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Brides of
Linder Creek**



*Governess
Bride*

SUSANNAH
CALLOWAY



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PERSONAL WORD FROM THE
AUTHOR



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Much love,

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CHAPTER 1



Rosalina Pike sat up when the first knock landed on her door. “Come in,” she called out.

Gemma entered, twisting the doorknob with one hand and balancing a tray with the other. She closed the door with her foot and walked across the room to set the tray down on a small table in the corner. Rosalina got out of bed, and the hem of her nightgown trailed across the soft carpet. She sat down at the table while Gemma continued to stand.

“So, you’re up today,” Gemma commented.

“As always,” Rosalina said breezily. “But why did you bring me breakfast up here?”

“Master has already left.”

Rosalina's face fell, but she quickly composed herself, hoping Gemma hadn't noticed. But obviously Gemma had noticed, for she was biting back an understanding smile. Rosalina knew her affection for Master Lewis was a well-known "secret" among the servants. Gemma, however, was the only person who dared be open about it, being her one friend in the household.

"So what did cook make today?" Rosalina asked, wanting to take the attention off Master Lewis and her love for him. She surveyed the tray.

"Fried tomatoes, bread and butter. No master, though, to cheer you up," Gemma said.

"Hush, Gemma," Rosalina said blushing. "And would you please quit teasing me?"

"It's all in good fun." Gemma giggled. "Besides, if I don't tease you, who will?"

Rosalina gazed with exasperation at her friend. Gemma's brown hair was pinned up, and a bridge of freckles spread across her cheeks, giving her a youthful look. She wore a high-collared gown along with an apron dotted with circles tied around her waist. Gemma was younger than Rosalina, who was already considered old at the age of twenty-five—something which caused Rosalina no small amount of despair.

“Where did Si—, I mean, where did Master Lewis go?”
Rosalina asked.

“To the farm.”

“When do you think he’ll be back?”

“Late,” Gemma replied. “I heard him telling Wilkins that a horse was sick, and he had to make sure that the veterinarian saw him.”

“I see.”

Rosalina moodily picked up her toasted piece of bread and began to slather copious amounts of butter on it. Gemma gave her a startled look.

“How exactly are you going to eat that?” Gemma said.

Rosalina balked as if coming up from a reverie and stared at the butter-soaked toast in her hand. She sheepishly began to scrape off the excess butter.

“You’ll be chubby if you eat like that,” Gemma observed.

“And you’ll be mean if you keep saying things like that,”
Rosalina responded saucily.

Her toast was now mostly butter-free, and she bit into it, scolding herself for her carelessness. Gemma poured her a cup of tea.

The two had met each other four years back, when Rosalina had arrived as the new governess for Master Lewis’s

daughter, Camellia. They became fast friends and frequently spent time in the village, shopping and exploring the narrow streets. They both shared the same love for adventure, and Gemma had the traits of a dear sister. Rosalina happily gave her the role. Having been an only child herself, she loved the feeling of having a sister.

“Is Camellia awake yet?” Rosalina asked, chewing.

“Swallow,” Gemma ordered. “What would Master Lewis think if he saw you talking with your mouth full?”

Rosalina obligingly swallowed and repeated her question.

“She isn’t. Perhaps you should wake her,” Gemma said.

“I would, but she was up past her bedtime last night.” Rosalina sipped her tea. “I thought she deserved the rest.”

“You give her too much freedom.”

“She’s only ten years old!” Rosalina protested.

Gemma snorted. “My younger siblings are in the same age range, and if you are lax with them, they’ll upturn the milk bucket or do some other nefarious deed.”

“Camellia is an angel.”

Gemma shook her head, but Rosalina ignored her. Camellia *was* a sweet child; although, she did have a streak of mischievousness in her. Something Rosalina chose to pretend wasn’t there. As did Master Lewis. The child had

once drawn on the walls with charcoal and ruined them. The only thing Master Lewis had done was praise Camellia's drawing ability and call the painter to whitewash the walls.

"You only defend her because you like her father."

"Gemma, why must you be so blunt in the morning?"
Rosalina sighed.

"Why must you be so silly?"

"Despite what you say, I think Master likes me." Rosalina stood up, having finished eating.

"It doesn't change the fact that it is impossible for you to wed," Gemma said.

"I have hope," Rosalina said primly. "Now, I'd better dress. Thank you for breakfast, for bringing it up to me."

Gemma smiled. "You're welcome. Hurry, though. I don't want you to be late. I'll see you downstairs."

Gemma closed the door behind her, and Rosalina let out a sigh. She was deep in thought as she rooted through her wardrobe for just the right dress for the day. Gemma always brought up valid points, and though Rosalina loved Gemma, she could happily strangle her for her habit of spouting uncomfortable truths. But she was right. Rosalina harbored a special affection for the Master, Simon Lewis, and it was a futile endeavor.

In Rosalina's defense, it was hard *not* to fall under his spell. Master Lewis was a handsome man; he was kind to everyone and treated them with respect. He was smart and intelligent without being vain. And Master Lewis was a widower with a child, a lonely man in need of a new wife. He was one of the richest men in town and was more than a decade older than Rosalina.

Rosalina didn't care about his wealth or his social position. She cared about *him*. She knew nothing of his first wife, only that she was a beautiful, kind woman. There were no portraits of her anywhere. Some whispered that the memories were too painful for Master Lewis, something that endeared him even more to Rosalina's heart. She refused to entertain any negative comments about Master Lewis. She was in love with the man, just as she was also in love with his daughter.

Rosalina went downstairs with her clothes in hand. She had to go outside to wash and, as this was a rich house, the outside washroom was clean and private. Mrs. Harper had left a basin of warm water for her, and Rosalina cleaned herself before dressing hastily. It was a bright day, and she knew she had to get to work. Firstly, she had to wake up her charge who was no doubt still sleeping.

Rosalina returned to her room and brushed and arranged her hair. She examined herself in the mirror. She liked her oval face and fair skin. And she was pleased with her lustrous brown hair and the way it cascaded down her back.

She had a slim figure which was accentuated by the long, peach dress she had chosen for that day. Her eyes were gray but sometimes seemed to have a ring of darkness around them. They were inquisitive and piercing—indicative of her character. Rosalina never backed down.

She rushed to Camellia's room and knocked once. There was no response so she pushed the door open. The draperies were drawn, and the room was dark. Rosalina could make out the lump in the bed and tiptoed in that direction. She changed course halfway through and made for the window instead, drawing back the curtains and allowing the light to flood in.

Toys were tossed about on the floor, including a wooden doll and coloring utensils. Camellia's drawing book lay open. Rosalina picked it up, smiling at the young girl's vivid depiction of a horse. It was a spitting image. Camellia hadn't been affected by the opening of the curtains; her face remained buried beneath the covers. Rosalina sat down and gently shook her.

"Camellia, dear, it's morning,"

Camellia murmured and moved but didn't fully awaken. Rosalina shook her for a minute more and finally the child awoke, sat up and rubbed her eyes, the picture of a perfect cherub. Her golden hair lay in ringlets on her shoulders, and her eyes were a startling green. She was in a white

nightgown with ruffled lace around the sleeves. Rosalina brushed Camellia's hair with her fingers.

"Good morning." Camellia yawned.

"It's past eight. You must awaken," Rosalina said.

"I *am* awake." Camellia yawned again and wiggled out from under her covers.

Rosalina took her to wash up. She helped Camellia dress and then took the child for breakfast in the dining hall. Gemma saw them descending the stairs and swished off to the kitchen, no doubt to inform the cook that Camellia was coming.

Camellia was at the table for only a minute before her breakfast was served.

"What are we doing today?" Camellia asked as Rosalina buttered her bread.

"Eat first," Rosalina said, placing the bread on the edge of her plate.

Camellia nodded and began to eat. She ate quickly, and Rosalina occasionally reached over to offer her the napkin.

Rosalina delighted in taking care of Master Lewis's daughter. She loved everything about being part of the Lewis family, even if she was only there as a governess. Her own father had died young, and she'd lived alone with her mother

throughout her childhood. Unfortunately, her mother had become distraught by the death of her husband and only lived to work. She never showed any affection toward her daughter, which led to Rosalina becoming overly-affectionate with Camellia. No one had taken care of her so she wanted to take care of others in every way possible.

Rosalina saw something of herself in Camellia. Master Lewis had withdrawn into work after his wife's death, much like Rosalina's mother had, and he didn't check up on Camellia with any kind of regularity. At first, Rosalina thought Master Lewis was callous for not caring for his own daughter. But something happened that changed her mind.

As Rosalina watched Camellia eat the last bit of her breakfast, her mind flashed back to that day.

"You mustn't run, Camellia!" Rosalina shouted.

Camellia ignored her, running across the garden, her dress flying behind her. Rosalina stood up and followed her, trying to catch her before she got hurt.

Even though Camellia had a cough and a bit of a runny nose, they were having a small picnic outdoors. Rosalina had gotten permission from Mrs. Harper, the caretaker of the house. Though Rosalina had been in the house for six months, she had never directly spoken with the master. She had seen him, but they had not talked. She got her orders from Mrs. Harper.

Rosalina had thought him heartless for not caring more openly for his own daughter.

Camellia had stopped running and was gathering up flowers in her arms. "Do you think Papa will like these?" She held up the daisies.

"I am sure he will," Rosalina said, touched by the thoughtfulness of the child.

They traipsed around until the sky began to darken. Rosalina looked up and saw the ominous clouds.

"We should go inside," Rosalina said.

"A few minutes more," Camellia begged, her eyes wide.

Rosalina complied, but a few seconds later the rain fell on them, drenching and thoroughly chilling them quickly. Rosalina picked up Camellia and ran inside, leaving everything else behind.

She hoped that the cold downpour wouldn't affect her charge who already had a small cold, but that night Camellia was sick with fever. Her face was red, and she gasped for air. Rosalina tended to her but was forced away to her room by Mrs. Harper, who insisted on taking over. Feeling guilty about taking the child outside in the first place, Rosalina couldn't sleep, and later that night, she sneaked back to Camellia's room.

When she opened the door, she saw Master Lewis holding Camellia's hand, asleep beside her on the chair. There was a new cloth on Camellia's head, and it was evident that he had stayed up to take care of her.

That was the day she saw him in a new light.

“I am done!” Camellia announced.

“Wonderful,” Rosalina said, coming back to the present. “Let’s go study.”

Rosalina was well-educated; she knew how to draw, read, write, and perform mathematics. She had the extra talent of speaking French, something she had studied because French had sounded delightful to her ears. Her mother wanted Rosalina to be educated and had worked hard to ensure that she was. Her mother was now gone, having died of tuberculosis two years back.

Rosalina read and played with Camellia. She never considered playing with Camellia as a waste of time. She loved spending time with the girl and always made sure Camellia was entertained and challenged academically. She treated Camellia like her own daughter, and Camellia seemed fond of Rosalina as well.

The hours passed quickly, and before she knew it, they were sitting down to dinner. Master Lewis still hadn’t arrived to look in, but Rosalina wasn’t concerned. He was often late and sometimes ate with the farmhands. He owned a large spread of farmland and other properties, through which he earned his wealth. His family was from noble stock, and his late wife had been from upper society as well.

Rosalina had heard all of this from Mrs. Harper. In fact, she recalled exactly what Mrs. Harper had said, *“The former Mistress Lewis was like a dove, pure and free. She had the sweetest voice and the kindest manner. She took care of us all, and I never heard a bad word come from her lips.”* Mrs. Harper’s eyes had filled with tears. She rubbed her hands repeatedly over the uniform which stretched across her matronly figure. *“It’s a pity she died young, leaving behind the child. The master loved her very much, and he never fully recovered from her death.”*

Mrs. Harper said that Master Lewis had grown happier as time passed, and that was a consolation for Rosalina. One day, she hoped he would see her as a woman and not just his child’s governess.

The house was a wonderland for Camellia. It was expansive with two floors and several rooms where she had the freedom to go and play. In addition to Gemma, Mrs. Harper, and the cook, there were two other maids who worked to keep the house clean at all times. Master Lewis didn’t socialize much, but at odd times, he would throw parties where people of the highest society would arrive. The women wore dazzling dresses, and the men wore full suits with tails. They walked in, heads held high, while Rosalina and Camellia watched from the stairs.

“Do you remember the gathering your papa had a while back?” Rosalina asked Camellia as they ate.

“Do you mean the one with the piano playing?” Camellia asked, her mouth spotted with gravy. “I remember that I peeked downstairs.”

Rosalina again handed the girl a soft cloth napkin.

“It was wonderful,” Camellia said excitedly. “I hope Papa has another party soon.”

It hadn't been so wonderful for Rosalina. As the events played back in her mind, she didn't even know why she had brought it up. It wasn't one of her better memories. At least, at first it hadn't been...

Rosalina was nervous.

Master Lewis's words rang through her mind. “You can come down after getting Camellia settled. You are not exactly a servant, and besides, I shouldn't deprive you the pleasure of such events.”

Rosalina had fingered the edge of her gown. Gemma had loaned it to her, having had it given to her as a cast-off from her previous master. It certainly was beautiful, but after seeing the ladies in the dining hall, Rosalina felt completely outclassed.

She didn't want to feel that way in front of Master Lewis, which would be mortifying.

Her petite foot hovered over the top step of the staircase, and finally she took courage and walked down the stairs. She entered the

ballroom quietly and looked around in awe. There were so many people inside, and Rosalina felt slightly panicked. She hid in the corner and watched them converse.

