his brown mane and down along his caramel neck.

He was a beautiful horse, and she feared she would never meet another like him. Swinging her leg, she dismounted, landing on the ground just beside Jasper, still holding his reins for stability. Marie took three steps forward and wrapped the leather rope around the post, making a simple knot. Even though Jasper didn't need it, never moving far without her accompanying.

Moving back along Jasper's side, she unlatched one of his saddlebags, knowing her list was short, she wouldn't need both. Checking Jasper's belt, Marie cradled the single bag in her arms and headed for the market door. Coming around the corner of the building, Susan saw

Marie almost immediately and walked across the street to meet her. Marie gripped the saddlebag tightly and slowly walked past the porch steps to meet Susan just beyond the edge of the road. Susan was quick to speak first, rushing next to Marie and leaning in towards her before opening her mouth, wanting to be sure only her ears heard.

“Oh my God, this town will be buzzing for the next six months with that entrance.” Susan’s smile was broad and sinister, and Marie couldn’t help smiling back.

“I don’t believe Reverend Reynolds could have planned it better.” Marie’s voice was light, finding the whole production rather amusing and strange. The two women shared a laugh gleefully, both at the delightful show and the resentful Reverend. Susan stood on tiptoe, having been anxious to get at Marie as this past Sunday hadn’t offered their usual gossip, and it was easy to see Susan’s eagerness.

“So, any news from the home-front?” Susan’s voice broke out fiercely, she wasn’t willing to play coy today. Besides, everyone knew. With Marie and Lewis being the closest living beings to the new Mr. Roland, they would be the ones to hear or see anything first. But Marie had seen nothing and heard less, having caught only a glance of Mr. Roland’s ranch earlier that day by chance.

“Nothing to report.” They shared a second chuckle, finding that every person in town was acting the same, wanting and eager for information, doing all they could to seek it out.

Everyone had their ideas for going about it. Some sat back and listened, while others found things came much more detailed when being sought out. Marie didn’t know if she was lucky, for her group was not subtle and didn’t consider small-talk a proper use of their time. However, she couldn’t argue that a little less conversation between them may have been nice.

Susan didn’t hide her disappointment, a sigh pulling from her at Marie’s bleak response, hoping she would have been able to offer new details of their wild man.

“Well, he’ll have to come into town sooner or later, can’t live on whatever rations were in Dick’s pantry for long.” Both smiled briefly but remained silent a moment. Each thinking about the dearly departed man and how his nephew was now the town’s replacement. “I should get back.” Susan motioned back towards the courthouse across the street to the east; her body language said the rest.

“Of course.” Marie’s feet adjusted, and her body turned away slowly, still looking at one another, curious if either knew more than willing to tell.

“Good day, Mrs. Bensworth” Susan moved her hand up to wave goodbye, a smile returning to her face.

“Good day to you, Mrs. Shaw.” Marie, still holding the bag, waved back. Susan already across the street to the courthouse and Marie on to the steps of the market.

It was a shortlist, and she had placed only six items on the counter, watching as Steven Newborn rang them up.

“Alright, Mrs. Bensworth, your total is a dollar and forty-three cents.” Steve’s hand rested on the register as he waited for Mrs. Bensworth, trying to be polite and only briefly looking to catch the eye of his next approaching customer.

Handing him what she owed, Marie, in turn, waited for Steve to return her change, its cold weight falling into her hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Newborn.” Marie’s hand had slipped into her pocket with her change when a large bag of flour hit the countertop next to her, making her jump. Her head spun to the right. Landing on the bag first, then over and up to its soon-to-be owner. The urge to move a

step back rushed through her legs, wanting to find a little more distance between them, but she held her feet to the floor, unwilling to look rude.

Standing less than two feet from her, was the new member in town and their closest neighbour, the mountain man Mr. Roland himself. His face was still covered with the thick beard everyone remembered from the previous Sunday. But Maire could see his features and that his skin wasn't as aged as she'd believed. All but his eyes had changed upon closer viewing; they'd remained the same brilliant and perceptive blue.

Pulling from his eyes, the sudden need to move away drowned and a quiet fear sparked deep inside her, unfamiliar and powerful. Reaching for her bag from the counter, Marie couldn't stop her hand from trembling as she nestled the bag in her arms tightly. A sensation of weakness ran through her body. Realizing she had lingered on him, she removed her gaze from his forcefully. Facing Steven behind the counter, he saw he was also starting at her.

How long had she stood there, looking at him? It only seemed like a moment to her, but both Steve and Mr. Roland may have considered otherwise. Her voice jumped forward, wanting to break the tension and leave.

"Gentleman." Politely bowing her head to them. Marie turned to walk out, still feeling his eyes on her every move.

"Have a good day, Mrs. Bensworth." Turning the counter, Marie saw Steven raise his hand to her as he spoke, but looked back at the stranger.

It wasn't a surprise that he sought out her eyes at once, sure he suspected her willingness to hold his stare. But Marie turned away, walking out the door of the market, still fighting the urge to look back at him. It was the same as when he had been in church, having no doubt now of his captivating quality.

