

THE SEQUEL TO BACKWARDS TO OREGON

# Hidden Truths

A HISTORICAL ROMANCE



JAE





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*Hidden  
Truths*

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## DEDICATION

For my grandmother, who taught me that love is thicker than blood.  
And for the hundreds of readers who sent feedback e-mails and asked for a sequel to *Backwards to Oregon*.



“We tell lies when we are afraid,” said Morgenes. “Afraid of what we don’t know, afraid of what others will think, afraid of what will be found out about us. But every time we tell a lie, the thing that we fear grows stronger. It is, in fact, a kind of magic—perhaps the strongest of all. Study that, if you wish to understand power, young Simon. Don’t fill your head with nattering about spells and incantations. Understand how lies shape us, shape kingdoms.”

“But that’s not magic,” Simon protested. “That doesn’t do anything. Real magic lets you... I don’t know. Fly. Make bags of gold out of a pile of turnips. Like in the stories.”

“But the stories themselves are often lies, Simon. The bad ones are. Good stories will tell you that facing the lie is the worst terror of all.”

Dr. Morgenes in *To Green Angel Tower* by Tad Williams.  
Quoted with permission of the author.





MACAULEY COTTON MILL  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
MARCH 5, 1868

“RUN!” RIKA’S CRY STARTLED TWO crows into taking flight. “They’ll close the gates!” She gripped Jo’s thin arm and dragged her over cobblestones slick with snow. Dawn hadn’t yet broken through the clouds, but Rika knew they didn’t have much time.

Jo gasped, her breath condensing in the chilly air. “I can’t.” A coughing spell shook her slight frame and bent her in half. When she straightened, a streetlamp’s yellow gaslight revealed angry blotches on Jo’s otherwise pale cheeks. She gave Rika a smile. “Go on without me. I’ll be there in a minute. Just need to catch my breath.”

*What she needs is to find new work,* Rika thought.

The stuffy, lint-filled weave room made even the healthiest women cough. But, like Rika, Jo didn’t have much choice. With no husband and no family to take care of her, the cotton mill was her only means of support.

“No,” Rika said. The first horsecar of the day clattered up the hill, and Rika raised her voice so Jo would hear her over the stamping of hooves. “I won’t leave you here alone.”

Another cough prevented Jo from answering.

Rika’s throat constricted. She handed Jo a handkerchief and wished she could do more. But what? Maybe if she gave her this week’s pay, Jo would agree to see a doctor.

“Come on.” Rika took hold of Jo’s arm. “If we’re late...”

Just yesterday, an Irish girl had stumbled from Mr. Macauley’s office, crying and pressing a ripped sleeve against her bleeding lip.

“That’s for letting my looms sit idle after the five o’clock bell,” William Macauley had shouted after her.

No one had said a word. No one dared to.

One arm still around Jo, Rika hurried them along rows of elms that bent beneath the harsh wind. They struggled across a small bridge. Rika sucked in a breath as the wind's icy fingertips drove a spray of water through her worn skirt. "Careful," she said. "Don't slip."

Finally, the flickering streetlamps revealed the mill's four-story brick building. The tall chimney already leaked sooty smoke into the dark sky, blotting out the stars.

The shrill ringing of a bell shattered the silence.

"Run!" Rika shouted.

A girl, no older than thirteen, pushed past them and hurried up the steps, probably on her way to the spinning room on the first floor.

The bell rang a second time as they raced through the doors of the cotton mill. Beneath the soles of Rika's worn boots, the floor vibrated. Even the walls, though made of brick, seemed to quiver.

*Darn.* Rika dug her nails into her palm.

The overseer had already pulled a cord, setting the gigantic waterwheel in motion.

She slipped into the weave room, hoping to get her looms going before the foreman climbed onto his high stool and found her missing. *What's this?* She squinted through the lint-filled air.

Jo's looms were already moving, the shuttles hissing back and forth. One of the women winked at Jo.

*Lord bless them. They covered for us.* Rika squeezed Jo's hand and hurried to her own workplace. Her steps faltered and her smile waned when she saw her looms—three unmoving objects in a sea of bustling activity. No one had set her looms in motion. No one had even noticed her missing.

No one but William Macauley. He towered over her looms, a golden pocket watch in his hand, and tapped the faceplate with a chubby finger. Thick lips blew cigar smoke into her face. "You are late, Miss..."

Rika struggled not to cough. "Aaldenberg," she said, knowing he never remembered the names of his employees. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Macauley. It won't happen again."

