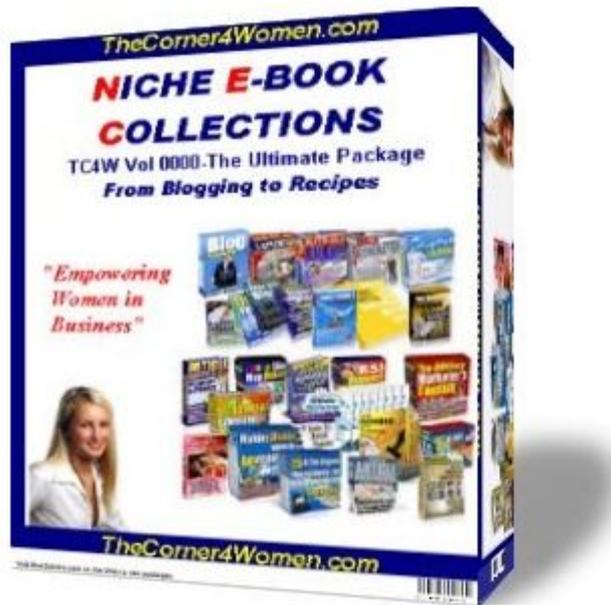




A Brave
New Bride
For the Farmer

Harmony Cardell



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Chapter 1

Lilah Pringle couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. The swaying of the train and the click-clack of the wheels, combined with her long journey from back east in Philadelphia, conspired to lull her to sleep despite her best effort at fighting it.

In her dream, Gilbert Nordstrum held her hand on the porch of his ranch home. His hands were rough from the hard work he did on the farm, the callouses as big as pennies, yet his touch was gentle and his smile melted her heart and caused butterflies to take flight in her stomach. They faced the west as the sun was setting and Lilah had a feeling of peace she hadn't known since before her she lost everything, including her mother and father, in a horrible fire that consumed their Philadelphia home.

Lilah shifted in her seat as the train jostled her, a smile on her pretty face as she settled back into her slumber. Now she was standing at the back of a tiny church and the sun was streaming in from the windows near the front, bathing the pastor and her future husband in a radiant white light. As she walked toward the altar where they waited, a feeling of calm washed over her as she realized that she'd finally made the right decision.

Her husband took her hand and smiled at her, and she laid her head on his shoulder and sighed.

"Excuse me, miss." Lilah felt a hand on her arm and she slowly opened her eyes. The seats around her were empty and she could see people milling about on the platform outside the dirty train window.

"Excuse me," said the conductor once more. "I believe this is your stop, miss."

“You mean to tell me this is Wyoming?” She sat up straight and tried to smooth the wrinkles on her dress.

“Yes, ma’am, it sure is. Bolton, Wyoming awaits. I’ll have someone see to your luggage.” He tipped his cap and moved down the aisle.

Lilah stood and stretched, then removed a small mirror from her purse and began plucking at stray hairs and straightening her hat until she was satisfied with her appearance. She made her way to the exit and stepped down onto the train platform, shielding her eyes with one hand as the afternoon heat took her breath away.

A porter struggled with a trunk that contained the possessions she managed to salvage from the fire, his shirt stained with sweat, and his round face as red as a ripe tomato. He tipped his hat and dropped the trunk at her feet. Lilah pressed a few coins into his palm and then used all her strength to drag the trunk into the shade near the train station.

She sat on the trunk and opened her purse, then re-read Gilbert’s latest letter for the one-hundredth time. According to his careful and precise handwriting, someone would be at the train station to welcome her to Wyoming. She swung her head from side to side, examining the people scurrying back and forth on the platform, looking for someone that fit the description of Gilbert.

His letters had been short on details of his appearance other than height and weight, leaving Lilah to fill in the gaps using her imagination and hopeful heart. She had a hard time with the leap of faith required to pack up all her earthly belongings and make her way westward, and now, with no one matching the picture of Gilbert Nordstrum her mind had conjured up, her heart felt heavy and her stomach churned.