Master Lewis spoke to two beautiful women who laughed delicately and, as it sounded to Rosalina, without any sincerity. One of the maids came by and offered Rosalina a glass of wine which she took. Rosalina didn't drink often, but she drank then, letting the sweet taste of the wine fill her mouth. She planned to finish her drink and leave.

"Rosalina!" Master's Lewis voice echoed.

He was staring at her, and he was smiling. Rosalina felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

"Why are you hiding in the corner?" he asked. He came to her and took her hand, leading her towards the ladies. The prospect of speaking with them caused her blush to deepen.

"These are my friends, Alyssa and Elizabeth. This is Camellia's governess, Rosalina," Master Lewis introduced them.

The ladies smiled politely, but Rosalina saw the malice in their eyes.

"Rosalina is very accomplished," Master Lewis continued. "She does an outstanding job of educating my daughter."

"And, of course, as a governess, you are unmarried?" Alyssa asked pointedly.

Rosalina nodded.

“What’s the use of knowing so much if you can’t use it?” Elizabeth commented with a sly smile.

Rosalina’s heart jolted at the insult. Master Lewis frowned, “She is using it, is she not?”

“Why yes, Simon. Of course,” Elizabeth said, but the damage was done.

Rosalina was shamed. How could Elizabeth say something so snide? She had insulted her for her knowledge.

The two women continued their barrage of comments, and it warmed her heart that Master Lewis tried to deflect some of them. Seeing him defend her gave her courage, and the ladies seemed to sense this. When the maid came by with more wine, Alyssa “accidentally” spilled wine over Rosalina’s dress.

“I am so sorry,” she said in an exaggerated voice. “I’ll pay for it. How much was it? A year’s wages?”

Alyssa and Elizabeth laughed together and thoroughly beaten, Rosalina ran out of the hall, tears gathering in her eyes. It had been such a beautiful gown, and she had borrowed it from Gemma. Gemma would be heartbroken.

She sat down on the stairs and cried.

She was vaguely aware that the hall door had opened, and then a shadow stood over her.

"You mustn't cry, Rosalina." Master Lewis had bent down in front of her, holding a handkerchief.

"It's ruined," she sobbed.

"I know, but it's only a dress. There's no need to mar a pretty face for it," he said and wiped her tears away with his handkerchief.

She sniffed, and he was quiet for a few seconds.

"I promise to buy you a better dress," he said. "And don't worry about their comments; I never thought they would be so shallow."

"They're right. I am poor and—"

"You are nothing of the sort," Master Lewis said firmly. "You are an intelligent lady with a handsome face. You are brave and strong, nothing like them."

"But they're your friends," Rosalina said, surprised.

"When you are in my position, you have to say a lot of things to seem friendly," Master Lewis said wryly. "You don't always mean all of it."

The sound of the piano drifted in from the hall, and Master Lewis took her hand. "Let's have a small dance."

Before she could protest, he had pulled her up and twirled her around. Rosalina felt like she was in a dream, and as they danced, she forgot her humiliation.

"Always smile, Rosalina. That gives you the strength to face others. Don't mind the dress. I promise to make it up to you."

Rosalina nodded, and he let her go. "I must go back inside but sleep well."

He left her, and Rosalina clutched his handkerchief, smiling through her tears.

Master Lewis had been good on his promise, gifting her with two dresses, one for her and the other for Gemma. This wasn't the only instance of his kindness; he was always friendly towards her. Sometimes they talked after dinner, and Rosalina looked forward to those conversations.

Eager to see him again, Rosalina kept her eye out the window after dinner, waiting for him to come home. She was eager to talk to him. She was besotted, and she didn't care. She knew in her heart that one day he would see her, truly *see* her, and he would ask her to be his.

Until then, she had to be patient.

Camellia and Rosalina spent the early evening together, but Rosalina still couldn't help but keep an eye out for Master Lewis's arrival. Finally, as dusk arrived, he came.

"Papa!" Camellia exclaimed running to him.

Rosalina hurried toward him, a bit breathless herself. She paused and let herself admire his appearance, as she always did. Simon Lewis had a handsome, chiseled face with curly blond hair and the same green eyes that his daughter had. He

was tall with broad shoulders and a wide smile. Rosalina's heart skipped a beat when he twirled his daughter around and then smiled at her over the child's head.

"Welcome back, Master," she said.

"I told you to call me Simon," he scolded her.

"It's not my place to do so."

"But I ordered you to do it. I don't consider you my servant, Rosalina. You care for my child. I think that elevates you somewhat, don't you think?"

Her heart filled with happiness at his words; she was surely close to her goal. As Camellia led her father to the dining hall, Rosalina thought that there was something different about him that evening. He smiled more easily than usual, and his eyes twinkled. Something good must have happened.

They sat down. Rosalina sat beside Camellia, with Master Lewis at the head of the table. He was served dinner, and while Camellia claimed his attention, Master Lewis brought Rosalina in as well. To Rosalina, it almost felt like a family gathering, and she could hardly contain herself.

Though she loved Camellia, she was impatient for the hour to pass so she could have a moment to converse with him alone. Camellia was sent up to bed, and Rosalina lingered in front of the fireplace with Master Lewis.

He took out his pipe and lit it, the smoke drifting around him. Rosalina waited for him to speak.

“I had a busy day today.”

“Gemma told me that a horse was sick.”

“Yes, it was. Thankfully, she’ll be all right.”

“I’m glad.”

“You know, you have always been more than a governess to me,” Master Lewis said.

At his words, her heart began to flutter. Was he going to do it? Was he going to propose to her?

“I have always cherished your work and your opinion. You have a good heart, and you take care of Camellia like you would your own daughter.” Master Lewis smiled at her and patted her hand.

Rosalina’s eyes were wide. Anticipation coursed through her—it was happening. After four years, he was *noticing her*.

“I thought I should tell you my news, as it concerns you in a way,” Master Lewis said.

Her breath caught. *In a way?* He turned to her so that they squarely faced each other. Rosalina leaned forward, hardly daring to wonder if he might finally say it.

“What I wanted to say is. . .” Master Lewis cleared his throat and took a deep breath. “Rosalina, you are the first to know this.”

“Know what?” Rosalina said, her eagerness nearly choking her.

“I am going to marry Bianca Miller.”

Rosalina gaped at her employer and fought the urge to collapse at his feet.

CHAPTER 2



Rosalina shuddered and shook her head to clear it. Had she heard him correctly? Or was he teasing her, making fun of her? He'd given her no clue that something like this was coming. In fact, he hadn't indicated that he was interested in anyone or even courted the lady in question. Had he? How could this be happening?

Rosalina wanted to laugh hysterically, to do something, anything, to deny the news, but she looked into Master Lewis's eyes and saw he wasn't joking. He was deadly serious.

"I-I don't know what to say," she mumbled, fighting tears.

"Say you are happy for me."

"I am happy for you, but..."

“You are wondering how this happened, aren’t you?” Master Lewis guessed.

Rosalina nodded.

“Truthfully, I don’t know either. I have been thinking of this for a while, that Camellia needs a mother in her life. Bianca is a nice girl. She is young, and she’ll make a good mother for her.”

What about me? Rosalina wanted to scream. *I’ll be a good mother to her! I am a good mother to her!*

“I know this seems hasty, but truly it isn’t,” Master Lewis went on to explain. “I am entering into business with Bianca’s father and marrying her will solidify our relationship. I was adverse to it at first, but after I got to know her, I understood that this was the best thing for everyone concerned.”

Except me! Rosalina raged inwardly.

“Are you quite all right, Rosalina?” he asked. “You are pale.”

No, she *wasn’t* all right. It felt like there were hands gripping her heart, squeezing it, and trying to claw their way through her chest. She wanted to deny his words; she wanted to forget everything he’d said.

Her world was cracking and crumbling into pieces around her. For the last three years, she had yearned to be with Master Lewis. She had served him faithfully in the hope that

one day he would overlook their social differences and ask her to be with him. And then, they would wed and live happily together with Camellia.

In two minutes flat, Master Lewis had destroyed her dream. He had tossed her aside and chosen someone else.

Rosalina abruptly stood. "I am tired."

"Oh." Master Lewis blinked. "Go ahead and turn in for the day, but I would appreciate it if you kept this between us."

Rosalina nodded, unable to form words. She hurried to her room and threw herself onto her bed and wept. Everything was over. All her years of service and loyalty ... gone.

Rosalina knew she was being selfish, for in truth, she had no stake in Master Lewis, but he had been so kind to her, so inviting. How could this nightmare be true? Didn't he remember the special times they'd had together? Didn't he ever think about them?

Rosalina's mind whirled with it all. Every precious memory she had of Master Lewis tumbled through her mind in rapid succession. One memory, in particular, stood out.

The carriage jolted, and Rosalina lost her seating, her shoulder moving to collide with the door. A hand fell on her, stopping the impact, and she looked over at Master Lewis. He had prevented her from hitting the door. She blushed.

“Papa, look, it’s so beautiful outside!” Camellia said.

Master Lewis let go of Rosalina and looked out of the window as Camellia had instructed. Rosalina placed her hand over her heart to calm herself. They were a few hours away from the beach. Master Lewis was taking his daughter on an outing, and as Camellia’s governess, Rosalina was able to go as well.

Rosalina had been looking forward to the trip, as she looked forward to every outing with Master Lewis. It had been almost two years since she had come to work for him. Since the day he had comforted her at the dance, Rosalina found herself falling harder and harder for him.

She loved the time they spent together and couldn’t get enough of it, though he wasn’t home very often.

The coach stopped, and they got out. It was windy, and Rosalina’s hat almost flew off. The beach was nearly deserted, which suited their purposes, and Camellia ran towards the sea with a loud cheer.

“Camellia!” Master Lewis shouted, following her.

Rosalina went with them and breathed in the salty air. This was her first time at the beach, and it was amazing. The waves lapped towards the sand, and the sound was soothing to her ears.

“Camellia, don’t run!” Master Lewis caught his daughter and spun her around.

*“Master...” Rosalina called, panting, trying to catch up to them.
“Wait for me!”*

“Keep up, Rosalina!” Master Lewis shouted back.

She hurried to their side where they were twirling and laughing. Rosalina smiled at their bond.

“Thank you for bringing me. It’s lovely here,” Rosalina said, breathless.

“It wouldn’t be the same without you. You are a part of this family. Camellia needs you.”

Rosalina tried not to be giddy at his words, but she was. Later, Rosalina helped Camellia pick some shells. They made castles and then ate sandwiches as the morning turned to afternoon. It was near dark when Master Lewis said they had to go back.

Rosalina didn’t see a branch sticking out from the sand. Her foot caught on it, and she fell, face first into the sand. Camellia and Master Lewis took one look at her and laughed. Rosalina brushed the sand off her and glared at the two of them.

“It’s not funny!” she insisted.

“It is,” Master Lewis contradicted. “Here.” He held out his hand for her, and she took it. But as she tried to get up, her right ankle gave way, and she fell again.

“I think I sprained my ankle,” Rosalina said, wincing.

“That’s not good.” Master Lewis turned around and bent down, indicating for her to get on his back.

"I am sure I can walk," Rosalina said and tried to stand up again. Her attempt failed and once again, she crumpled onto the sand.

"Don't be so stubborn," Master Lewis said. "Camellia, tell your Rosalina to not be stubborn."

"Listen to Papa," Camellia said.

Rosalina nodded and tentatively climbed on his back just as she used to climb onto her cousin's back when she was a child. Master Lewis lifted her up as if she weighed nothing and carried her towards the coach.

"I'm so sorry about this," she murmured close to his ear.

"It's no trouble. You hardly weigh a thing."

They walked in silence until master Lewis spoke again, "I would appreciate it if you called me Simon. We are on familial terms already.

Rosalina was glad she was on his back, or he would have seen the color that burned her cheeks at his words. Luck surely favored her.

Luck hadn't favored her at all, Rosalina thought miserably.

She tried to stop crying, but she couldn't control the tears. They flowed without ending and soon her pillowcase was drenched. She had to get ahold of herself.

It's not the end of the world. You must trust Master Lewis. He surely chose someone suitable. You can't play the fool. No one must suspect your heartache.

Rosalina repeated her thoughts endlessly, but as she squirmed under the blankets, she wasn't sure she could do it.



It was easy for a few days.

Master Lewis made no mention of Bianca Miller. He hardly spoke at all, and Rosalina was grateful. She knew if he had spoken to her, she would lose herself. She found herself hoping that his engagement would break off, and that he would realize *she* was the one he loved. Foolish, foolish thoughts. In the depths of heartbreak, she remembered to keep a stiff upper lip.

Her peace didn't last long.

It was a Monday, several days after he had announced his engagement. They were having breakfast together. Master Lewis cleared his throat.

"I have an announcement," he said.

Rosalina froze in the middle of handing Camellia the peeled piece of an apple; he was going to tell his daughter.

"Camellia, darling, Papa is going to get married again."

“Married?” Camellia repeated, and her brows furrowed.

“Yes, you’ll have a new mother. A beautiful mother,”

“A new mother?” Camellia’s eyes brightened. “Who is it?”

“She’ll be coming tomorrow,” Master Lewis said. “Rosalina, make sure that Camellia is properly dressed, and that she doesn’t embarrass herself or us during Bianca’s visit.”