"Damn right, it won't." He snapped his watch shut. "I don't need lazy gals running my looms."

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Rika trembled. Was he about to fire her? *Think! Say something!* She pressed her palms together as if praying. “I swear I left the boarding house on time, but um...I had...um...female problems and had to visit the outhouse.” It wasn’t a lie, just a creative interpretation of what had happened. After all, a female had made her late.

Mr. Macauley’s plump cheeks flushed, and he bit down on his cigar.

Rika held her breath. The lump in her stomach rose to her throat.

He stabbed his finger at the rows of looms rattling and whirring around them. “Then how come all the other womenfolk started work on time?”

*Because they didn’t care enough to stop and help Jo.* But saying that would get Jo fired. Once, a girl had fainted in the weave room’s humid heat. The overseer had told her, “We’ve got no place for a sickly girl,” before putting her out on the streets.

Rika bowed her head. “It won’t happen again, Mr. Macauley. I promise.”

His cheeks still flushed, the old goat grunted but seemed to accept the apology.

*Ha!* Rika clamped her teeth onto her lower lip to hide a triumphant smile. She knew he wouldn’t be eager to discuss the particulars of “female problems.”

“I’ll take the delay you caused out of your wages.” Mr. Macauley puffed on his cigar and blew smoke into her face. “I’m sure you agree one week without pay is fair.”

One week? Rika coughed and bit the inside of her cheek. She would have to dig into her savings to pay for her room and board. How would she ever save enough to make it out of the mill if things continued like this? Worse, she wouldn’t be able to give Jo money so she could finally see a doctor. She clenched her fist behind her back. For a moment, she thought about arguing, trying to offer him one day’s wages, but she knew any protest would anger him even more. “Of course,” she mumbled, gaze lowered to the floor.

Mr. Macauley brushed lint off his cravat. “I’m warning you, girl. I’ll have the overseer keep an eye on you. If you’re late again,” he stabbed his hand forward, making cigar ash rain down on her, “you’ll be out of a job.” He pocketed his gold watch and strode into the whirl and hiss of the looms.

Rika pressed a hand to her stomach. Fear snuffed out her momentary relief. She'd avoided disaster this time, but how much longer would she be able to care for Jo and keep her job?



Hours later, Rika's ears were ringing. All around her, water-powered wheels and leather belts whirred. Two hundred looms clattered as the harnesses lifted and lowered the warp threads. Her gaze flew left and right, following the paths of the shuttles. After each pass of the shuttle, a comblike bar hammered the woven threads into the cloth's web.

*Darn! A broken thread.*

Rika sprang into action. She hit the lever, bringing the loom to a shuddering halt. She reached into the machine, fished out the broken ends, and, without looking, tied a weaver's knot. It had taken her a long time to master the skill, and the Macauleys weren't generous enough to let the women learn the technique during work hours. Rika had practiced under Jo's tutelage by candlelight in their room, tying knots until her fingers bled.

She shook off the memory and jammed the lever back into place. The loom roared to life again. Rika glanced at her other two looms. Sweat ran down her face, and she dabbed at her forehead with her apron. Her damp bodice clung to her chest no matter how often she tugged it away from her overheated skin. Despite the cold outside, steam wafted through the weave room. It kept the cotton threads from drying out and ripping, so she didn't dare open a window.

Rika took a deep breath and then coughed when she inhaled a lungful of floating lint. Dust and the lingering odor of sweat and oil burned her nose.

Finally, the bell rang, announcing the end of their workday.

*Thank the Lord.* Rika signaled for the cloth boy to gather the woven cloth and walked toward Jo, who still hurried from loom to loom. "Jo," she shouted.

Her friend kept on working. After three years in the mill, Jo's hearing had been affected by the noise of the machines. Rika vowed to make it out before the same happened to her.

"Johanna Bruggeman!"

"Oh!" Finally, Jo seemed to notice the other women filing out of the room. A tired smile flitted over her face when she turned to Rika. "Let's

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

get out of here. My feet are hurting something awful.” Damp strands of normally white-blond hair, now darkened to the color of wheat, stuck to her thin face.

When Rika opened the mill’s heavy door, darkness had fallen. Cold air hit her like a punch, and she shivered as the wind cut into her sweat-dampened cheeks. After the weave room’s humidity, the dry winter air burned her lungs.