She carefully folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope, then sighed and got a firm grip on one trunk handle and dragged it down the stairs and into the dusty street. In front of the Harpswell mercantile, she straightened her back and used a sleeve to wipe the sweat from her brow, wondering what her next move should be.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see a woman with a wrinkled face and long gray hair staring at her. She held a toddler in one arm and there was a boy of about six or seven standing at her side.

“Lilah Pringle?” said the woman. She shifted the young girl from one arm to the other.

“Yes, that’s me,” said Lilah. “And who might you be?”

“My name is Hilda, and I’m Gilbert’s sister.” Her smile made a brief appearance and then disappeared. “Gilbert, he, um... he couldn’t be here to meet you.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Lilah. “Is he well?”

“Oh, he’s fine, just busy at the moment. I have a wagon for your trunk. This is Anna, and the young man’s name is William.”

Lilah smiled and pinched William’s cheek. He blushed and smiled up at her and she plucked at Anna’s golden curls. Anna giggled and hid her eyes with both hands.

“Your children are precious,” she said.

“Oh, these little beasts?” replied Hilda. “They’re not mine, they belong to Gilbert.”

She walked toward the wagon, leaving Lilah standing in the middle of the dusty street with her mouth hanging open.

Chapter 2

The ride to Gilbert's farm took thirty minutes over a bumpy, dusty trail that rattled Lilah's teeth and threatened to pitch her from the wagon at any moment. She was weary and frazzled from her long trip and her mind was awash with thoughts that frightened her.

The fact that Gilbert was too busy to meet her, and then the revelation that he had two children and never made mention of the fact in all his letters made her sick to her stomach and question her wisdom in pulling up roots in the east and moving to the western frontier.

Hilda concentrated on driving, Anna held firmly to her with an arm clamped around her middle. No one said a word and the silence grew uncomfortably long.

A cabin came into sight and Hilda yanked on the reins. The wagon slowed to a stop in front of a small home with peeling paint and brush creeping up the sides. Hilda plopped the young girl on Lilah's lap and climbed down from the seat, then pushed open the cabin door and disappeared inside.

Anna stared at Lilah, her lower lip quivering as Lilah held her tightly and worked her way off the seat. William followed them down and they all stood in the front yard as Hilda came out of the cabin carrying a huge suitcase and a small valise.

She went around the back of the wagon and grabbed Lilah's trunk, and with a mighty heave, it landed in the dirt at her feet. She placed her luggage in the wagon and then came around the front, one hand fishing in the pocket of her dress.

“Here,” she said. She handed an envelope to Lilah and then climbed into the seat again. “Give that to my brother. Make sure no one opens it except him, and tell him it’s for his own good.”

“You mean... are you telling me Gilbert is not here?” said Lilah. She shifted Anna in her grasp and looked down at William, then back at Hilda.

“He’ll be back soon. Tell him... Well, just tell him I love him, but I have to get back to Laramie.” Hilda shook the reins and Lilah reached for William and pulled him out of the way as the wagon made a wide turn and then headed up onto the trail, heading north in a cloud of dust.

Anna’s lower lip wobbled again, and then she began to cry. William watched the wagon disappear and then he bounded up the steps to the cabin and disappeared.

“There, there,” said Lilah. “Let’s see if we can get something to eat, shall we?” When she put a foot on the bottom step, she heaved a sigh and wondered what she’d gotten herself into.

Lilah managed to calm the children, distracting them with biscuits and jam she found in the cupboard and then sitting on the floor and playing a game with them, but all the while, a series of disturbing thoughts gnawed at her mind.

Where was Gilbert? Was something wrong with him?

Does Gilbert even exist?

Just before dark, Lilah heard hoofbeats out on the trail. When they slowed and came to a stop, she got up from the floor and opened the door a crack,

with Anna and William at her side. She watched as a man slid gingerly from his horse. He cried out in pain and then limped toward the barn and disappeared inside. William wormed his way past her and onto the porch.

“Pa!” he said. He ran across the yard and Anna followed behind him. Lilah waited on the porch until the man came back into view leading Anna and William by the hand. His limp had gotten worse and when he reached the porch he shook his head and looked at the barn, then back at Lilah.