“Yes, Master Lewis.” *As if he needs to tell me such things.*

Master Lewis looked at her, and Rosalina thought he was going to object to her use of “Master”, but he didn’t. Rosalina wasn’t stupid; she knew that since he was getting married, he was setting up boundaries. He got up and left the hall, leaving her with Camellia.

Camellia chattered about Bianca as Rosalina led her to the garden.

“I wonder what she looks like. Are you excited?” Camellia asked.

“Yes,” Rosalina lied.

“I think she’ll be wonderful if Papa chose her. She’ll be wearing a pretty gown, and her hair will be done up, and—”

Rosalina cut her off. “Please stop going on and on. You must finish your studies.”

Camellia went back to studying and wandered off into the garden, holding her book before her eyes with one hand.

Rosalina sank down on the steps and watched the young girl.

A hand tapped her shoulder, and Rosalina looked up to see Gemma gazing down on her with sympathetic eyes.

“I heard the news,” Gemma said quietly. “How are you?”

“As well as can be expected,” Rosalina said, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

“Rosalina—”

“I know. It’s my fault. You were right. I’ve been a fool.”

Gemma didn’t contradict her. She was quiet for a few seconds and then spoke again. “Mrs. Harper mentioned something.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that usually when widowers marry again, their children are sent to boarding school.”

“What?” Rosalina blurted. “Master Lewis would never let that happen!”

“I know, but...” Gemma hesitated. “Young women don’t often tolerate another woman’s child.”

“But I’m here. I’m sure Master Lewis won’t let me go, and I won’t let them send Camellia away.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Though she had spoken bravely to Gemma, the seeds of doubt had been sown. What if Gemma was right? There was only one way to find that out, and that was by interacting with Bianca Miller.



Mrs. Harper worked double time to welcome Bianca Miller to the house. She had everything polished and cleaned until it gleamed. The curtains were dusted, floors were waxed and the best cutlery was used. Mrs. Harper had ordered a four-course meal to be prepared, and though she was well into her sixties, she worked tirelessly to make sure everything came off seamlessly.

Rosalina tried to lend a hand, but mostly she took care of Camellia, who changed gowns every second wanting to find the best one to make a good impression on her new mother. When Camellia finally settled on a dress, Rosalina tied the girl's hair back with a blue ribbon and admired the blue silk gown Master Lewis had bought for his daughter on her previous birthday.

Rosalina took special care with her own attire, too. She dressed in a simple gown which she hoped looked both professional and welcoming. Right on time, she and Camellia awaited Miss Miller's arrival. They waited for the better part of an hour before she arrived. Finally, they heard the sound of her carriage, and Rosalina went to the window.

She didn't catch a glimpse of Bianca's face, but she saw Master Lewis help the young woman down from the carriage. Gemma rushed to open the door, but Rosalina and Camellia didn't move.

Bianca Miller entered, and Rosalina's heart sank. She was everything Rosalina had dreaded and more. She had long, glistening chestnut hair braided down her back. She was wearing a white hat which she took off to hold in her slender gloved hands. Her green eyes sparkled, and her face was alabaster pale without any flaws. Her beauty took over the room.

But for all of that, Rosalina felt uneasy. She didn't like her. There was something prideful about the way she examined the dining hall. Camellia curtsied prettily, and the woman didn't even smile at her. Rosalina was scared that Gemma's prediction would turn out to be true. This woman seemed entirely capable of shipping Camellia off to boarding school.

Later, they sat down to eat, and Rosalina dwelled on Bianca's voice. It was light and musical, like a bird, and she laughed delicately at Master Lewis's words. Rosalina could relate to the look on Master Lewis's face—it was shining with love and anticipation. Camellia attempted to converse with Bianca, but she was ignored soundly, something that angered Rosalina.

Master Lewis appeared blind to the way Bianca treated Camellia, and some of Rosalina's respect for him died. Were

men fools? Couldn't he see the blatant way Bianca was pretending that Camellia didn't exist?

Lunch was painful for Rosalina. She didn't speak further, and she retreated into her own thoughts

"I must be off, as I have some pressing business," Master Lewis said after dining. "Rosalina, would you kindly show Bianca around the house?"

Bianca raised her eyes at Master Lewis's use of Rosalina's first name, and Rosalina gulped. This wouldn't go well. Master Lewis left them, and Camellia stood, with a wide smile on her face.

"I want to show you my room," she said, taking Bianca's hand.

Bianca's lips twitched, but she let Camellia guide her. Rosalina followed the two of them up to Camellia's room. Bianca's expression was bored as Camellia showed her everything in her room. Rosalina then took over, sending Camellia along to find Gemma. Rosalina showed Bianca the upstairs library and the study when Bianca stopped her.

"What is your relationship with Simon?"

"He is my employer," Rosalina said stiffly.

"Are all employers on first name terms with their employees?" Bianca sneered.

“I have worked here for a good number of years, and Master prefers to call me by my first name.”

Bianca appeared mollified. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” she said. “You won’t be here for long.”

“I beg your pardon,” Rosalina said. Her stomach filled with dread.

“After we are wed, you’ll be dismissed,” Bianca said breezily. “And so will the child.”

“You can’t dismiss a child,” Rosalina said, horrified.

“No, but I’ll send her away to a school, somewhere far. There is no place for her here. This home will be for my children, and she isn’t one of them.”

Rosalina gaped at her, and Bianca laughed.

“Are you going to tattle on me? You? A mere servant? Tell me, who do you think Simon will side with? His governess or his future wife?”

Bianca strode off, still laughing, and Rosalina stood there, rooted to the spot.

This couldn’t be happening. The world couldn’t be so cruel towards a young child. But reality crashed down upon her. The world *was* this cruel, and Rosalina was helpless to do anything to save the child she loved so much.

CHAPTER 3



Rosalina didn't want to leave her room. She was content to stay there and hide from her troubles. She knew she was being cowardly, but she didn't care. Everything she had known and planned for was over, and she could do nothing to fix it.

Bianca had left a while back, and it was already near supper time. Gemma had come by to urge her to go eat, but Rosalina couldn't do it. She couldn't force herself to go down and pretend that everything was fine. She wasn't a great liar, and she knew that her face would give away her real thoughts.

Bianca was right, the master wouldn't believe a lowly governess if she voiced her fears. He would think she was lying, and that was the last thing Rosalina wanted. Yet, Rosalina's time was limited until she disappeared from the

house without a whisper. Could she just stand by and be at the mercy of Bianca?

No! Rosalina thought defiantly. She would leave her employment on her own and in her own way. She would *not* let Bianca dictate her final departure.

But where could she go? A thought came to mind. It might work, but it wasn't the normal course of events. But Rosalina was at her wit's end and saw it as her best chance.



Rosalina left the next day to go into town. She loved going to town. The townspeople were friendly, and the town itself was beautiful and easily navigated. It was probably one of the cleanest towns in the area, and Rosalina loved strolling about, breathing in the clean air and chatting with passersby. She knew most of the shopkeepers and loved getting caught up on their lives.

To Gemma and Simon, Rosalina said she was going to mail some letters to relatives, and of course, they believed her. But her words were far from the truth. The truth was something she didn't feel comfortable sharing.

Rosalina had tried to talk herself out of her idea. But she was too old to start looking for another job, and only that day Simon had informed the household that he would be married in two weeks' time, too short of a time for Rosalina

to secure another position. If she was kicked out—and she knew she would be—where would she go?

As much as she wanted to stay back for Camellia, she had to face facts. She wasn't the girl's mother; she was just a governess who had no hold over her.

Rosalina reached her destination. She stood outside for a few minutes, struggling with her moral standards before walking inside with her shoulders squared.

“What do you require?” the woman inside asked her.

“I need some paper ... to give my details,” Rosalina said, her voice trembling.

The woman looked mildly amused by her response, but finally went to the back and got her the paper. “You can stay here and fill it out or—”

Rosalina cut the lady off. “I'll do it right now.”

Rosalina wrote everything down precisely and slowly, to make sure that she wasn't making any mistakes. Her heart hammered in her chest as she wrote. She was wrought with indecision, but she stubbornly continued her task. Was she doing the right thing? She had asked that question so many times that she was tired of mulling it over. It was now or never.

She handed the woman the paper and was given instructions to deliver her portrait, which Rosalina promised to do the

next day. She didn't really feel better when she left the office, but at least she had taken some action for her future.

Rosalina never thought she'd embark on the path to becoming a Mail Order Bride, but she didn't have many choices in life. She'd always thought she would marry for love, but things hadn't worked out like that. She would have to settle for what she could find.

Rosalina remembered the day she had learned of Mail Order Brides. She had been out with Gemma, and they had been chatting about what to buy when a woman approached them asking if they were interested in becoming Mail Order Brides. Gemma had laughed and pulled Rosalina away, but Rosalina had looked back, interested in knowing more. She'd chased after the woman and gained the basic facts.

Now in front of the Lewis estate, Rosalina's legs threatened to give way as she thought of the drastic measure she had just taken. She looked at the house she had worked in for so many years and suddenly it was unfamiliar to her. It was cold and unwelcoming.

I hope I survive this, she thought.



The letter came two weeks later. And during those two weeks, there was big news. The wedding was postponed, and Master Lewis seemed upset about it. Apparently, Bianca had

gone to visit relatives to personally extend her invitations but, due to bad weather conditions, she hadn't been able to get back in time. The wedding was to take place at a later date which had not yet been set.

Rosalina was inexplicably relieved at the news, and stupidly, she wondered if Master Lewis would see the light and ask her to marry him instead. Her old dream of love with her employer continued to rear its unlikely head, only to repeatedly break her heart. Rosalina knew she was being idiotic, but she couldn't stop herself.

When the letter arrived, it snapped some sense into her. Gemma brought it to her, and like a good friend, she wondered who it was from.

"Is it from a relative?" Gemma asked.

"Yes. Um ... my aunt was sick, so I sent her a letter," Rosalina lied in a weak voice.

Gemma nodded and left while Rosalina sat down on her bed to peruse the letter.

Dear Rosalina,

My name is Albert Andrews. I live in Linder Creek...

Linder Creek? Her mind swirled. Hadn't she heard of it before? It was a long distance away if she remembered correctly.

I am not an old man if that's what you were wondering. I am in my third decade, but I am quite young by any standards. Unfortunately, while I was managing my family land, I didn't get the chance to find someone to marry. So I went looking for a Mail Order Bride. I was given your information, and you look like the perfect woman for me.

If you are interested, please reply to this letter.

You must understand that I am in a hurry to marry, and I assume you are, also. I would like for you come here as soon as you can.

Sincerely,

Albert

Rosalina read through the letter a couple more times and, in all truth, she was disappointed. This wasn't what she had expected, although she couldn't even state what her expectations had been exactly. She only knew that this letter didn't live up to them.

Stop it, Rosalina told herself. Be reasonable.

Albert seemed like a nice man. He was certainly blunt. Rosalina felt a prick as she read the last two lines. Well, she *was* in a hurry, but to see it written out so bluntly was quite devastating. The truth had a harsh bite, but it was still the truth.

Rosalina took out a blank piece of paper. She would write a response right then.

Dear Albert,

I received your letter, and thank you.

Yes, I suppose you could say that there is no reason to slow this down, but I would like to know more about you. You have my information, but I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage, so could you please tell me something about yourself?

Something you like to do? Your hobbies?

I'll reciprocate, I like reading and walking. I don't shy away from work, and my friends have told me that I am sometimes overzealous. I hope this serves as enough information to start our conversation.

Sincerely,

Rosalina

Rosalina read her letter and despite her misgivings, sealed it. She would deliver it to the post office the next day.



Three weeks passed and during that time, Rosalina managed to exchange two more letters with Albert. She was surprised at how quickly they arrived. His letters were touching, and she found herself quite taken with them. More than once, Albert had called her special.

The romantic side of Rosalina told her that she *was* special, but after Master's engagement announcement, her practical side had taken over and she wasn't about to be carried away by her romantic side again.

Rosalina banished all her idealistic thoughts and reached her decision quickly. The letters told her what she wanted to know. Albert sounded sensible and decent, and that's what she needed. She didn't need love, she kept telling herself.

Rosalina wasn't of a mind to tell everyone her news until she was ready, but her revelation was hastened by one piece of information the Master shared during dinner.

"I think you all should know the good news," Master Lewis said, smiling broadly as the dessert dishes were removed. "Bianca and I are getting married in a week's time."

Rosalina froze as Mrs. Harper congratulated Master Lewis. Rosalina wasn't aware of what she was doing, but she was suddenly standing. "I have something to share as well," she said.

Everyone stared at her, and it was the gaze of Master Lewis that pierced her the most.

"I'll be leaving in three days."

Her declaration was met with complete silence.

"I am sorry?" Master Lewis said politely. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

“I will be going to my relative’s house.” The lie left her mouth smoothly, without any hesitation.

“You can leave after the wedding,” Master Lewis said dismissively.

“I’m afraid it is urgent. I must leave, and I won’t be coming back.”

Camellia’s eyes filled with tears at her last words, and Rosalina felt her own eyes tear up as well. She didn’t want to upset the child, but that was how it was, and she couldn’t do anything about it. She was failing Camellia, but she was helpless to do otherwise.

“Are you serious about this?” Master Lewis asked her. “Rosalina, you are part of this family. You can’t just leave.”

I don’t want to leave, Rosalina thought. But your bride won’t let me stay. Aloud, she said, “I’m afraid I must. “

Rosalina stopped her tears through sheer force and avoided looking at Camellia.