She tugged Jo against her side, hoping to protect her friend’s thin body from the wind, and they set off for home. *If you can call it that*. Rika slowed her steps to adjust to Jo’s shuffle. Like most mill girls, they were renting a room in the crowded part of town east of Tremont Street.

“What did Mr. Macauley say to you this morning?” Jo asked when they paused to let a beer wagon rumble past. “He didn’t catch you being late, did he?”

Rika lifted her skirt and stepped over a half-frozen puddle. “Don’t fret. He just gave me an earful, that’s all.”

Candles flickering in the boarding house’s narrow windows beckoned, promising rest, warmth, and food, at least for a few hours. But when they crossed the street, half a dozen young women sat on the stairs or perched on the banister, bundled up in their coats.

“What are you doing outside?” Rika asked. “Don’t tell me there’s vermin again?” Her scalp itched at the memory of last summer’s lice, and the thought of again finding tiny teeth marks on her brown bread made her stomach roil.

“No,” one of the women answered, shivering. “Too cold even for vermin. Betsy is inside, talking to her gentleman friend. She’s giving each of us a penny so that they can have the parlor to themselves for an hour, and we don’t want to be cooped up in our rooms.”

While Rika longed for some fresh air too, she worried about Jo catching a cold, so she led her inside and up the creaking stairs.

Mary-Ann’s voice came from within their third-story room. “It’s my turn.”

“But I got to it first,” Erma answered.

*Not again*. Rika was sick and tired of the old argument. She opened the door. “Stop squabbling. Let Jo have the washbowl first.”

“That’s all right.” Jo sank onto the bed she shared with Rika. The small room lacked other places to sit. “I think it’s your turn anyway.”

Huffing, Erma retreated from the washbasin. “I’m going down to write a letter home.”

Rika folded her coat and apron and set them on the trunk next to their bed. Without looking at Jo or Mary-Ann, she slipped out of her bodice, skirt, and petticoat. Goose bumps pebbled her flesh in the chill air. She stepped toward the washstand and ran a wet cloth over her pale skin.

After slipping into her only clean skirt, she shoved her feet back into the worn shoes. They no longer seemed too large, as they had this morning. When she had first started working in the mill, Jo had taken her under her wing, happy to befriend another girl from a Dutch family. She taught her to buy shoes one size too big so they’d still fit her swollen feet in the evening.

The ringing of the supper bell made Rika jerk. “Hurry, Jo!” She passed her friend the washcloth and laid out a clean skirt and bodice for her.

“You go on.” Jo didn’t move from the bed. “I’m not hungry.”

*Not hungry?* Rika eyed her slight friend. Jo had lost weight during the last few weeks, and she couldn’t afford to miss meals. “Jo,” she said. “Come on. Just a few bites.”

“No. Go on.” Jo shooed her away. “I’ll stay and read my letters.”

The sound of feet dashing down the stairs made Rika look up. If she didn’t hurry, her place at the table and most of the food would be gone. “I’ll try to bring you some bread and cheese. Are you sure you’ll be fine? I can stay and keep you company.”

“No, go.”

“Promise you’ll go see a doctor. They got lady doctors at the hospital now.”

“What would they tell me? To rest? To quit working in the mill?” Jo shook her head. Her voice was calm, as if she had long ago accepted her situation. “I can’t afford either.”

Rika drilled torn fingernails into her palm. “But maybe there’s a tonic or syrup that can help.”

“I can’t waste money on that. I need every dime when I go west. Now go, or the others will eat your supper.”

“But—”

Jo opened her mouth to interrupt, but coughs cut off her words. Her face flushed, and she waved Rika away.

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With one last glance, Rika hurried to the dining room.

Tin plates clattered, and chairs scraped over the floor. Girls and women shouted up and down the three long tables, adding to the roaring in Rika's ears. She squeezed in between two girls and snatched the last potato. The first few forkfuls of beans landed in her stomach without her taking the time to chew thoroughly or enjoy the taste.

At breakfast and lunch, the factory bell hurried them along, and Rika gobbled down her food to satisfy her growling stomach. Now she found it hard to eat slowly. Minutes later, she mopped up the bacon grease on her plate with a piece of brown bread and became aware of the other women's conversation.

"Did you hear about poor Phoebe?" Mary-Ann asked.

The women shook their heads and stared at Mary-Ann.

Rika listened but said nothing, using their distraction to slip a slice of bread into her pocket.

"What happened?" Erma asked.