“Hello,” he said with a grimace. “Who are you, and where is my sister?”

“I... It’s Lilah. You must be Gilbert Nordstrum.”

“Yes, ma’am. That’s me. But it still doesn’t explain who you are and what you’re doing here.” He looked down at William and then yelled, “Hilda!”

“My name is Lilah Pringle, and I’m so glad to finally meet you.” She took a step onto the porch and extended her hand. Gilbert eyed her offer and raised one eyebrow, then took her hand in his. His grasp was warm and inviting, his skin rough but his touch gentle, and Lilah felt a fluttering in her stomach as they shook.

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am. Where is my sister?” Gilbert held her hand for a long time before he let it go.

“I’m afraid she’s not here, Mr. Nordstrum. She left immediately after she picked me up at the train station. She did leave an envelope for you.” Lilah fished through her pockets until she found it and handed it over. “Are you okay, Mr. Nordstrum?”

“I twisted my knee trying to free a calf from a tangle of brush. It got worse as the day went on.”

Gilbert looked at the envelope for a moment, then sighed and worked his finger under the flap and extracted a single piece of paper. He held it up to catch the waning light, his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. When he was done, he folded the paper and stuffed it into his back pocket.

“I’m afraid there’s been a terrible mistake,” he said. He led his two children inside, leaving Lilah on the porch.

Chapter 3

Gilbert lit a lantern and fell into a chair at the kitchen table, his children fidgeting around him. Lilah sat down opposite him and watched as he touched their faces and stroked their hair.

“I’m hungry, Pa,” said William.

“Hungry,” said Anna, tugging at her father’s sleeve.

Gilbert tried to push himself to his feet but fell back into the chair, letting out a yelp when he put weight on his bad leg. Lilah came around the table and got the children seated, then found a frying pan and some leftover beans. She lit a fire in the stove and turned back to Gilbert.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said Lilah. “You can’t put weight on that leg. Is there anything besides the beans?”

“A chunk of ham we had for breakfast. I think we can all get by on that until I can get to town tomorrow.”

Liah heated the food, then fed them a supper of ham and beans, making sure there was enough for everyone. When the children were settled into bed, she sat down at the table again and clasped her hands together.

“Your children are precious,” she said.

“I appreciate what you’ve done. I can make arrangements for your journey back east,” he said. “I can’t imagine you’d want to be staying here under these circumstances.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Lilah. “And at the moment, you’re the only one who fully knows the circumstances.”

Gilbert tapped his hands on the tabletop and pursed his lips, then clawed the envelope from his back pocket and slid it across the table.

“This should explain things.” He stood up and tested his leg, then dragged himself to the stove and poured a cup of coffee. When he tried to make it back to the table, he sloshed it all over the floor and dropped the cup at his feet.

“Please sit,” said Lilah. “I can do that.” She cleaned the mess he’d made and then got him another cup. When she sat down again, she pulled the paper from the envelope and spread it on the table before her, pulling the lantern a bit closer as she read. Her brow furrowed and she bit her lower lip, then looked up at Gilbert, her mouth agape.

“Your sister wrote the letters?” she said. “Are you meaning to tell me that you did not know of my arrival?”

Gilbert shook his head. “I’m afraid not. I had no idea.”

“I’m not sure what to say about that.” Lilah sighed and stared at the top of the table for a moment, then looked up at Gilbert.

Gilbert grimaced as he shifted in his chair. “I’m not sure what my sister wrote in the letters she sent to you.”

“She described you perfectly, but no mention was made of the children. In one letter she said your wife had passed away.”

Gilbert was silent for a long time, his chin on his chest and his hands opening and closing on the tabletop.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m afraid that’s true. My wife died of Scarlet fever two years ago. God bless Hilda, she’s been a great help but has a family of her own to

worry about. I guess I can understand why she wrote the letters, but I'm embarrassed that she dragged you way out west for no reason. As I said, I can make arrangements for your trip back east."

"I believe everything happens for a reason, Gilbert. I'm not sure about this one yet, but I'm betting it will soon become clear."