“What about Camellia?” Master Lewis asked.

“She is old enough for school,” Rosalina said, her voice wavering. “There’s nothing more I can teach her.”

Camellia burst into tears and ran from the table, and Mrs. Harper trundled after her, no doubt to give comfort. Master Lewis stared at Rosalina with an unfathomable expression, but finally he said, “If you must.”

He left, and Rosalina collapsed onto her chair. His answer had been the final seal on her coffin. He didn't care. She would have stayed on if he'd tried to stop her, but he'd made no effort to do so. He didn't care about her in that way. In the end, she was an employee, nothing more.

Rosalina left the dining hall and went to her room. As she passed Camellia's bedroom, she heard Mrs. Harper consoling her, and Rosalina felt her heart tear. She wanted to go in and tell Camellia that it was a lie, that she didn't have to leave. But she couldn't do that.

Soon, her news would spread, and she would have to prepare herself for the questions. Rosalina sat down on her bed, suddenly tired. She would deal with everything tomorrow.



“Are you crazy?”

Gemma glared at Rosalina, but behind her glare, Rosalina saw fear and uncertainty. Rosalina knew that Gemma was afraid of losing her, and she could relate. But she couldn't let it change her decision. She hadn't told Gemma about Bianca's words, and now she felt it was the right time.

“Gemma, sit down,” Rosalina said quietly.

Gemma maintained her glare as she sat beside Rosalina on the bed. Rosalina took a deep breath and began to recount the events of what had happened.

Gemma's face went through a series of emotions before it settled on understanding. "I still don't want you to go, but if that's what she said..."

"I can't stay here," Rosalina said softly.

"I hate to admit it, but you're right," Gemma said sorrowfully. "Do you think it would help if you told Master Lewis?"

"Not one bit."

"You should comfort Camellia at least." Gemma sighed. "She hasn't eaten today."

"I'll do that. Can you handle Mrs. Harper for me?"

Gemma nodded and left. Rosalina looked out the window, into the darkening afternoon light. She had stayed in her room, and it saddened her that Camellia had done the same. But she was a child, and Rosalina had to talk to her.

Rosalina smoothed her dress, went to Camellia's room, and knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" Camellia's voice rang out.

"It's me."

"Go away!" Camellia hollered, but Rosalina disregarded her.

She opened the door and saw Camellia under her covers. Rosalina made her way to the bedside and sat down. She

touched the covers, and Camellia didn't make any attempt to throw her hand off.

"I am sorry," Rosalina whispered.

"I hate you! You are going to leave me!" Camellia shouted tearfully.

"Camellia dear. I'm so sorry, but I have no option." Rosalina tried to keep her voice strong.

"Why do you have to go? Why can't you stay?" Camellia pulled back her covers, looking at her with a tear-streaked face.

"Camellia, I..." Rosalina couldn't go on. She hugged Camellia and began to cry. "I am sorry. I wish I didn't have to go."

Camellia hugged her back, and for a few moments, they didn't break their hold on each other. When they let go, Camellia seemed better.

"Mrs. Harper told me I shouldn't be selfish," Camellia said. "She said I should let you go."

"She's wise," Rosalina said.

"But I don't know how to. Promise me you'll write." Camellia wiped her tears.

"I will." Rosalina couldn't help but admire her. Camellia was still crying, but she was doing her best to be brave, to not

show weakness. She was going to need that strength for what was to come once Bianca moved in.

“Camellia, you have to be strong. No matter what comes. Don’t ever give up,” Rosalina said.

“I won’t,” Camellia promised and gave Rosalina a hug, burying herself in Rosalina’s arms. Rosalina let the little girl hug her as she thought of the future. Was she really doing the right thing by deserting the child?



Rosalina got everything ready. She hired a coach which took a hefty portion of her money. She could go by train, but she couldn’t afford it. A coach was cheaper, and she hadn’t given Albert enough time to arrange payment for her passage. She packed her clothes and said her goodbyes. Master Lewis made no effort to dissuade her from her path, and Rosalina was ready to put everything behind her.

The only people to see her off at dawn were Mrs. Harper and Gemma. Rosalina knew that it would take at least a week to reach Linder Creek given that she had opted for a cheap coach, but she would go through the arduous journey just fine. Mrs. Harper cried as she left, and Gemma made her promise several times to write.

Rosalina bid them goodbye, and she entered the coach. The driver had taken her luggage and tied it up top for her.

Rosalina looked out the small window to wave goodbye. She wiped away her tears and adjusted her bonnet. She wouldn't cry further.

"Are you all right back there, miss?" the coach driver asked before climbing into his seat. His chubby face reflected his concern.

"Perfectly fine. Thank you," Rosalina said.

"I assume you know, but I'll remind you anyway. We'll be making a stop a few hours from now."

"Where?" Rosalina asked, surprised.

"Millsville to pick up one other passenger and to change out the horses."

"I thought that I would be in this coach on my own."

"No, miss. This is a public coach. We can take a number of people in here, and we had a telegram for one other passenger. A rancher."

"Is he going to Linder Creek, too?" Rosalina asked.

"No, miss. He'll be stopping in the town before yours."

Rosalina nodded, and the coachman turned back to his business. Rosalina was apprehensive of the man who was to come on board with her. Would he be a nice person to be cooped up with for days?

She would have to guard her possessions, for she'd heard about bandits and robbers. She looked at her handbag. Gemma and Mrs. Harper had packed some food for her: bread, fruits, and dried meat. She would have the chance to buy more on the way with the money she had tucked inside her coat, but she would have to be careful. And frugal.

Rosalina settled back into the seat and closed her eyes, ready to get accustomed to the sound of the coach moving. Everything would turn out fine. It had to.

CHAPTER 4



“Miss?”

Rosalina was startled awake to find the coachman looking at her.

“Yes?” She yawned.

“We’re in Millsville, so I thought I should inform you,” he said.

“Thank you,” Rosalina said, grateful for the time to compose herself. She fixed her bonnet and dabbed at her face with her handkerchief. Already, she was feeling a bit dusty from the journey.

She saw a boot on the coach floor before the man himself entered. Rosalina suddenly found it hard to breathe. The man shouldn’t look so impressive, but he did. He had his hat

in hand, and unruly dark hair covered his forehead. His eyes, when he looked her, were dark like the night. His face was square with an angular jaw and slight stubble. The clothes he wore accentuated his build and though Rosalina was by no means a small woman, he would tower over her if they stood side by side. He seemed to take up all the space in the carriage.

He didn't speak, but he tipped his head to her in greeting.

As they got underway, Rosalina couldn't help but sneak glances at him; he had a presence about him, something that made her heart hammer in her chest. Out of fear or excitement, she couldn't quite say, but she didn't dislike it. She kept expecting him to speak, but he remained quiet.

To avoid gaping at him, Rosalina looked out of the window. The scenery was stark in its beauty. Quite like a desert, but it appealed to Rosalina in a strange way.

"Where are you going?" the man finally spoke, startling her.

"Linder Creek," Rosalina replied.

"I see."

He didn't say anything further, so she took the initiative.

"The coachman told me you are a rancher?"

"I am. I am going to buy horses," he explained.

"I see," Rosalina said. "I hope you get good ones."

“So do I.” There was silence, and then he said, “Are you going to visit your family?”

“Yes,” Rosalina said, amazed at how quickly she was lying those days. But she didn’t want to divulge the truth to this man; somehow she felt he wouldn’t approve of it. He scrutinized her but didn’t challenge her words, and she felt strange for having expected him to do so.

“What’s your name?” he asked instead.

“Rosalina Pike.”

“Jacob Slater.”

“Do you often travel, Jacob?” Rosalina asked.

“When I need to.”

The conversation died after that. Time passed, and Rosalina continued to gaze out the window. Jacob leaned back against the seat, his hat over his face. A few hours later, the coach stopped at a small settlement, and they both got out to stretch their legs. Rosalina looked around the town, and bought a new brooch shaped into a blue flower, on a whim. She pinned it to her coat and went back to the coach where Jacob was already waiting.

“That’s pretty,” he said looking at her new purchase. Then he got into the coach.

Rosalina touched her brooch, blushed, and followed him inside. Why was she so flustered by a simple compliment?

She craned her neck outside the window to speak to the coach driver. "How much further?"

"Four more days, miss, if there are no delays."

"There won't be," Jacob said.

At his words, Rosalina got a strange sense of foreboding. She said nothing about it, for she felt rather foolish, but the niggling feeling that something bad was sure to happen remained.



Later, Rosalina was feeling hungry so she reached into her bag and took out an apple. She thought about it and took out another one, holding it out for Jacob.

"Please, have one," Rosalina said.

"Thanks."

And then it happened.

"No!" the coachman shouted. "Whoa!"

Rosalina had a split second before she felt a lurch, and the coach dipped to the left. She heard a dragging sound from the bottom side and the smell of something burning as the coach continued to spiral out of control. The door shot open and Rosalina saw the ground rise up to meet her. Her bag began to slide, and she reached for it. In doing so, she lost

her grip on her seat and felt herself slipping out through the door. She screamed, frantically trying to stop herself.

In an instant, Jacob's hand wrapped around her waist and yanked her back inside. He held her close. She struggled to brace her arms against the doorframe, working with him to stay inside the vehicle. His proximity made her self-conscious, but there was no time to concentrate on it. The horses neighed violently as the coachman sought to gain control of the coach.

"Driver!" Jacob shouted out the flopping door. "Pull the horses right! We'll jump out on the count of three. You do the same!"

Jacob held her as the coachman lurched the horses sharply to the right. The two jumped out. Jacob grasped her tightly, as if trying to take the brunt of the fall himself. They rolled on the ground and stopped with Rosalina on top of him. She sucked in air, and desperately tried to assess whether she was hurt. Beneath her, Jacob groaned. She scrambled up, and he struggled to his feet, too. The horses had torn loose and were racing off in the distance, leaving the coach in pieces.

The coachman lay a few feet in front of them, moaning. Jacob ran over to him. Rosalina followed, her body sore and aching as she ran.

"Are you all right?" Jacob asked.

The coachman shook his head, clutching his leg. "It's bad," he groaned.

Rosalina looked at his leg. An open gash was bleeding copious amounts of blood. She felt queasy looking at it.

Jacob turned to Rosalina. "Can you spare a scarf of some sort?"

Rosalina was going to shake her head, but she remembered her luggage. "Just a moment!"

She ran to the wreckage and began digging through it to find her luggage. Her bag was thankfully intact. She opened it and took out a scarf. She hurried back to Jacob, who snatched it from her.

"I'll need some water as well," he said tersely.

Rosalina nodded and got her flask. He didn't use too much of the water, just enough to clean the wound and tie it up with her scarf. The man cried out in the pain as Jacob tended to him. Rosalina could see by the way Jacob handled the wounds that he was quite adept at it. Her curiosity over the man before her grew.

He must have noticed her scrutiny. "I tend to my horses, and this is quite similar to the wounds they sustain."

She nodded, watching carefully. Finally, Jacob was done, and he tried to help the man up.

"Do you think you can walk?" Jacob asked.

The man nodded, but the pain on his face made Rosalina cringe.

“I didn’t ask you your name before,” Jacob said to the coachman.

“It’s Elliot.”

“Well, Elliot, we are going to have to walk a bit, so bear with me, all right?”

Elliot nodded, and Rosalina looked at the sky, fearing nightfall would come soon.

“It’s going to be dark. We can’t travel now,” she said helplessly. “How much farther is the next town?”

“It was going to take us about two days by coach, but on foot...” Elliot’s voice trailed off.

“We have no choice. We can make a bit of progress tonight, but we’ll find a place to rest soon. We’ll have to sleep outside tonight,” Jacob said bluntly.

Rosalina glanced around the area, dismayed. They were in the middle of nowhere; the ground under her feet was dry and cracked, and the air felt heavy. How were they going to walk to the next town like this? And who knew how long it would take? With Elliot’s leg injured, it could take three to four days, maybe even more. How were they going to survive?

Rosalina didn't voice her thoughts out loud. Jacob's confidence bolstered her even though she felt fear inching up her spine. But Jacob seemed both capable and confident. As far as she was concerned, he had proven himself by the way he'd saved them from being smashed along with the coach. But still, who knew what else awaited them?

Despite the tight wrapping on his leg, Elliot was having trouble navigating so Jacob put his arm around Elliot's shoulder to help him. Rosalina trailed behind, carrying her bag. It was all she had, and she couldn't see leaving it behind. Besides, it held the small amount of food she had left.

They didn't make it far before nightfall. Rosalina could barely make out shadows and silhouettes when Jacob stopped.

"We'll have to camp here," he said.

In the darkness, it looked to be a completely isolated area. They weren't near any stands of trees, so maybe there wouldn't be any dangerous creatures around. She was tired and still aching from the fall and was glad to have stopped. Jacob didn't act affected, although she saw the fatigue on his face even in the darkness.

She felt sorry for Elliot. With each step they'd taken, his face had looked even more grim and twisted in pain. And now, he had to sleep on the hard ground.

“Let me set down some clothes for him. To make a sort of bed,” she offered.

She took out one of her dresses and placed it on the ground. Jacob didn’t say anything, but he lowered Elliot onto the dress.

“No sense in trying to make a fire,” Jacob said. “I didn’t see a lick of wood anywhere. Will that be a problem for you?”