"She got her hair caught between a belt and one of the shafts," Mary-Ann said. "Scalped her from forehead to the back of her neck."

The girl next to Rika gasped.

Rika touched her own hair. Factory rules demanded that the women wear their hair up and tucked under a scarf, but accidents still happened. Last week, a weaver had lost a finger in the machinery, and the month before, an unsecured shuttle put out a girl's eye.

"I'm taking up a collection for the hospital fees," Mary-Ann said. "So if you can spare a few pennies..." She looked at the other women.

Rika reached into her apron and rubbed her thumb over a coin in her pouch. Five cents that could help fulfill her dream: getting out of the cotton mill and finding a place to call her own, maybe running a seamstress's shop or a small boarding house. Five cents that could help Jo, buying better food or a syrup for her cough. She clamped her hand around the coin until it dug into her skin.

"Hendrika?" Mary-Ann tilted her head. She held out her hand, fingers cupped around the coins the other women had given for Phoebe.

Sighing, Rika handed over the nickel.





When Rika returned to their room, Jo was sitting up in bed, slumped against the pillow. Her eyes were closed, and an unhealthy flush painted her normally pale cheeks.

“Jo?” Rika whispered, then remembered that Jo wouldn’t hear her. She raised her voice and repeated, “Johanna?”

Jo opened her eyes. “How was supper?”

“Good.” No use telling Jo about Phoebe’s accident. It would upset her and cause another coughing spell. Rika reached into her apron pocket. “Here. I brought you some bread.” The bread’s aroma evoked childhood memories of being forced to leave the warmth of her father’s bakery and walking Boston’s frozen streets, peddling her father’s wares until her feet blistered. Back then, she’d dreamed of a better life, of a place where she belonged and was loved for who she was, not just how much bread she sold. She shoved the thought away. Love was a childish dream. All she wanted was to own a home, no matter how small, that no one could take away from her.

Jo took the slice of bread and held it in her hand without eating. “Thank you.”

Rika’s gaze fell on Jo’s feet hanging over the side of the bed as if she hadn’t possessed the strength to take off her boots. She sat on the bed and grasped one foot. Cotton dust colored the worn boots a mousy gray, and Rika tried to give them a good polish with the edge of her apron.

Groaning, Jo lifted her head. “Don’t bother. You won’t get these old things to shine.”

Rika gave up, unlaced the boots, and took them off to make Jo more comfortable. “Want me to help you wash up some?”

“I’ll do it in a little while, when I get up to use the necessary.” Jo pulled herself higher up in bed. “For now, I just want to rest a bit and read my letters.”

“Read?” Rika looked at the creased pages and the battered envelopes on Jo’s lap. “You mean recite by heart. Don’t you get tired of reading them over and over again?”

“Tired?” Jo pressed a handkerchief to her lips. “Never. Listen to this: ‘The land here is lush and green, and the air smells of pine, spring grass, and apple blossoms. I do believe that you will find it a real healthy climate when

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you come to live with me.’ Doesn’t that sound heavenly? How could I get tired of it?” She sighed. “Just one more week until I catch the train west.”

“Then why are you sighing?” Rika asked. It had sounded like a sigh of resignation, not one of longing. “I thought you were looking forward to marrying your Philip.”

“Hendrika Aaldenberg! You know quite well that his name is Phineas.” A smile curled the edges of Jo’s lips. It was a game they had often played in the past few months, meant to lift Jo’s spirits and ease Rika’s gnawing worries about Jo’s health. “Of course I’m looking forward to going west and becoming his wife. I just wish you would change your mind and come with me.”

The conversation was as old as Rika’s pretending not to remember the name of Jo’s future husband, wrapping around them like a worn coat that comforted with its warmth and familiarity. “Go west and marry a man I don’t even know?” Rika shook her head. An image of Willem flickered through her. She shivered as she again felt his bloodshot eyes staring at her as if she were a stranger while she helped him to bed. “He could turn out to be a drunkard or—”

“Or...” Jo coughed. “Or he could turn out to be the man of your dreams.”

“I haven’t dreamed of any man.” Rika placed Jo’s boots next to the bed. “But I hope you become real happy with Paul.”

Jo held her ribs, this time from laughter, not coughing. “Phineas.”



Rika rolled around and pulled the thin quilt over her ears. Nights in the boarding house were as noisy as days in the weave room. Jo coughed and wheezed next to her, and in the other bed, Erma snored more loudly than Rika’s brother and half siblings had ever managed.