Gilbert tried to stand again but his leg wouldn't hold his weight. Lilah came around the table and got herself under one of his shoulders so he could limp to the couch near their hearth. Lilah brought the lamp closer and lit a fire against the evening chill.

"You're kind, ma'am. I appreciate your help. I'll sleep here on the couch and you can take my room for the evening. Tomorrow we can see about getting a train ticket for you."

Lilah sat down in a chair next to him. "Your leg is likely to be worse in the morning and I can't rightly leave you like this. If it's acceptable to you, I'll stay until you get back on both feet."

Gilbert smiled and shook his head. "Are you an angel, Lilah Pringle?"

"Far from it, I'm afraid. But my parents taught me I should help people in need and not turn my back on them."

"I accept your offer," said Gilbert. "I'm grateful to you, and I think the children will be glad as well. They seem to have grown fond of you already."

Chapter 4

Gilbert's bed was the most comfortable she'd ever been in, but still, Lilah could not fall asleep no matter how many sheep she counted. Her mind raced in several directions at once and wouldn't allow her to rest.

She was angry that she'd been duped but giving thought to the situation, anger at Gilbert would be misdirected when he did not know about Hilda's efforts on his behalf. Now Hilda was long gone, leaving Gilbert to manage a farm and his children, and with a bad leg on top of it all.

Lilah turned to one side and sighed.

She'd pulled up her shallow roots in the east after the fire took everything important to her, and if she couldn't stay here, there was no place for her to go.

She tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable as the light from a full moon lit the bedroom with an eerie glow. Somewhere in the distance, a pack of coyotes howled and yipped and she felt goosebump sprout on her arms.

Finally, exhaustion overtook her and she fell into a deep sleep where once again, the dreams stole her rest.

In her dream, Lilah was rushing along a street that was filled with men and women who were dressed in suits and gowns. Most of them had no faces, and when she tried to push her way through the throngs of people they pushed back at her as if keeping her from an important appointment.

Lilah became frantic when she could see flames in the distance. She lowered a shoulder and forced her way through the crowd until she was

standing at the fence in front of her home. Flames leaped from the upstairs windows and she could feel the heat against her face as it sucked the breath from her lungs.

She pushed through the gate and tried to get onto the porch but the flames and heat drove her back. Two men grabbed her arms and pulled her back beyond the fence. She heard a loud crack and looked up. Her mother's profile was visible in the upstairs window and Lilah felt her heart break in two.

She awoke with a start and sat up, sucking in lungfuls of air, her face peppered with beads of sweat and her heart pounding in her chest. Milky light filtered in through the curtains as they swayed in a slight breeze. Lilah listened intently, but she was the only one awake in the house.

She found her robe and went into the kitchen. Gilbert was still asleep on the couch, his snores rhythmic and deep. She sat and shivered for a moment and then heard footsteps behind her.

William rubbed at his eyes and yawned, and Anna stood beside him holding his sleeve. Lilah smiled and put her arms out and Anna walked to her and put her head down on her leg.

"Good morning," whispered Lilah. "Who's hungry?"

"I am," croaked William. He slid onto a chair and propped his elbows on the table, his blonde hair hanging in his face. Anna padded over to where her father was sleeping and pointed at him, then came back to Lilah and climbed onto her lap.

"You sit here," said Lilah. "I'll see what we have. Do you like eggs?"

Both children nodded and Lilah lit a fire in the stove and found six eggs in a basket on the counter. She added a dab of grease to a huge black skillet and when it was hot, she cracked the eggs into the pan and scrambled them with a long-handled spoon.

She found plates in a cabinet and doled out the eggs when they were cooked, adding a biscuit with honey to each plate. Gilbert stirred on the couch and sat up and Anna ran to him.

“Do I smell breakfast?” he said.

Anna laughed and pointed at Lilah, then ran back to her seat. Gilbert tried to stand but his leg wouldn’t hold him and he fell back onto the couch, grimacing in pain.

“Stay right there,” said Lilah. She brought a steaming cup of coffee and Gilbert accepted it with both hands.

“Thank you,” he said. “But you don’t have to go to this trouble.”