Rosalina shook her head and took out more articles of clothing. She folded them up so that they could be used as makeshift pillows. Jacob refused his.

“Won’t need it. I’ll keep watch,” he said. “You two go to sleep.”

“But you have to sleep,” Rosalina insisted.

She saw Jacob’s teeth glisten in the dark as he gave her the faintest smile.

“I will, but not right now.”

She wanted to argue, but her tiredness was taking over, so she nodded and lay down on the ground. Her eyelids quickly began to droop. Elliot made light groaning sounds beside her. The last image before her eyes closed was the sight of Jacob’s back as he prepared himself for the long night ahead.



It had to be the middle of the night when Rosalina awoke. Jacob was in the same position he'd been in earlier. His shoulders seemed to have relaxed, and he didn't notice that Rosalina stirred.

She thought about it. He couldn't stay on watch the entire night; it wouldn't be right to push that burden onto him. She reached forward and gently touched his shoulder. He gave a start and looked back at her.

"Please go to sleep," Rosalina said quietly. "I'll keep watch."

"I can't let a woman keep watch."

"I'm afraid you don't have much choice," Rosalina said. "The way I see it, you're our only chance at surviving this, so we can't have you worn plum out. Please rest. I can stay up for a few hours."

Jacob acted like he was going to argue, but he must have thought better of it for he nodded and accepted the folded clothing. He lay down and closed his eyes. Rosalina hugged her coat around herself and stared at her surroundings. It was a strange and lonely feeling to think about the vast empty land stretching in all directions around her. She hadn't imagined when she left her position at Master Lewis's house that she would ever become stranded like this. What a cruel fate she had.

Rosalina managed to stay awake for the rest of the night. During the long hours, she wondered if she would ever reach

Linder Creek. But there had been no signs of danger during the night, and she was grateful that she had done her duty. Elliot woke up as dawn broke, and Jacob followed soon after. Having them awake alleviated Rosalina's worries, and she was ready to carry on with their journey, whatever hardships might come.

Elliot felt slightly stronger so he could walk on his own, but they had met their worst enemy, the lack of food. They were in a barren land so there was nothing to be found; the only food they had was in Rosalina's bag which seemed like a godsend at that point.

"We should find a river soon," Elliot said. "I know there is a river around here, but as for food..."

"We'll have to go with what you have," Jacob said to Rosalina.

She nodded and opened her bag for them to see. She had a few buns—smashed in the fall but still edible, three apples, and some salted pork. The flask was their only source of water, and it was three-quarters full at that point.

"We are going have to be careful about quantity," Jacob said.

At his suggestion, they shared a bun and some pork. She saw that Jacob tried to give her more, but she handed it off to Elliot, who had a greater need. He was the injured one, and despite her hunger and soreness, she was doing all right.

Maybe Jacob sensed her anxiety because as they resumed their walking, he caught her arm.

“I know you are worried,” he said quietly. “I can’t tell you not to be, but please control yourself around Elliot. He is injured and weak and seeing us panic will make him lose hope. We can’t let him experience that.”

Jacob was right; she had to hold herself together. Their slow-moving party of three didn’t make much progress that day. They walked with few rests, but their headway was sluggish, owing to helping Elliot along. Rosalina doubted if they had logged more than a couple miles all day.

“I wish we had the horses,” Elliot said as they were going to sleep that evening.

“It would have been a whole lot easier,” Jacob agreed.

“We’ll manage,” Rosalina said, putting cheer into her voice. She hoped it didn’t ring too falsely.

Elliot moaned and repositioned his leg. “I reckon I ought to tell you that the territory we are in has had reports of bandits. If we had the coach, we could probably avoid them, but as we are on foot...”

Rosalina’s eyes widened in fear, but she recalled Jacob’s words so she turned away to hide her alarm.

“We’ll be fine,” Jacob said gruffly. “Let’s get some sleep.”

Rosalina lay down and looked at the night sky. It was clear and full of stars, but in her state of mind, she couldn’t

appreciate its beauty. Bandits? How would they fight bandits with one man injured?

She glanced over at Jacob. He was dependable, and she found herself warming toward him.

When they'd first met, she'd been cautious, but he was doing a good job for them. Throughout the day, she had watched him help Elliot along without a complaint. Jacob didn't speak much, but he showed his worth through his actions.

"Can't sleep?" Jacob asked.

Rosalina shook her head before saying, "I don't feel tired." She yearned to see his face, but in the darkness, it was impossible.

"You must be scared," Jacob said.

"Maybe a little," Rosalina admitted. "But I know that won't help me so I must keep faith."

"Brave words," Jacob commented.

"Words are always brave," Rosalina said, laughing slightly. "It's actions that count."

"You a philosopher or something?"

Rosalina laughed. "Merely a governess."

"That explains it then."

“I suppose so. I tried my best to be educated. I love to read, and I loved being a governess.”

“I didn’t get much opportunity for learning. I grew up on a ranch so there wasn’t any time to study. I had the horses to look after.” Jacob’s voice held a trace of longing.

“You regret that?”

“A little. I love horses, but I always wonder about what could have been.”

Rosalina was silent, thinking about how her life could have taken a different direction had she not been given the privilege of education.

“Have you been around horses much?” Jacob asked her.

“Not that much. I’ve never ridden one. I guess my education is lacking in that area.” She hoped her words would ease his regret a bit, and then she wondered at herself for trying to make him feel better.

“When we get out of this mess, I’ll take you to my ranch. You’d enjoy learning to ride,” Jacob said and stopped. “That is, if you want to.”

Rosalina found herself smiling. “I want to.”

She thought Jacob returned her smile, but she couldn’t be sure in the darkness. Again, she regretted that it was too dark to see his face.

“Go to sleep,” Jacob urged. “If you are going to take over for me, you need your rest.”

Rosalina settled down the best she could and closed her eyes. She thought about visiting Jacob’s ranch, and then she remembered she was betrothed to someone else, and her heart sank. She could hardly be gallivanting off to visit one man’s ranch when she was engaged to another.

Why did she suddenly regret her decision to marry Albert?

CHAPTER 5



The night passed peacefully, and they were on their way early the next day. They made better time than the previous day, but the incessant walking was beginning to wear on Rosalina. Halfway through the day, her legs felt like giving out. A hot breeze had blown over the land for hours, and her throat was parched. They hadn't found a source of water yet, and Rosalina was worried. How much further could they go with a thirst that scraped up her throat like a cactus?

Rosalina's vision began to blur, and luckily, they stopped for the day, so she didn't have to tell either of the men about it.

"How long until we get to the river?" she asked as they rested on the hard, dusty ground.

"A day maybe," Elliot said uncertainly. "Not sure. I'm confused. Fact is, I thought we would've reached it by now."

Jacob didn't comment; he had grown increasingly quiet over the day, and Rosalina knew that he shared her worries. She closed her eyes, hoping that at least sleep would bring her comfort.

It was the same on the following day, but this time, Rosalina's fatigue came faster, and she could barely go on. Her feet ached, throbbing mercilessly as she tried to keep up with Jacob. Even Elliot seemed to be faring better than she was. The dusty air made it hard to breathe, and she began to doubt if they would ever reach the river, let alone the next town.

"Let's stop," Jacob said suddenly. He turned around to look at Rosalina, who was struggling to stay upright. "We'll rest for ten minutes."

Elliot sat down on the ground while Jacob came back to her.

"I am fine," Rosalina said quickly.

"You don't look like it. Do you want some water?"

"No." Rosalina murmured. "Not unless you and Elliot have some, too."

"Let me see your feet."

Rosalina wanted to refuse, but the look in Jacob's eyes told her that he would insist, so she pulled up her dress to her ankles to show her shoe-clad feet. Jacob reached for her right foot and slowly eased off the shoe and sock. Then he

pulled off the other. Rosalina winced and looked down at her feet. They were covered in sores, red and vicious, and she shuddered at the sight of them.

“You should have said something,” Jacob said, his eyes full of concern.

“I didn’t think they were that bad.”

“I can do something to lessen the pain,” Jacob said. He began to massage her feet, lightly at first and with surprising skill. He avoided the blisters and open sores. Slowly, the pain did lessen as he said it would.

“How are you doing that? Making them feel better, I mean?” Rosalina asked, awed.

“I know some tricks,” Jacob said with a smile.

Rosalina felt drawn to his smile. Truthfully, she felt drawn to *him*, and she quickly turned away to hide her burning face.

“You are brave, but it’s all right to falter a bit,” Jacob said, continuing to rub her feet.

“I don’t see you faltering,” she said, now watching his face and the set of his jaw.

“I’m fine,” he said, squatting back on his haunches. “But I think most of us have some cowardice inside.”

Rosalina looked at Elliot, who sat with his legs stretched out before him and his eyes closed.

“Do you think Elliot will be fine?”

“I’m worried about his gash. We didn’t have anything but water to clean the wound, and out here, it could get full of pus. I have to change the dressing, but I can’t risk using up all the water.”

Rosalina blew out her breath. Jacob had moved on to her other foot, and Rosalina was feeling much better.

“Have something to eat,” Jacob said. “Build up your strength.”

“I’ll split the last bun.”

She knew Jacob was right, she needed strength. They *all* did. She ripped part of the bun and knew that Jacob was watching her every move. She was suddenly aware of everything she did, every motion of her hands, every expression on her face. She swallowed and wished that she wasn’t so conscious of him. He was close to her, so close she could practically feel his breath on her face as he massaged her foot.

She set the bun aside and pulled back her leg. “That’s enough,” she said. “Thank you, but it’s better now.”

Jacob looked surprised and dropped his hands. “All right,” he said slowly and scooted away. He stood then, and reached down to help her up. She gave him part of the bun and then hobbled over to Elliot to offer him some.

“How are you doing, Elliot?” Jacob asked, joining them. “Any pain?”

“It’s manageable,” Elliot assured them, but Rosalina saw him flinch when he said it.

“As soon as we get to the river, we’ll clean out the wound, all right?” Rosalina said.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Rosalina put her shoes and socks back on, and Jacob helped Elliot up so that they could be on their way. It wasn’t long before Rosalina’s feet hurt equally as much as before. She rearranged her socks in her shoes, trying to pad the sores a bit better, but with constant movement, the socks slipped back to their regular position. As far as she was concerned, night couldn’t come quickly enough.

When darkness finally fell, they shared the rest of her stale buns and went off to sleep. It had been a few days since their accident, and as Rosalina lay on the hard ground, she wondered if anyone was looking for them. Didn’t someone wonder what happened to the coach, or had they been written off as dead?

Before she fell into an exhausted slumber, her mind flitted to the danger of bandits. They had been lucky so far, but she had a sickening premonition that their luck wouldn’t hold. Filled with dread, she went to sleep.



It took them another day to reach the river. At that point, Jacob and Rosalina were both increasingly cautious around Elliot. As they struggled to half-carry him, the man looked ready to drop at their feet. Elliot continued to push himself beyond his limits, and though he was failing rapidly, Rosalina had to admire his tenacity.

He'd insisted on walking by himself right before they found the river. He lagged seriously behind, and Jacob said enough was enough. He grabbed the man around the waist and helped him along. Rosalina walked out in front to keep an eye out for any danger.

She had noticed that gradually their surroundings were becoming greener, and the foliage had increased. She was encouraged, knowing they'd be better able to find food. She glimpsed the tall trees and quickened her pace, hopeful that they had finally reached the river.

Rosalina heard the sound of rushing water before she saw it. She looked back excitedly. "I hear water!"

Elliot brightened up and shook off Jacob's grasp to stagger towards Rosalina. All of them lurched ahead as fast as they could, passing the few trees between them and the river. There was no vegetation around it, but water was their main objective. Rosalina looked to the east and saw what looked like a river crossing. She breathed out with relief.

They were on the right path, then, close to some sort of civilization.

Elliot gave a gasping cheer when he saw the water and fell down, sprawling on the bank in his eagerness to get a drink. Rosalina shared his enthusiasm, throwing herself down beside him. Jacob lay next to her.

Rosalina cupped her hands and drew up the water to drink. It had never tasted so sweet. She let it run over her chin and down her neck. She splashed it over her hair and face. None of them spoke for long moments as they quenched their thirst. Once she was satiated, Rosalina began to think of the journey still ahead. She filled up her flask and looked at the two men.

“We can be there in a day,” Elliot muttered, his words slurring.

“That’s good.” Jacob sounded mighty relieved.

“We should rest here for the day,” Rosalina stated. “Get up our strength for tomorrow. And we need to clean Elliot’s wound.”

Jacob gingerly unwrapped Rosalina’s scarf from Elliot’s wound. He had wrapped it so tightly, it took a while to unwind. When he did, Rosalina braced herself. The gash had crusted over with blood and pus, but thankfully, it didn’t look too horrible. Rosalina blew out her breath in relief and nearly slumped in gratitude.

“I’m going to wash it the best I can,” Jacob said. “It’s gonna hurt, Elliot. No way around it.”

Elliot grunted his consent.

Rosalina had no more scarves so she fussed with her slip, tearing a wide strip loose. She handed it to Jacob. “For a new bandage,” she said.

“Sorry about your clothes,” Elliot wheezed between gritted teeth.

“I don’t care. It’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“They’re only clothes,” Rosalina muttered, embarrassed by his gratitude.

Jacob cleaned and wrapped the wound as Elliot winced. Rosalina had the feeling that Elliot felt more pain than he was letting on. Truth be told, he looked ready to scream.