With a grunt, Rika turned to face the wall. The lumpy straw ticking beneath her rustled.

The snoring stopped for a second, then resumed twice as loudly.

She wanted to yell. How would she make it through a fourteen-hour workday without a wink of sleep? She threw her boot across the room. It thumped against the wall above Erma’s head.

At last, the snoring ended.

The popping and chirping in her ears never stopped, though. Sometimes at night, when everything was quiet, she still heard the incessant clattering of the looms. If she wasn't careful, she'd end up as hard of hearing as Jo.

Finally, long after midnight, Jo's coughing ceased, and Rika fell into an exhausted sleep.



"Hey, Hendrika!"

A hand on her shoulder pulled Rika from sleep. She blinked open sleep-crusted eyes and stared into the semi-darkness of the room.

Erma stood next to her. The glow of the kerosene lamp created a halo around her head. "I think this," Erma set one dusty boot on top of Rika's chest, "belongs to you. And 'cause you were so busy throwing boots tonight, you and Johanna slept right through the bell. You'd better hurry if you want to make it to the mill on time."

"Darn!" Rika threw back the quilt. The boot dropped to the floor, and she scrambled after it. "Jo, get up. We can't be late again." Her tired arms and legs protested as she struggled into her petticoat and pulled up her skirt.

Jo was still bundled up under the covers. One arm stuck out beneath the extra blanket she had heaved on top of herself.

"Jo!" Rika gave her a shove.

Jo didn't move.

The slice of bread lay untouched on the trunk next to the bed. In the low light of the kerosene lamp, Rika caught a glimpse of a crumpled handkerchief, dotted with brownish spots and tinged with the gray lint that had accumulated in Jo's lungs. Hastily, she closed the buttons on her bodice and bent to shake Jo awake.

Her hand gripped a cold shoulder.

The coldness raced up her arm and through the rest of her body. An icy lump formed in her stomach. "Jo?" she whispered. "Jo, please!"

No answer.

With trembling fingers, Rika rolled Jo over and stared into the face that had lost its feverish color. "Oh, no. No, no, no." She pressed both hands to her mouth. "One more week. Just one more week. Then you get out of here."

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Tears burned her eyes. She stroked the stiff fingers. They were still clamped around one of Phineas's letters.

"Hendrika, Jo, come on," Erma called, already halfway out the door. "If you're late again, you're gonna be fired."

Rika didn't move from the bed. She slid the creased paper from Jo's hand, folded the letter, and returned it to its envelope.

TRAIN STATION  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS  
MARCH 7, 1868

“NO, MA’AM.” THE MAN BEHIND the counter shook his head. “I can’t give you a refund on this ticket.”

“But you don’t understand.” Rika held out the ticket. A plume of dark gray coal smoke rose from the locomotive huffing and puffing its way out of the railroad station. Soot tickled her throat, and she coughed. “The ticket is valid, and I need the money.”

“No refund,” he shouted over a whistle blast and pointed at a small mark stamped on the ticket. “See? You have to either use the ticket by boarding the train next Friday or let it go to waste.”

Rika stared at the square piece of paper in her hand. So Jo’s beau hadn’t trusted her not to turn the ticket in for cash. *And why should he? He doesn’t know her from Eve.* Only a fool trusted strangers.

She shoved the ticket into the pocket of her thin wool coat, nodded a thank-you, and walked away.

*What now?* How else could she pay for Jo’s funeral? Her savings and Jo’s would cover it, but then how would she continue to pay rent now that she’d lost her job?

As she stepped off the curb, a horse let out a startled whinny and veered to the left, almost colliding with a cart.

“For heaven’s sake, pay attention, Miss,” the driver of the brougham yelled.

“Sorry,” Rika mumbled and hurried away. She stumbled along streets and alleys.

Where to? Erma and Mary-Ann couldn’t help. They’d already given half their wages to Phoebe, the scalped girl. Even if they had money, Rika doubted they would help. They’d been Jo’s friends, not hers, and now that

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Jo was dead, they wanted to save their money for the living. Everyone had liked smiling Jo, but Rika knew her own gap-toothed grin didn't warm any hearts.

Certainly not Mrs. Gillespie's. When Rika reached the boarding house, her landlady dragged a carpetbag through the front door and set down a slender box next to it.

Rika trudged up the steps. She stared at the box with its familiar purple and green stains. *Mama's box of paints!* She glared at Mrs. Gillespie. "What are you doing? These are my things."