“It’s no trouble, Gilbert. I meant what I said. I won’t be leaving you and your family in a time of need. Besides, I have nowhere to go.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that.” Gilbert sipped at his coffee and then placed it on a table beside him.

“My parents were killed in a fire back in Philadelphia. It consumed our home as well. There’s nothing for me back there.”

“No family?” said Gilbert.

Lilah shook her head and stood up. “I’m afraid not.”

Lilah picked up the dirty dishes and placed them in a wash basin, then opened the front door and let some fresh air into the house. She took Anna into the bedroom to get her dressed for the day while Gilbert beckoned to William.

“Son, I’m not sure I’ll be able to get to town today. Do you think you can hitch Filbert to our wagon for miss Lilah and show her Mr. Harpswell’s store?”

“Yes, Pa,” said William. “But what if he gives us trouble again?”

“He won't, William. Now get dressed and see to it.”

“What about school? Can I stay home today?”

“What day is today?” said Gilbert.

“Monday,” replied William. He looked at his father and then down at his bare feet.

“My goodness. No, you must attend school. Remember our promise.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lilah led Anna from the bedroom and held her hand while she twirled and spun, showing off a white dress imprinted with tiny red hearts. She giggled and then clamped both hands over her mouth.

“Gentlemen,” said Lilah, “may I present Princess Anna?”

Anna squealed with delight while William clapped his hands. Anna ran to her father and rested her head on his leg. Gilbert stroked her hair and smiled, but then his face clouded over and he sighed heavily.

Anna danced away and ran around the living with her arms spread and William ran behind her, giggling and whooping. Lilah joined in the parade and they ran around the kitchen table and out onto the porch. When they came inside again, Gilbert clapped his hands and whistled to get their attention.

“Enough,” he said, his face stern. “We have work to do today.”

Anna sat in a kitchen chair and propped her elbows on the table while William disappeared into the bedroom. When he came back, he was fully dressed and ran out the door, heading for the barn.

“Anna,” said Gilbert, “can you help your brother, please? Just do as he says.”

Anna squealed with delight and hopped off her chair, heading to the barn to join William. Gilbert blew out his breath and leaned back on the couch.

“Is everything alright,” said Lilah.

“Everything is fine,” he said gruffly. “I forgot it was Monday and that William needs to get to school.” Gilbert tried to stand again and caught his balance, then lurched across the room and crashed into a chair in the kitchen.

“Gilbert, sit down, please. I’ll take William to school.”

Gilbert eased himself into a chair. “You can drive a wagon, can you?”

“It just so happens that I can,” said Lilah. “It may come as a surprise that someone from back east can get by, but...”

“And what about the chores that are piling up around here as we speak?”

Lilah sighed and placed her hands on her hips. She watched out the kitchen window as William led a horse from the barn, then turned her attention back to Gilbert.

“Your knee should be wrapped to keep the swelling down,” she said.

“Don’t tell me you’re a doctor, too?” Gilbert leaned one elbow on the tabletop.

“I can fetch the doctor from town if you’d like, but I grew up with two brothers and I learned a lot about these things. My father was a doctor.” She put her chin in the air and watched the children out the window again.

“I thought you said you had no family.”

“My brothers were both killed in the War, Gilbert.”

He stared up at her, his mouth hanging open and tears filming his eyes. Lilah met his gaze and never flinched.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I think it's the dress.” He rubbed one wrist under his chin and it made a raspy sound.

“The dress?” Lilah cocked her head and looked out the window again. “Anna’s dress?”

“My wife made that for her when Anna was only one year old. I’ve never had the heart to try it on her, but it fits her perfectly.”

“I’m sorry,” said Anna. “I had no idea. I found it in a drawer. Oh, Gilbert...”

“It’s okay,” he said. He sniffed and ran a finger under his nose. “She looks like an angel this morning.”

Lilah nodded and smiled. “Do you have an old shirt I can use? I can wrap your leg and maybe you can hobble around the yard.”

“In the bottom drawer of the dresser, take anything you need.”