Rosalina took the chance to clean herself the best she could in the river. She was sure her hair was a mess. She hadn’t untied it from her bun so now she unraveled it and tried to get rid of the tangles by using her fingers.

She looked up to see Jacob staring at her.

“You have beautiful hair,” he said.

She blushed. “Thank you.”

Somewhat cleaned and her thirst again quenched, Rosalina felt more hopeful than she had in days. She discarded her bonnet; the filthy thing would be no use to her any longer. Her coat had been discarded as well, and she had lost some of her money in the fall. As it was, she didn't have many funds, but it wouldn't matter when she met Albert. They would marry, and that would be that.

She sighed heavily. Her heart was no longer in it. She felt an odd reluctance to meet her fiancé, and she didn't know why. After this harrowing experience, she should have been more eager than ever to locate him.

She glanced at Jacob who was now washing up. He had taken off his hat and was brushing back his hair with his fingers. His eyes were fixed on hers, and she found herself growing warm under his deep gaze. She looked away first, trying to pretend nothing was awry while her heart beat unevenly in her chest, telling her that any effort to delude herself was useless.

She was falling for the man and falling hard.



Night had come, and Elliot had gone to sleep. Rosalina wondered what time it was and guessed that it was about eight. *They* would be having dinner.

She got a lump in her throat as she thought of Camellia. How was she? Was she all right? Bianca was her mother by now. Strangely, she didn't feel the pinch in her heart when she considered this.

Maybe I am over it.

It could have been the shock of the accident and its aftermath, but something had pushed all thoughts of Master Lewis from her mind. Rosalina wasn't afraid of not making it on her own anymore; she was sure she would be fine without Master Lewis in her life.

Only one more day and they would be back in civilization. Only one more day and she would find another carriage and go meet Albert, who was surely waiting for her.

She had sent a letter to him the day before she embarked on her journey, and she was certain he would have received it by now. Was he thinking of her? He would have to be, wouldn't he? They were going to be married.

"You have the most curious expression on your face," Jacob commented.

Rosalina looked at him and smiled wryly. "I was thinking of someone."

"Your beau?"

Was it just her imaginings or did he say it with an unpleasant tone in his voice?

“No, I was thinking of a little girl actually. My charge.”

“The one you left?” Jacob said. He must have raised his eyebrows, but she wasn’t quite sure in the shadows.

“Yes, she is ten years old, and I miss her,” Rosalina said.

“Why did you leave?”

Rosalina didn’t want to answer, but it was a fair question so she took a deep breath.

“My employer was getting married and his new bride threatened to fire me, so I had to leave. I wish I could have taken Camellia with me, but of course, that was impossible. I hope the child will be fine. Her father ... he is blind to his bride’s faults.” Rosalina felt a knot form in her throat.

“Sounds like a troublesome situation to be in,” he said. “I think you made the best choice.”

“I don’t know,” Rosalina said. “I wish I could have done something.”

“Some things are outside of our abilities. It’s best to admit it and move on.” He took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I can tell you’re upset about it, but I think it’ll get better with time.”

“That’s the hope,” Rosalina whispered.

“Your family must be worried that you haven’t arrived yet.”

Rosalina remembered that she'd told him she was going to visit her family. Shame burned through her at such a careless lie.

"They'll be fine," she said, swallowing her guilt.

"My family is mostly gone," Jacob said. "My parents died in an accident when I was twenty. Ironically, like the one we were in."

Rosalina stared at him. His bravery meant even more to her now. He hadn't hesitated when he had saved the two of them by jumping wildly from the coach.

"After their deaths, I took over the ranch, and I have been running it for eight years. It's going well," Jacob said. "Well enough for me to afford some more horses."

"I've often wished I knew how to ride," Rosalina said.

"A horse is like a human being; they can get scared like we do. You have to treat them with respect, knowing they have emotions, too. You want to stroke the horse's mane first and then gently place the saddle. You must be of one mind when you ascend, and you have to communicate clearly with where you want to go."

"That sounds difficult."

"It takes time and practice, but you'll get there if you are interested," Jacob assured her.

“Isn’t anyone searching for you?” Rosalina asked, changing the topic.

“Samuel might be. He is my second in charge, and I told him that if I wasn’t back in a week then he should send someone for me.”

“Is your ranch in the same town where we picked you up? What was it? Millsville or something?”

“Yes. Near Millsville, on the outskirts of town,” Jacob said.

“You have someone to search for you. I don’t,” Rosalina said.

“What about your family?”

“I exaggerated a bit,” she finally admitted.

You have me,” Jacob said fiercely. “I’ll get you out of this, Rosalina. I promise.”

Rosalina felt her eyes fill with tears, but she turned away, not wanting to let him see them glisten in the moonlight.

“Thank you, Jacob,” she said, her voice thick with emotion.

Jacob didn’t respond, and she closed her eyes, ready to drift off to sleep.



Rosalina woke up later to take over for Jacob. As he slept, her mind was filled with all the things Jacob had said and done,

and her stomach fluttered as she replayed each word and act. What was this feeling? It was confusing, but deep. Pleasurable, yet tinged with dread. It was driving her mad, but Rosalina didn't spurn it. Indeed, she wanted to feel more of it.

As if magnetized, she found herself looking at Jacob's form as he lay in the dark. Even though she couldn't see him well, she knew what each of his features looked like as if they were engraved on her heart.

In a way, she knew more about Jacob than she had ever known about Master Lewis, even in all the years she had worked for him. Master Lewis was kind. That's all she knew about him, but Jacob, he was courageous *and* kind. He had his faults, and he admitted them. She had the feeling he wasn't stubborn, but persistent. He was loyal, and he cared about her.

She cared about him, too. A lot.

Her mind pulled itself out of those thoughts when a voice rang out in the darkness. Since none of them had spoken, someone else had to be nearby. Now they could get help. Rosalina was about to shout out, but she stopped herself. She couldn't be foolish. She had no idea who was there.

At the last word spoken, her heart stopped and she curled back, trying to look through the darkness. She thought she saw a light but wrote it off as unlikely until it brightened. The voice was going strong, singing, and it was a male voice.

“Stop that ruckus. Your voice is terrible,” one man said.

“I like singing. We got good loot today,” the other man replied.

“We’ll get more later. I heard in town that a coach has gone missing. Maybe them people is still stranded around here.”

Rosalina’s hands began to tremble, and she turned to Jacob, shaking him. He awoke instantly, and she clapped her hand over his mouth to keep him silent. He nodded, and the voices rang out again.

“We’ll get a lot of money for this gold pendant,” one man said.

“I had to tear it off the lady, but she wasn’t protesting much when we cut her throat, was she?”

They laughed, and Rosalina was sickened.

“We have to move,” Jacob whispered in her ear so low, she could barely hear him. “Wake up Elliot.”

Rosalina nodded and shook Elliot awake. Like she had with Jacob, Rosalina put her hand over his mouth. They waited for the bandits to pass, but they didn’t seem to be moving. Rosalina could still hear their voices clearly over by the river crossing.

“Follow me,” Jacob whispered.

They backed away until they were completely hidden amidst the trees.

“Do you think there’s anyone here?” one of the men asked.

“Naw, I don’t think so,” the other bandit said. “Let’s go further along.”

Their voices grew faint.

“We have to leave,” Jacob whispered again. “Slow and easy.”

Rosalina helped Elliot struggle to his feet and then picked up her suitcase. They came out of hiding and made it to the river crossing. The moon shone in jagged lights across the water. Were they going to ford the river in the dark? Terror gripped Rosalina.

The bandits were nowhere to be seen, and Jacob waded out into the water. He held out his hands to her and Elliot. The current was slow and easy, and the water wasn’t deep. Even so, Rosalina made her way across in stark fear. She tried to help Elliot, but Jacob had him firmly in hand. Rosalina’s fingers went to the brooch on her dress. She hadn’t taken it off once, and she didn’t want to lose it. It was insignificant, but as she thought of it, she remembered how Jacob had complimented it. She wouldn’t lose it.

Strange, how thoughts passed through a body’s mind at the oddest times. In no more than ten minutes, they were on the opposite shore. Rosalina felt the weight of her wet skirts, and she wrung them out as best she could.

“The faster we get to town, the better,” Jacob said under his breath.

“Now? While it’s still night?” Rosalina asked.

“Now.” His voice was brusque.

Rosalina was forced to agree with him, and they started off again. It was even slower going for her now. The weight of her wet dress dragged her down. She couldn’t see well in the darkness and could barely make out Jacob’s or Elliot’s silhouette up ahead. She stumbled and tripped on her dress, falling down on her knees. She cried out but when she looked up, Jacob and Elliot were gone. She was alone.

“Jacob?” Rosalina whispered. “Where are you?”

How was it that they were already out of sight? Rosalina stretched her hands in front of her, her heart pumping fear throughout her body. Where were they? Had they left her?

Her hand touched something rough, and it took her a second to understand that it was bark on a tree. She drooped against it as tears fell from her eyes. Where was Jacob? She didn’t dare shout, or she might attract the bandits. Who knew how close they might be. But she couldn’t stay alone like this. She needed Jacob.

Rosalina kept on moving, tripping from tree to tree.

“Jacob?” she whispered again.

Suddenly the voices came back, and she froze, hoping she was concealed adequately. She saw the light from their torch, but they were too far away for her to see their faces clearly. A cold tremor moved up her back, and she began to shiver. If they saw her, she would never be able to run away from them.

“We should look around here,” one of them called out to the other. “I reckon they can’t be far.”

Her arms tightened around the tree. Was this the end for her? Hands grabbed her and wrapped around her waist. Her mouth opened, but the scream she uttered was muffled when a hand went over her mouth. Someone was hugging her tightly, pressing her face against his shoulder.

“Don’t speak,” Jacob whispered into her ear.

Jacob. Rosalina breathed, and her arms tightened around him.

In that moment, she had never felt so relieved in her life. Jacob’s strength seeped into her, and she wouldn’t let go of him. His breath was warm against her neck as they waited for the bandits to pass, but she didn’t care about the bandits anymore. All she could think of was Jacob and basking in the safety he gave her. That was when she knew without a doubt that her feelings for Jacob went well beyond friendship.

The bandits had moved along, but Jacob didn’t let go of her. They stayed like that, pressed together, their hearts beating

against each other for a long minute. Finally, he let her go and took her hand.

“I left Elliot to come look for you,” he whispered. “What happened? One minute you were there, the next, you were gone.”

“I fell. Is Elliot all right?”

“He’s okay.”

Rosalina held onto Jacob for support, and they reached Elliot who was seated on the ground. The sky had begun to lighten, and she could make out their surroundings. They were far away from the road and hidden by a few trees.

“Rosalina, thank God you’re all right,” Elliot said when he saw her.

“You should sleep,” Jacob told Elliot. “I think we’re safe here for now, but, in an hour or so, we should move out, and we are not going to stop until we’re safe.”

Elliot nodded. A few minutes later, he appeared to be asleep.

“You should sleep, too,” Jacob told her.

“I can’t. I am too...” Rosalina couldn’t find a word to describe her condition. She was spared the need when she saw the cut on Jacob’s cheek in the growing light.

“What happened? You’re bleeding!” Rosalina reached up to touch his face.

“It’s nothing. I scratched it along a branch when I came to find you,” he said.

Her hand caressed the wound with a feather touch. Rosalina didn’t know where she got the nerve, but she couldn’t stop herself from touching him. Jacob caught her hand, holding it in his own, and cupping it on his cheek. Rosalina found it hard to breathe.

He leaned close, and she was lost in him. Their breaths mingled, their lips only a few inches apart...

In a flash of sanity, Albert came to mind and Rosalina jerked back, horrified at what she had been about to do. She *couldn’t* do this, she was promised to someone else. But the hurt and disappointment in Jacob’s moan wounded her heart.

“Rosalina, are you all right?” he asked her.

“I’m sorry, Jacob, but I...” Rosalina’s heart broke as she spoke the words. “I am betrothed to another.”

Horrible silence hung between them, and he moved away from her, turning his face.

“Then what I did was improper. Forget it happened.” His voice was cold.

She swallowed and clasped her hands to her chest. There was nothing more to be said. Her eyes burned and a sickening feeling assailed her. Had she just spurned the man she truly loved for a stranger she hadn’t even met?

CHAPTER 6



Jacob wouldn't speak to her. He avoided her by any means necessary, walking ahead and talking to Elliot instead. She knew he was trying to maintain his dignity, but she couldn't stop the stabs of pain from going through her heart. More than once that morning, she found it difficult to breathe.

Elliot must have noticed the silence between them because when Jacob was out of earshot, he spoke to her. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing," Rosalina said, pressing her lips in a tight line.

"Whatever it is, fix it. I know he's sweet on you." Elliot gave her a knowing smile, and Rosalina couldn't say a word.

She didn't want the journey to end on such a sour note, but she was powerless to change things. By night, they could see

the town ahead of them and when she saw it, she felt empty, void of emotions. She should have been ecstatic. Instead, she felt dead inside.

Elliot was the only one overtly excited by the sighting of the town, evidenced by the way he increased his pace. Jacob helped him walk, leaving Rosalina to lag behind. They reached the empty streets, and the first thing they did was look for the doctor's place so that they could get Elliot checked out.

After a bit of searching, they found the doctor's house, and Jacob banged on the door until the doctor came out, clad in his nightclothes. Elliot was taken into the back, and Rosalina was left with Jacob to sit inside the parlor of the doctor's house. Neither spoke.