Mrs. Gillespie dropped Rika's old pair of shoes onto the box. "The mill is sending over half a dozen Irish girls, and I need the space."

Trembling, Rika clutched her fingers together. "You can't just put me out on the street."

"I can't afford to keep you on if you're no longer paying rent," Mrs. Gillespie said.

Bile crept up Rika's throat. She swallowed. "I'll pay. Really, I have enough to pay for a month."

"And then what?" Mrs. Gillespie crossed her arms and peered at Rika from her position on the top stair. "How will you pay the month after that, now that you lost your place in the mill?"

So she had heard already. Rika's shoulders slouched.

"Good luck, Miss Aaldenberg." The landlady turned and stepped into the boarding house.

"No, no, no, you can't just—"

The door swung closed between them.

The sound sent a thousand panicked thoughts ricocheting through Rika's mind, leaving behind a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her knees gave out. She sank onto the cold stairs, between the carpetbag and the paint box, and cradled her head in her hands.



"Amen." The pastor closed his Bible, nodded at Rika and the gravediggers waiting nearby, and walked away.

Rika stared into the open grave. *Oh, Jo. Why is life so unfair sometimes?*

When one of the gravediggers cleared his throat behind her, she gave herself a mental kick. No use lamenting over things she couldn't change. She said her final good-bye to Jo and left the cemetery.

She wandered Boston's streets, keeping on the lookout for offers of work or an inexpensive place to stay but finding neither. Her steps led her to the colorful stands and carts of the market, where she clutched the carpetbag to her chest and squeezed past two men haggling over a fish. The smell of bread and smoked meat made her stomach growl. She hadn't eaten since yesterday, and market day with its smells and sights made her head spin. In search of food she could afford, she stepped around the yardstick of a vendor measuring cloth.

"Crunch bread," a deep voice called across the street, trying to be heard over the other peddlers. "Boston buns! Apple bread fresh from the oven."

That voice! She knew it. A shiver raced through her. She ducked behind a stand piled high with vegetables and peered at the man.

The white apron covered his barrel chest, and the hands resting on the pushcart were as large as she remembered. Rika's heart stuttered, then calmed. It couldn't be him. Her father was in his fiftieth winter, and the man selling breads and pastries seemed younger than Rika.

"Nicolaas," Rika whispered. It had to be him. When she'd left home six years before, he'd been just a boy, not yet twelve years old. Now her little brother was all grown up. She craned her neck and let her gaze slide over the crowd, making sure her father wasn't with Nic.

When she realized he was alone, she blew out a long breath and hurried across the street.

Nic grinned a welcome. The twinkle in his brown eyes still reminded her of their mother. "Want a loaf of apple bread? For you, just two pennies."

"No, thanks, I—"

"Seed bread, then?"

"I don't want any bread. I'm—"

His grin turned into their father's angry grimace. "Then get out of my way. I don't hand out charities." He kicked her as if she were a stray dog.

Rika cried out at the sharp pain in her shin. She clutched her skirt and stared up at Nic. The brown eyes that had once looked at her with adoration now held only cruel indifference.

"Want more of that?" he asked when she still didn't run.

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So her brother had become a man who kicked people when they couldn't afford his bread. Rika's chest burned. "If Mother could see you now, she would be ashamed."

"How dare—" He lifted his fist, then stopped and blinked. "Rika? Hendrika? Is that you?"

Rika nodded but kept her distance. She no longer knew him or what he was capable of. Six years under their father's tutelage had changed him from a shy boy into a hard man. To their father, being kind was a sign of weakness.

"Lord, you have changed!"

"So have you," she mumbled.

"What are you doing here? Are you returning home?"

She shook her head. The bakery had never been her home, just the house where she grew up. She had promised herself she would never live there again. But where else was she supposed to go? She had spent the last two nights in the poorhouse, where she had to share a bed with the feeble-minded, the drunk, and the insane. She'd tried to find work in Boston and had gone to the hospital to ask for a job even though she had never wanted to work as a nurse again after the horrors of the war. But the war was over now, and the hospital no longer needed so many nurses. Immigrants, fresh off the ship, worked for next to nothing. No one wanted to employ Rika, and Mr. Macauley had gotten her blacklisted, so no other cotton mill would take her in either.