Losing her pacing for only a moment before falling back into rhythm, Marie stepped off the market steps and onto the dirt road. Finding herself becoming a little more grounded and sadly aware of her looming ride home. Walking west, Marie headed towards Jasper. His ears twitch at her approach, looking upon him to see his tail switch flies away who annoyed him and. Coming to his side, she was quick to buckle the tote to his belt and lift herself to his back. His muscles flexing in excitement for their ride, even if their destination wasn't optimal.

Luckily for Jasper, who didn't have the same insight as Marie, he always longed for any excuse to run a little longer and farther. Coming from the tie-posts and onto the road, Marie's eyes turned back into the open doors of the store and within the shaded business inside. Her eyes faced the direction of home and gently pulled Jasper's reins, aware of his feet following quickly.

As they left town, she did not look back, even though that pull persisted her to do so. It was bizarre and foreign. Like a spell cast by those bewitching blue eyes, managing to break her down and make her weak, leaving a mark, making her body shudder with insecurity. It had to have been those hypnotic eyes holding to her so long, locked within his stare. Without letting the thought rise to the top, she pushed down the part of her too scared to think that deep within her wanted to dive in, skeptical if she would resurface. Found, lost within the oceans they held.

Her next breath brought worry. Instantly remembering Mr. Newborn behind the register with his blank face resting on her. God forbid anyone else should have been present to witness her hesitation. How long had she stared at him, or him at her?

Closing her eyes, she tried to feel the wind against her face as she had done on the way into town a thousand times before, breaking free of her fears. Still, even at Jasper's steady pace, the wind had died around them. Leaving her to swim in cloudy things, of her home, her life, and loneliness, pondering what to prepare for Lewis's supper.



It was nearing dark when he opened the door to his newly acquired lodgings, walking inside its mostly empty room and through the cold, musty air. He had stayed longer at the saloon than he ought, thinking about this new town, these new people and for the most part, their small minds. Remembering the many faces and stares he'd received as he made his way about his business in town, today and every day since his arrival on Sunday.

Oddly, he remembered one interaction more than the others. After their encounter at the store earlier that day, it seemed the woman with red hair had made more of an impression than he first assumed. She hadn't looked at him any differently than she had at church, still holding the same emotions. Only now, he struggled to figure if his guess had been right before. He had come to recognize distaste, mistrust and simple rejection. But this was something else, something more hopeful or even exciting; the closest word he'd found was intrepid.

He turned around the room, looking back again and again to the empty hearth and its beautiful blackened stone, thinking. Something was starting inside him, something unfamiliar or maybe long-forgotten. He wanted another chance, another opportunity to see, to breathe and to live. It was a peculiar hold which had suddenly dug into him so deeply; sure, it would not retreat its persistent sting without satisfaction.

The fact remained, it had been many years since he'd been around people long enough to relate to. Or for them to gather a taste for him, leaving his frame of reference empty and vague. He didn't believe he was a bad guy, granted, his past held some dark times, but he knew more than one person to have travelled down darker paths than his own, many without coming out clean on the other side. He wasn't so sure how clean he'd made it out of everything himself, finding lingering feelings of resentment and hate.

He'd moved into the kitchen, looking across the room towards his bed, already anxious for the relief sleep may offer. It was still early evening, but if his brain kept at this rate, he would need to come up with a better option than pacing all night.

He roamed about the house another forty minutes, uncertain of what to do with himself. In this place, with these things and surroundings. He'd lit a fire but could not yet hold still. It had been a long time since he had a home such as this, including the chores and responsibilities involved in running a household and ranch. He had unpacked a few belongings and placed them about the room, pleased the walls were bare in wait for the many furs he brought along.

He hadn't brought much else with him, although looking onto his wagon would have recalled otherwise. More boxes contained furs and pelts than of supplies and clothes put together. His eyes shot to the clock above the mantle. Seeing it read a quarter to nine on its face, he didn't waste a second. He slowly walked towards his bed, longing for the peace of mind and body the night's calm would bring.

Stepping across the room, he stripped himself down to his shorts, leaving everything in a sporadic row on the floor behind him. Coming to the left side of his mattress, he sat down, pushed himself to the center and laid down, the blankets left at his feet, wanting the cooler air of the night to dance over his skin. Rolling to his side and feeling the weight in his eyes, he saw the flashes of red fire dancing in that woman's hair. Realizing how easily she had drawn his attention and mind, leaving the image of her burning locks to linger.

Her fair skin, green eyes, and beautifully bound hair, a colour so brilliant he'd only read of its description in fairy tales. His blue eyes fell shut, and her appearance lay in wait on the

other side, who was she, where'd she come from, undoubting of her Irish ancestry. He thought back to Church and remembered the man she had sat next to and left with, curious about their relationship, being sure the large man she walked with was her husband.

Gently opening his eyes, his head turned, and he stared up to the ceiling, watching the firelight dance off the wooden beams, wondering if this was the right place for him. This town, these people, hugely worrying that they would place him on the outside as a stranger and keep him there. He had to admit it was generally more comfortable than going out of one's way to try and learn.

Sighing deeply, his eyes slipped shut again, and, this time, sleep took him. The images in his mind slowed but never stopped, coasting from dream to dream, of the people of Ashill, reliving the sting of their hungry eyes upon him. The picture melted into the house around him and the bed he lay in. Seeing a younger version of himself sleeping within it, the darkness was sweeping in, tangled in the red curls that blossomed within his visions.