The doctor came out shortly to tell them that Elliot was all right and that the wound had been cleaned and stitched up. Elliot was sleeping, and the doc wanted him to stay the rest of the night.

"Frankly, I don't know how he made it here. He had to be hurting like a bear caught in a trap," the doctor commented before bidding them good night.

"I'll be off then," Jacob said quietly.

Rosalina stared at him.

"I'm leaving. I said my goodbyes to Elliot, and now I am saying them to you," Jacob said.

“Where are you going?”

“To the saloon to get a room. Then to see about them horses,” he said. “You should get ready to go to your betrothed.”

Rosalina couldn’t respond.

“I saw a boarding house just down a ways. I’ll take you there.”

Rosalina got to her feet and trudged behind him toward the boarding house. What she really wanted to do was follow him to the saloon, get something warm to eat, and bed down in the room next to his.

Jacob stopped at the door of the boarding house, glanced at her once, and walked out of her life.



Rosalina had time to clean herself up. Her luggage had little to no clothing left, and most of it was in no condition to be worn. She put on one of the few clean pieces of clothing she had after bathing at the boarding house. She fell into bed in a near stupor and slept soundly without moving until morning.

After a hurried breakfast, Rosalina immediately went to hire a new coach that would take her to Linder Creek. This put another dent in her finances. Fact was, it cleaned her out completely. But she didn’t much care, for she seemed to have gone numb to her emotions.

Jacob was *gone*.

It was her fault, but the pain over his leaving was a physical thing, threatening to choke her with its intensity. All through the coach ride to Linder Creek, she tried not to think of him, tried to make herself forget him, but he had made a space for himself in her heart and everything reminded her of him.

The ride didn't take long, but more than once, she was frightened that an accident would happen again, and this time there would be no Jacob to save her. She was alone. But she refused to succumb to her tears no matter how much they threatened.

Her feelings for Jacob were so much more potent than what she had felt for Master Lewis. The emotion for Master Lewis was fascination, she decided, but what she felt for Jacob was love. Love that she was sure she would never experience again. Why had she let go of it so easily? But she was an honorable woman, and it was her duty to keep her commitment.

But at what cost?

Rosalina reached Linder Creek the next day. It was a busy town with many bustling people who didn't look twice at her. She touched the brooch over her breast, the one she had bought on a whim, and a tinge of hurt ran through her.

Jacob... she thought. I am so sorry. I miss you.

Rosalina remembered Albert's address, and she asked around until folks in town guided her to it. Fact was, everyone seemed to know where Albert lived, and when she inquired, most people had given her a thorough once-over.

It didn't take Rosalina long to find his residence, and when she did, she was taken aback. It was much larger than she'd anticipated. When she approached the gates, a man stared at her from within. "What do you want, miss?"

"I am Rosalina Pike. Would this be Albert Andrews's house?"

"It is. What business do you have with the master?" the man inquired.

"Could you tell him I have arrived?" Rosalina requested.

The man looked her over, nodded, and went inside. She waited for a few minutes and a different man approached her. He was better dressed and had brushed back golden hair and a decent, somewhat kindly, face. He smiled when he saw her.

"Rosalina?"

"Yes."

"I am Albert. Delighted to meet you."

He opened the gate and took her hand. Rosalina felt awkward at his touch, for she didn't know this man.

Time. She must give it time. Albert pulled her along with him, somewhat brusquely. “I expected you a while back,” he said. “What took you so long?”

“I—” Rosalina started.

She wanted to say that she had been through a traumatizing accident, but Jacob’s face came to mind, and she couldn’t speak.

Albert stared at her, and she finally said, “There were delays with the coach due to bandits.”

“I’m sorry. You should have come by train. Are you all right?”

She nodded. “I’m fine.”

“The important thing is that you are here now.” He pushed open the door to his house. “Welcome to your new home.”

The house was anything but humble. It was large and luxurious with expensive looking décor and fine furniture. Rosalina’s eyes widened at the sight of everything, and she saw the look of smug satisfaction on Albert’s face.

“It’s time for lunch. Will you join me?”

Albert glanced down at her tattered luggage with a look of distaste and clapped his hands. A maid came, and Albert handed the suitcase off to her.

“Put it in the room that’s been prepared,” he ordered.

Rosalina blinked. "But I can't stay here. We're not yet married..."

"No word of that," he stopped her. "I have it all arranged."

He led her to the dining table and motioned for her to sit next to him.

"Mrs. Pepper, lunch," he called out and turned to Rosalina. "You are more beautiful than you were in the picture."

"Thank you," Rosalina answered politely.

Your hair is beautiful... Jacob's words echoed in her mind, and her fingers tightened on her dress.

"I was thinking that we should get married in two days," Albert said. "There's no point in delaying it, right?"

"No, there's not," Rosalina said, her heart throbbing.

"We can go into town tomorrow and shop for your wedding clothes."

Rosalina nodded and looked up. Albert's face contorted suddenly, and he shouted. "MRS. PEPPER! Where's lunch?"

Rosalina jumped at the sound of his harsh voice. A middle-aged woman scurried out, holding a bowl of steaming soup. She ladled it for them, and Albert gestured at Rosalina to eat. Rosalina stared at the food, thinking of the days she had spent on the road, eating next to nothing.

"Is something wrong?"

“No,” Rosalina said and picked up her spoon.



The next day, she was taken to town. Rosalina found a dress at the seamstress’s shop, and she tried it on. It wasn’t particularly elegant, but she wasn’t *feeling* particularly elegant at that moment. In truth, the dress would look drab next to Albert’s extravagant things, but it would do. She took it off and handed it to the clerk, telling her she would take it. Then she slipped back into her own dress.

Rosalina hadn’t slept much the night before, continually waking up after dreaming that she was alone in the plains. She cried during the wee hours of the morning, thinking of Jacob and all the pain she had caused him and herself.

When she emerged from the shop, Albert gave her old dress a scowl and raised his eyebrows. He didn’t say anything until they’d climbed into in his carriage.

“We should get rid of your clothes. I’m surprised that you didn’t buy more dresses on my account. I see only one package. You *are* going to be my wife, you know, and you should have proper clothing.”

Rosalina could only nod.

Albert’s words were nice enough, but something about him seemed off. A change in his mood, a trace of impatience ... she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. He seemed to be

trying, but some of his words grated on her. Was she overthinking everything?

Albert stopped the coach in front of a different clothing store and took her inside where the clerk looked her over, taking her measurements. As far as Rosalina knew, it would take at least two days to sew new clothes, but Albert waved his money around, and the clerk promised to deliver them the next day.

Rosalina was embarrassed by this flaunting of wealth, but she decided that she was being unfair to judge Albert so quickly. Deep down, though, she knew the real issue: she was comparing Albert to Jacob, and Albert was coming up short.

They passed a jeweler's shop, and Albert stopped the coach.

"Let's go inside and see some necklaces." He sniffed as he looked at her brooch. "Feel free to get rid of that inexpensive bauble."

Rosalina touched the brooch, hurt by his assessment, but she didn't make a protest. Inside the shop, she saw many things, but nothing caught her eye. The air inside the shop was stifling, and she felt a sudden need to get outside. While Albert was distracted, she slipped out the door and stood with her back to the shop, staring at the street in front of her. What was wrong with her? Why was she being so uncooperative?

She gulped air and pressed her hands to her chest. She missed Jacob terribly, and she wanted to go back to him. But how could she? She couldn't do that to Albert. He looked so excited about their wedding. What kind of person would she be to desert him now?

Rosalina was hardly aware of her surroundings when someone bumped into her.

"I am so sorry!" a voice cried.

Rosalina stumbled back and then looked at the woman in front of her. She had long brown hair and a sharply defined face with beautiful eyes. Something about her drew Rosalina.

"Don't worry. It's all right," Rosalina assured her.

"I didn't mean to bump into you. I was distracted," the woman said with a laugh.

"It happens." Rosalina smiled.

"I'm Grace," the woman said, holding out her hand.

"I am Rosalina." They took each other's hands in a gentle shake.

"Are you new to town?"

"I am. I arrived yesterday."

"That's wonderful. How do you like it so far?"

"I'm not sure yet."

“I know what you mean. I came here more than a year ago to get married.”

Something about that sentence clicked, and Rosalina found herself asking, “You aren’t a Mail Order Bride by any chance?”

Grace blushed. “I guess I’m found out.”

“I am, too,” Rosalina hastened to assure her. She didn’t want Grace to think she was looking down on her.

“Are you?” Grace blinked. “Where’s your husband?”

“I’m not married yet. He is inside,” Rosalina said.

“I wish you all the best.” Grace beamed at her.

“Was it hard for you?” Rosalina asked.

“It was at first, but Sean is a wonderful man. My first husband died in an accident, and Sean basically taught me how to love again.”

“He sounds like a good person.”

“He is,” Grace said, touching her belly. “I love him.”

“I hope that happens to me, too.”

“I’m sure it will. You must have faith.” Grace seemed to remember something. “Sean said he would be waiting for me. I have to go. He’s been worried ever since I—” She blushed and didn’t complete her sentence. “Since you are

going to be staying in town, why don't you visit sometime? Ask anyone, they'll be able to direct you. Goodbye."

As quickly as she appeared, Grace disappeared into the crowd, leaving Rosalina bewildered. She pondered Grace's words and decided the woman was right. If Grace's husband could make her fall in love with him, Albert could do the same. She had to have faith like Grace had said.

Rosalina looked back at the store just as the door opened. Albert emerged from inside. "I was looking for you."

"I came out for some fresh air." She tried smiling, but she knew it fell flat.

"I believe we have everything we need. Let's go home," he said.

They turned toward the carriage when a child appeared in front of them. He looked to be about ten years old, and his dark hair was matted to his forehead, and his clothes hung in tatters. His eyes were large and soulful. "Could you give me a bit of food, ma'am?"

Rosalina heartstrings tugged, and she was about to ask Albert for some coins when the child went flying, landing on the ground. Albert's hand was outstretched, and he had a disgusted look in his eyes.

"We don't cater to beggars," he snapped.

The child scrambled up and stumbled off as fast as he could go. Rosalina felt as if she had been punched. That child had been about Camellia's age. Why on earth had Albert attacked a defenseless child?

"I'm sorry, Rosalina. There are scamps like him in this town. You have to be careful of them. I can't abide ragamuffins. I keep telling the sheriff that he's got to do something about it. It isn't good for the town to have such beggars about. Come. Let's go home."

Rosalina couldn't speak. A man who would hurt a child ... there was no way such a man could ever be her husband. *Ever.*

She couldn't let it happen. This was a mistake. *A huge mistake.* She had made a horrible decision, and she had to fix it.



Rosalina couldn't sleep. The events of the day had her frozen to the core, and things had only worsened from then on. Things she hadn't noticed at first came to her attention. Albert was short with his staff, and he harbored only the barest amount of respect for them. Even to her, his voice bordered on impatience.

This wasn't the man she could imagine living with or marrying. If they were to have children, would he treat them with impatience, too?

Rosalina began to sob in her bed, the tears flowing freely. She had to do something. She couldn't stay there. She just couldn't. She had to go.

Rosalina looked at her luggage. There was no point in taking the battered bag of her ruined clothes. Nor could she take anything that Albert had bought for her. She would simply disappear into the night before he woke up. She knew it was cowardly of her, but she would leave a note explaining herself. She dressed in the darkness and pinned on her brooch. She would take it with her—it was her link to Jacob and all they'd been through together.

Rosalina heard the neighing of horses in the distance and the thought of taking one of them entered her mind. It would help her to travel faster, and she could make sure the animal was returned later.

She tiptoed down the stairs, careful not to make any noise. She must disappear quietly. She rummaged around in the study until she found paper and a fountain pen. With the faint moonlight coming through the window, she was able to write a quick note. She promised to return Albert's horse soon, and she apologized for all the trouble her disappearance might cause.

Rosalina had a plan now. She would go to the town where they had left Elliot and ask if he had seen Jacob. Sending up a quick prayer, she prayed that Jacob would want her when she showed up.



The horses were in the stable. As she approached them, she remembered Jacob's words.

A horse is like a human being; they get scared like we do. You have to treat them with respect, knowing they have emotions, too. You want to stroke the horse's mane first and then gently place the saddle. You must be of one mind when you ascend, and you have to communicate clearly with where you want to go.

Her eyes went to a white horse, and she reached out to touch it. It bent its head so that she could stroke its mane. This would be the horse she'd take. But before she could do anything further, the implications of it hit her. Even with her note promising the return of the horse, she couldn't with good conscience take one, that wasn't like her at all. She was no thief. Rosalina withdrew. Whatever she would do, she would do on foot.

After all, she had spent many days on the plains; she could do it again.

Rosalina backed away and ran to the entrance of the property. She opened the heavy metal gates and slipped out. She didn't look back once as she ran toward the outskirts of town, leaving behind the promise of a secure life in exchange for a love she had so foolishly dismissed.

CHAPTER 7



By dawn, Rosalina knew she had made a mistake. She'd been overzealous at first, running quickly so that she could reach the next town, but reality came down harshly upon her. She didn't have money or possessions, all she had was the brooch, and even that was of questionable value. In her haste to leave, she hadn't even brought food or water.

How she could have been so foolhardy after her previous experience was beyond her. *Stupid* was more like it. She had acted impetuously and with *complete stupidity*. Her throat became parched quickly, and she knew she deserved it.