After losing Jo and her job in the mill, there was nothing left for her in Boston. She needed a new start somewhere else. Her fingers closed around the train ticket in the pocket of her worn coat. *What if I traveled to Oregon in Jo's place?* She dismissed the thought as crazy, but once it had taken root, she couldn't forget about it. Not allowing herself to hesitate, she straightened her shoulders. "I'm going west."

Nic nodded but didn't ask for details. "You have a husband?"

Again, Rika shook her head. "The war left me a widow."

"Then you won't make it very far."

Her father had told her the same before she had left home. The hard, patronizing look in Nic's eyes reminded Rika of their father—and it made her even more determined to go to Oregon. She clenched her jaw. "I'll be fine." If she made do with a piece of bread and a bowl of beans a



day, she would make it to Oregon with the money Jo had saved for the journey. “Good-bye, Nic. Take care of yourself, and don’t become too much like Father.”

Without waiting for an answer, she stepped into the crowd and let the noise of the market wash over her, hoping it would drown out her pain.

POST OFFICE  
CHEYENNE, WYOMING  
MARCH 18, 1868

“ALL ABOARD! BOISE, UMATILLA, THE Dalles!”

Rika lifted her wrinkled skirts with one hand and ran to catch the stagecoach before it could depart. The train that brought her to Cheyenne had been late, and if she missed the connecting stage to The Dalles, she would be stuck in this busy little town for three days.

She almost collided with a man who was lugging a large sack toward his wagon. A mule brayed next to her, and Rika jumped and dropped her carpetbag. She snatched it up and hurried toward the red and golden stagecoach.

The driver sent her a glare. “Come on, Miss. I don’t have all day.”

Rika produced one of Jo’s tickets. When he nodded, she handed up her carpetbag, climbed into the stagecoach, and squeezed into the only free seat. “Good day,” she said to the other travelers.

The well-dressed, portly man next to her tipped his forehead, where the brim of his hat normally rested. “Welcome, young lady. James Kensington at your service.”

Instead of introducing herself, Rika asked, “Are you traveling to The Dalles too?”

“Yes. I signed up for the whole four weeks of dust and misery.”

Misery? Surely nothing could be worse than the last five days spent in the stuffy passenger car of that box-on-wheels calling itself a train. Her back still hurt from the hard wooden bench, and she couldn’t get the coal soot out of her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Kensington said, “but I didn’t catch your name.”

There it was, the dreaded question.

*Better learn to be convincing now.* “Johanna Bruggeman,” Rika said and suppressed a shiver. Her father had never talked about God, but surely taking the name of a dead woman was a sin.

Mr. Kensington gave her a friendly smile. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Bruggeman.”



Hours later, Rika finally admitted to herself that the stagecoach was indeed worse than the train. The coach’s wheels bumped over a rock, and she grabbed the leather strap dangling from the ceiling. Mr. Kensington crowded her from the left, while a mailbag pressed against her feet from the right. Every now and then, her knees collided with that of the traveler facing her in the cramped space.

“You hungry?” Mr. Kensington held out a piece of cold ham.

“Oh, no, thank you.” Rika pressed a hand to her belly. Every time the stagecoach lurched, her stomach did the same. She had no memory of the long journey across the ocean when she had been just one year old, but she imagined her parents must have felt like this. With the leather curtains closed to keep out the dust, the inside of the coach was as stifling as the train’s passenger car, despite the March breeze outside.

“In a year or two, once the transcontinental railroad is finally done, we’ll make it from the East Coast to the West Coast in just seven days,” the man opposite her said.

As heavenly as that sounded to Rika, it was of no use to them now. She had been traveling for days and was still nowhere near the Willamette Valley.

The coach slowed, and Mr. Kensington stiffened. His hand crept to the mother-of-pearl grip of his revolver.

“Easy, easy,” another traveler said. “Probably just a rest station. No need to worry.”

“I’ll stop worrying when we arrive in The Dalles,” Mr. Kensington said. With the ruts and rocks in the road, his interrupted words sounded as if he had the hiccups. “This is a major route. Bandits and marauding Indians could lurk behind every bush.”

The only other woman on the stagecoach gasped.

*Surely he’s being overly dramatic.*

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

The stagecoach rocked to a halt before Rika could ask, and her backside rejoiced when she climbed off the stage to stretch her cramped legs.

Just a few minutes later, they were on the road again with six fresh horses.

Silence settled over the travelers, though sleep was impossible on the swaying coach.