Lilah went into the bedroom and Gilbert watched out the window as William brought the wagon around. Anna ran alongside it and for a moment, Gilbert’s heart was heavy with sadness, and then Lilah was at his side with a blanket and spare shirt. She tore it into strips, turning her back as Gilbert removed his pants and draped the blanket over his lap.

When she was finished, Gilbert tested his leg, gingerly putting weight on it as he limped around the room, the blanket clutched around him and his face as red as an apple.

“I have a long way to go, but I think it helps,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll be off soon.”

“William knows what to get at the mercantile. Just tell Mr. Harpswell to put it on my bill and I’ll settle up with him next week.”

Lilah plucked her hat from the back of a chair and arranged it on her head, then joined the children in the yard. Gilbert watched them as they waved from the seat, then the wagon lurched forward, dust rising from the wheels as they churned up the road and toward the trail into town.

He limped to the porch and leaned against a post until they were out of sight, marveling at how life could change so drastically in just a few hours.

His anger at his sister, Hilda, which threatened to bubble over when he learned of her going behind his back, was now softening, and a smile played at his lips as he thought of Lilah wrapping his leg and how soft and gentle her touch was.

Chapter 5

Their first stop was at the mercantile, and William handed the reins to Lilah and hopped from the seat before the wagon stopped moving. Lilah watched for a moment and then helped Anna from the wagon and followed him inside.

An older man with a few wisps of snow-white hair stood behind the counter, bent over a ledger and pushing a pencil across the page. Lilah cleared her throat but the man was absorbed in his work.

“Mr. Harpswell?” she said.

“That’s me,” he replied, looking at her over the glasses perched at the end of his nose. “And who might you be?”

“My name is Lilah Pringle, and I’m here on behalf of Gilbert Nordstrum.”

“Yes, I thought I recognized these little hellions.” He put down his pencil and crossed his arms as William began piling a few items on the counter. Anna stood beside Lilah and pulled at the sleeve of her dress.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said Lilah. “These children are not hellions, they’re a delight.”

“Says you. Hey, young man, how are you paying for all these items? I’m not running a charity here.”

“Mr. Nordstrum has requested that you put everything we need on his bill and he’ll settle with you next week.”

“His bill is high already. I have a good mind to...”

“Mr. Nordstrum looks forward to seeing you next week and paying the bill in full.”

“But...”

“Come, children. Let’s get these supplies into the wagon before we’re late for school.” Lilah reached into a glass container on the counter and pulled four pieces of hard candy from the colorful contents, then fished in her dress pocket and pulled a few pennies out, sliding them across the counter one at a time. She smiled at Mr. Harpswell and slipped the treats into her pocket.

Mr. Harpswell frowned, then tallied up the goods and wrote in his ledger again, a scowl plastered on his face. When he looked up, Lilah and the children were headed out the door. He opened his mouth to protest and then gave up and threw his pencil across the room.

William ran from the barn and up the steps, landing lightly on the porch completely out of breath. Gilbert watched as Lilah walked across the yard holding Anna’s hand. They were both giggling over some secret and Gilbert’s heart fluttered at the sight of it.

“Miss Lilah did it,” he said. “You should have seen it, Pa.”

“Calm down, son. Seen what?” Gilbert grimaced and shifted in his chair.

“He didn’t want to give us the goods, but Miss Lilah talked him into it. And she can drive a wagon, too!” He ran down the steps again and disappeared into the barn, then came back with an armload of supplies and went into the house.

“Something happened in town?” said Gilbert.

Lilah shook her head and came up the steps holding Anna’s hand. When Anna saw her father, she broke free and threw her arms around his neck.

“No trouble,” said Lilah. “You can settle up when you’re feeling better.” She went into the house and clapped her hands together. “Who’s hungry?”

Both children screamed with delight and Gilbert struggled to his feet and joined them inside.

When supper was over, Gilbert sat on the porch again, watching the sun sinking in the western sky. Lilah brought him a cup of coffee and then made sure the children were settled before she joined him on the porch. They were silent for a few moments and then Gilbert cleared his throat and spoke.

“Lilah, I’m grateful for your help. I’m sorry you were brought here on a falsification, and I can only imagine how you must feel.”