The sores on her feet acted up again, and without Jacob's touch, she couldn't get rid of the pain. She stayed close to the road but not on it, thinking that Albert might try to find her, and she didn't want to have to explain herself again.

Unfortunately, she soon she lost sight of the road, and went forward onto the directionless plains.

She was not only alarmed with the situation she found herself in, she was totally disgusted with herself. She also couldn't shake the notion that she was being followed.

She realized that most of her strength after the accident had been from Jacob, who had banded the three of them together and led them forward. He had been her hope, and he wasn't anywhere near her this time.

Rosalina blamed herself for letting him go. She needed him so much out there, alone again on the plains. The vast land seemed never-ending. It would have been wiser to simply turn back, but she wasn't even sure which way "back" might be. She would end up lost forever, and no one would care to look for her. She was alone in the world.

Rosalina had planned to go to the town where Elliot was, but in the heat of the moment, she hadn't thought her plan through. It could take her at least two days to find the town if she didn't die of thirst first. There had been no rivers when she had traveled to Linder Creek, at least that she had noticed at the time. So there would be no drinking.

She took each step with only one goal, to find Jacob.

It was when night fell that she experienced true fear and understood Jacob's need to stay awake as a lookout. She

couldn't go to sleep, thinking that any moment a bandit or dangerous animal might appear. What if there were snakes?

At that mental image, she huddled with her knees under her chin, crying again at her own foolishness. If she died out there alone, would anyone even remember her? Would Jacob? How she wanted to remain in his memories, to be the person he loved. Would he remember her fondly?

Somehow, she made it through the long night and when morning dawned, she traveled on, without covering much distance. Her legs became stiffer with each step. Her plan had been completely impractical. She doubted if she could make it to Elliot, and she doubted if she was even going in the right direction.

But the thought of Jacob kept her grimly determined. She would see this through—even if it was the last thing she ever did. She kept Jacob's image in her heart and bolstered herself on, urging herself to make every step count so that she could be reunited with him, however small the chance. She wouldn't let go of love so easily again.

Rosalina recalled the look of affection on Grace's face when she had run into her in town. She remembered the way the woman had glowed when she spoke of her husband. Rosalina wondered if that was what she looked like when she thought of Jacob. It was true what they said. A woman was most beautiful when she was in love.

Rosalina didn't sleep much the second night, and it caught up with her during the day. It was incredibly hot, and her hair stuck to the nape of her neck. Her vision began to blur, and she felt her legs slowly crumple beneath her. She lay on the ground and told herself she would rest for just a minute. She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.



“Wake up!”

Someone was poking her. Rosalina dreamed it was Camellia. It had to be her; the young girl was always trying to wake her up by poking her. But Rosalina had left Camellia a long time back, so who was this person?

The poking became painful. Now someone was kicking her. Rosalina's eyes flew open, and she stared up at the unfamiliar face. A scruffy, dirty, leering face.

“Look what we have here,” the man drawled. “A lonesome, half-dead woman.”

Her senses pricked, and she didn't move. “I don't have anything,” she uttered, her voice trembling.

“I didn't ask for nothing, darling,” he said and prodded her with his boot. “Get up!”

Rosalina struggled to her feet, staggering slightly.

“Let me see.” He looked her over with eyes that made her want to cover herself. “You don’t have nothing? I see something here.”

He reached forward and touched her brooch. She cringed, wanting to escape but knowing she could never get away from him in her weakened state.

He spit a glob of tobacco onto the dirt. “That there brooch ain’t too precious, but it’s a start. Who knows what else you got hiding in them clothes of yers.”

“Get back!” Rosalina cried.

He let out a guttural laugh. “Yer the one in danger, lady. Ain’t no one gonna hear no screams.” The man chortled.

Rosalina inched back, her mind desperately searching for some way to flee. The man caught her arm. In one motion, he had a knife pressed to her cheek.

“Don’t move, or I might cut ya.”

She trembled at the cold steel against her cheek. He fumbled with his free hand at her brooch, trying to unpin it. She shoved him away. As she did, she felt the knife slice her cheek. Warmth flowed down her face, but she didn’t care. She had to get away. And fast. She tried to run, but the man caught her leg, and she went down hard on the dirt.

“I warned you!” He spat at her furiously, trying to pull her towards him.

She screamed and kicked. The side of her shoe caught his hand, and the knife spun away through the air. He growled and edged forward, grabbing at her clothes. Her hands scrambled, trying to find something to hit him with, and her right hand closed on a rock. She brought it against his head with all her strength, and he screeched, clutching his head, cursing all the while. She scrambled up and ran without a backward glance.

Only one thought came to mind, she had to find the road. That was the only way. She didn't know which direction it lay, but she zagged west hoping she would find it there.

The man's shouts echoed behind her, and she mustered every ounce of strength to run faster.

She ran blindly, wildly, ignoring the pain shooting up her legs from her throbbing feet. Nothing mattered. Nothing, except finding that road. Just as she spotted what could be the road, the bandit's screams grew closer. Rosalina's body was at its limit. Her lungs were ready to explode.

It had to be a hallucination, but she fancied that she heard the sound of hooves. A carriage, maybe?

"HELP!" she screamed with the last of her strength.
"PLEASE, HELP!"

The sounds came closer, but she had to be dreaming. By then, her vision was clouded, and her legs had slowed, unable to continue. They folded, finally, and she fell to her

knees, unable to go on. She accepted her fate; she was to die there.

The bandit's shouts became louder. It was over.

"ROSALINA!"

She was delirious now. So close to death that she thought she heard Jacob's voice calling for her. But, no. She had gone crazy.

"Get away from her!"

Rosalina was prone on the ground now, her bloody face against the dirt. She heard the sound of a fist colliding with bone and the sound of something falling with a crashing thump. Familiar hands were around her, and her head fell back. She looked blankly into Jacob's dark eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" she muttered. "Am I dead?" She reached up to touch his face before her hand fell limply to her side.

"Oh, God. Rosalina, talk to me!" he begged.

Rosalina couldn't open her eyes. Her throat hurt. Her head hurt. Her face hurt. But nothing mattered anymore. She was dead. Jacob had come to her in death.

"Are you all right? Rosalina! Speak to me!"

"I ... am thirsty," she whispered. Did dead people have thirst? She tried to clear her mind, but it was all a jumble.

"I'll get water."

Something was placed against her lips, and she drank greedily. With huge effort, she opened her eyes, and her vision slowly cleared. She blinked unbelievably at Jacob's image. Was he dead, too? She shook her head. What was happening?

"You're here? How?" Her voice was weak, barely audible even to her.

"You're not dead, Rosalina. You're not. I made a mistake. A huge mistake." His eyes welled with tears. "I left you like a coward. I was a fool for letting you go. *A fool*. I came back in hopes. In hopes you aren't married yet." He gave her a pleading look.

She shook her head. "Not married," she said, her throat scraping with each word.

"Rosalina, I love you." He crushed her to his chest. "I'm so sorry I let you go. I love you."

She buried her face in him. Was it true then? He had come back for her? Was her fate finally changing?

"I love you back," she whispered.

"You're hurt." He let go and gently cradled her head in his lap. He touched the wound on her cheek. "It's stopped bleeding. He can't hurt you anymore."

She closed her eyes again.

"What about your fiancé? What happened to him?"

“I left him.”

“Rosalina...” He tenderly brushed her hair from her forehead. Leaning down close, he pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Rosalina smiled and returned his kiss with the last flagging energy she had. Even in her weakened state, her skin buzzed from his touch, and she didn’t want it to end. She silently thanked God for his mercy.

“Are you strong enough to travel? We can ride together. Then we can get a train back to Millsville. To your new home,” Jacob said. He got to his feet, scooping her up in his arms.

She raised her head enough to see his horse waiting for them.

“I’m strong enough,” she murmured. She clung to him as he hoisted her onto the horse, letting go only long enough for him to climb up behind her. As soon as they were situated, she slumped back, letting Jacob’s strength once again envelop her.

He put one arm around her, holding her close. With the other, he gave the horse a gentle slap of the reins.

“Giddy ‘up,” he said, clicking his tongue. “I’m taking my love home.”

Rosalina smiled weakly as she felt a soft breeze against her cheeks.

EPILOGUE



Dear Gemma,

I'm sorry I haven't written sooner. To be honest, I wasn't able to bring myself to write. It was too hard to think about Camellia and what could be happening to her. But things have settled down for me now, and I need to know. Was she shipped off to boarding school? Is she all right? Does she ever mention me? Is she still angry?

It broke my heart to leave Master Lewis's household. You have to know that. But I had no choice. None at all. I miss you, Gemma. I miss all that we shared together.

How are you getting on? You do still have your job, don't you? I hope this letter reaches you. If you are no longer working for Master Lewis, I'm afraid it won't.

Gemma, I wasn't completely honest when I left. I was too ashamed. But now I realize that I should have been honest with you at least. You were my best friend there, and I still consider you my best friend. Don't be too angry or disappointed with me. The truth is I didn't leave to go to my family. Fact is, I don't have any family to speak of. What I did was become a Mail Order Bride.

You will be shocked to hear that, and I don't blame you. I had looked down upon Mail Order Brides as desperate. So did you. I well remember the time that lady approached us about it, and you marched off in a snit. Well, I became desperate, just like other Mail Order Brides. I was going to lose my job. And you already know, I lost my hope of ever being considered a suitable match for Master Lewis. I should have listened to you from the beginning. You knew it was hopeless, but I hung on. What a fool I was. To think that Master Lewis would fall in love with a governess.

So many things have happened to me since I left. So many. I didn't end up marrying the man I came out West to meet. I ended up marrying a wonderful man I met on my journey out here. We had a huge catastrophe on that trip, and he showed me his courage, wisdom, and care through it all. Without even wanting to, I fell in love with him. And I'm grateful to say that he fell in love with me, too.

It's a long story, and someday, I'd like to tell it to you. What I will say now is that sometimes what seems to be a horrendous catastrophe can bring you the biggest blessings. Jacob is my biggest blessing for sure.

Someday, maybe you could take a temporary leave from your job and visit us. What fun it would be to see you again! You would like our ranch. Oh, Gemma, I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be working in my own home. To be loving a man who loves me back. To not feel beholden to a master all the time.

And the greatest news of all, which I was saving for the end of this letter is—I'm in the family way! Jacob and I will be parents. I can hardly fathom it, as I thought I'd passed the age of child bearing long ago. But age is different out here. All of us work hard to build our lives, and no one seems to care about your real age.

Gemma, please do tell me how you are. I think of you often with such fondness. Give all the staff my greetings. If you can come to visit, just let me know when. Jacob will pay the cost of your passage. Might I suggest you take a train? I found the coach to be a little more dangerous and adventurous than I'd planned on.

Your dear friend,

Rosalina

The End

CONTINUE READING ...



Thank you for reading *Governess Bride!* Are you wondering **what to read next?** Why not read *The Deserted Groom?* **Here's a peek for you:**

The first light dusting of snow was beginning to accumulate on the steps outside as the bride came down the aisle, a small bouquet of the last few black-eyed Susans in her hands. She was dressed in her mother's wedding gown, a gesture that was not to be overlooked in the small town of Culver's Creek, Missouri, steeped in tradition as it was. The veil was new, though; ordered special through the mercantile. In the marriage of his youngest daughter, the last to leave the house, Martin Connor was prepared to spare no expense.

The last of the daughters to leave the house, at least. The oldest of the four Connor siblings, and the only boy, stood

with his mother in the second aisle, watching his youngest sister proceed past the gamut of admiring gazes. Martin let his eyes rest on the young man, feeling the familiar tug at his heart. His only son, the man who would inherit the ranch and carry on the family name. Martin loved all his children, but Val had a special spot in his heart. He could only hope that it wasn't as obvious to all as he feared it was.

He sighed, turning his gaze back to Lydia. She was just eighteen, and every inch the sweetest, prettiest bride Culver's Creek had ever seen – at least, since her two sisters got married. Yes, he was proud of all his children. If they could all see the same sort of happiness that was on Lydia's beaming face right this moment, he would go to his grave content.

His wife tucked her arm through his, stepping closer. She gave him a teary-eyed smile, her face filled with fondness and love, and he put a hand over hers, pressing warmly. His heart swelled with the happiness of the occasion – and, faintly, his fear for the future. He tried his best to push the thought away. There was no use borrowing trouble...

Martin resisted the urge to press a kiss to his wife's temple. It wasn't that the townsfolk in Culver's Creek would frown on such a public display of affection between an old married man and his wife, exactly – but he had something of a reputation to uphold in this town, even now.

He did allow himself to lean closer and whisper into her ear.

“You’re as pretty as the day I married you, Bernice.”

Though she nudged him and murmured, “Oh, please,” as though his words were ridiculous, he could tell that she appreciated them all the same by the blush that stole over her cheeks. Yes, his daughters had come by their rosy-cheeked, golden-haired looks honestly, inheriting them from their mother. Val, now – Val had a different sort of look to him. Tall of form and narrow of feature, with dark hair and black eyes, and there was such an intensity to everything he did. Martin could only think that his son had inherited it from further back on the line, some grandparent who came over from Italy in the cargo hold of a tempest-tossed ship...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Susannah has always been intrigued with the Western movement - prairie days, mail-order brides, the gold rush, frontier life! As a writer, she's excited to combine her love of story with her love of all that is Western. Presently, Susannah lives in Wyoming with her hubby and their three amazing children.

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