Lilah rocked in her chair as the dusk settled around them, her feet tapping out a staccato beat on the dusty wooden floor. She gripped the arms of the chair and shook her head.

“Remember what I said, Gilbert. I believe everything happens for a reason, so at the moment I’m not questioning anything.”

“You mean, there’s a purpose to this? I’m sorry, but I cannot see it.”

“Have faith,” said Lilah. She rocked and smiled in the darkness.

William came out onto the porch and stood on the top step for a moment, then went down into the yard.

“Where are you off to, son?” said Gilbert.

“I forgot my school books in the wagon, Pa. I’ll be right back.”

“Take a lantern with you,” said Gilbert. “And hurry up now. It’s almost time for bed.”

“Yes, sir.”

William ran up the stairs and came back with a lantern, holding it in front of him as he made his way to the barn. Gilbert fidgeted in the darkness, staring at the barn and tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“What’s keeping that boy,” he mumbled.

“I can see about it,” said Lilah.

“No. He gets distracted, but I’m sure he’s okay.”

A few more moments passed, and then Gilbert squinted into the darkness as a pinprick of light in the barn reflected in one of the windows. Smoke began seeping from the doors and flames danced in the eaves.

“Oh my goodness,” he said. He struggled to his feet and went toward the stairs. He missed the first step, then tumbled down the rest of them and landed in a heap at the bottom.

Lilah knelt beside him and tried to sit him upright, but Gilbert was dazed and there was a cut on his forehead. He reached out with both hands toward the barn.

“William,” he croaked.

Lilah stood up, her hands shaking as she watched the flames licking at the window of the barn. Her mind flashed back in time and she saw her house

in Philadelphia and heard the cries of men who were trying to help her parents trapped inside.

A ball of ice formed in the pit of her stomach and her legs felt like they were made of lead. She heard Anna on the porch behind her, crying and calling her brother's name.

Lilah forced herself to move, running toward the barn as fast as she could. She used both hands to yank on the heavy door.

The heat forced her back but she shielded her face with her arms as and pushed inside. Flames were crawling along the beams and a mound of hay had caught fire. The horses' eyes were wide with fright as they danced in their stalls

She spotted William near the wagon, his face filled with fear and tears streaming down his cheeks.

"William!" she shouted. "Over here."

He shook his head and refused to move, so Lilah made her way through the hazy smoke, dodging the flames as they tried to clutch at the hem of her dress.

She reached out for him and their hands clasped together. She pulled him toward her and wrapped him in her arms, then carried him to the door.

"Run to the house," said Lilah. "Go!"

William turned and ran toward the porch and Lilah went back inside. A few moments later, she emerged from the barn, choking and coughing and pushing the two horses in front of her.

They bolted into the darkness as soon as they were free, the timbers inside the barn cracking and splintering in the intense heat.

Lilah made her way to the house and sat at the foot of the stairs, watching the flames consume the barn, eerie shadows dancing in the front yard.

Anna and William began to cry and she pulled them close and hugged them tightly.

Epilogue

“I can’t believe that it’s been just one month,” said Gilbert. He pulled Lilah closer to him and hugged her tightly. Anna pulled at Lilah’s sleeve and then clasped her arms around her leg. William stood by his father’s side as they watched several of Gilbert’s neighbors working on a new barn where the old one had burned to the ground.

“William, can you see if the men need anything? And tell them I’ll be along directly, please?”

“Yes, Pa.” He ran toward the new barn and Anna ran after him, giggling and trying to catch her older brother. Gilbert turned back to Lilah and took her hands in his.

“Did I tell you that I’m so grateful you came into our lives, Lilah?”

“Not today,” she said. “But I never get tired of hearing it.” She smiled and looked down at her shoes, then up into the eyes of her future husband.

“I received a message from Hilda,” he said. “She’s coming for the wedding. I guess I’ve forgiven her for going behind my back and writing you those letters.”

“I’m sure she had your best interest at heart. And I’ve forgiven her as well.” Lilah winked and looped her arm inside Gilbert’s and they walked to the new barn, her heart aflutter with thoughts of building a new life in the west.

“Remember,” she said, “everything happens for a reason.”



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