Rika took the bundle of letters out of her coat pocket and smoothed her finger over the carefully knotted ribbon that held Jo's treasures together. Jo and Phineas Sharpe had been corresponding for six months, and now she held half a dozen letters on her lap.

She undid the knot and slipped the first letter from its envelope. A newspaper advertisement landed in her hands, and she lifted it to her eyes to read the printed text despite the coach's swaying.

*A good-natured, hardworking fellow of twenty-five years, six foot height, is heartily tired of bachelor life and desires the acquaintance of some maiden or widow lady not over twenty-five. She must be amiable, loving, and honest. Please respond to Phineas Sharpe, Hamilton Horse Farm, Baker Prairie, Oregon.*

Honest. The corners of Rika's mouth drooped as if she tasted something foul. Lying and pretending had always come easy to her. With a father like hers, she'd had ample practice.

She stared at the advertisement. *How strange. What kind of man orders a bride through the mail?* But the answer was clear. *Someone as desperate as you.* She folded the advertisement and straightened her shoulders. This couldn't be worse than marrying Willem. She wanted a house and a secure position, and maybe Jo was right. Few women ever got a house of their own without marrying.

She studied the artful pen strokes on the letter and read some of the sentences. Phineas Sharpe was a simple ranch hand, yet his words had a poetic beauty that surprised her.

Deftly, she put the letter into its envelope. She'd never allowed herself to be blinded by beauty. Her mother's art, though beautiful, hadn't filled her siblings' stomachs when her father was too drunk to work.

When she bundled the letters, her glance fell on the dented tintype Jo had placed between two envelopes.

The small, slightly out-of-focus image showed a blond man sitting stiffly with his hat on his knees. He craned his neck as if he was uncomfortable in his starched shirt, worn only for the occasion of having his image taken. His hair was parted on one side and his handlebar mustache neatly trimmed, probably from a recent visit to the barbershop.

Rika had never cared for mustaches.

With every mile on the bumpy road to Oregon, her doubts grew. Had her desperate decision been foolish? If she found out Phineas Sharpe had misrepresented himself and was neither good-natured nor hardworking, what would she do? What if he discovered she was not the woman who had sent him the letters? Could she take the next stage out of town and go home?

Rika shook her head. She had no home, not for a long time.

*No. There's no way around it.* She would have to become Mrs. Phineas Sharpe and get used to a mustache.

HAMILTON HORSE RANCH  
BAKER PRAIRIE, OREGON  
APRIL 18, 1868

“PHIN?” AMY SHOVED OPEN THE creaking door.

Phin flinched and whirled around. His razor dangled from his fingers, and the scent of castile shaving soap filled the small cabin. “Damn it, Amy. If you keep comin’ in like this, I’m gonna kill myself one day.” He wiped a drop of blood from his throat and turned back around. “Or your father will do the killin’ for me. A young, unmarried lady visitin’ a bachelor without a chaperone...”

“You’re our foreman. How else can we organize our workday if Papa or I don’t come to talk to you?”

Phin’s blue eyes met hers in the mirror. “Talk about it over breakfast at the main house?”

“With Mama there to try and get me out of the most interesting things? No, thanks.”

“Don’t know why you bother,” Phin said. “Your mama always knows what you’re up to anyway. Your parents never keep secrets from each other.”

*Yes, because they have nothing to hide. Unlike me.* She pushed the unwelcome thought aside and fiddled with the edges of a saddle blanket hanging over a chair. “Besides, most people would say I’m not a lady.” Not that she cared. If it meant being like the young women in town, Amy wanted no part of being a lady.

“I’d give anyone who said that to my face a good thrashin’.” Phin’s jaw clenched beneath the shaving soap. Then his expression softened. “You’d better learn to knock or meet me at the main house anyhow. I’m not gonna be a bachelor for much longer.”

“What? You’re joking, right?” To her knowledge, Phin wasn’t courting anyone. She rode stirrup to stirrup with him every day. She would know if he had a sweetheart somewhere.

He turned toward her, and she sensed that he was blushing under the thick layer of shaving soap. Wordlessly, he pointed at the table against one wall.

Amy pivoted. Her fingertips slid over the burned corner of the table where she and her younger sister, Nattie, had toppled over the kerosene lamp years ago, when they fought over something Amy couldn’t remember. Traces of flour still lingered in the fine grain of the wood, remnants of countless apple pies Mama had made for Papa when they had lived in the cabin, their first home in Oregon.

Amidst the childhood memories was something new. A stack of letters. On top, the tintype of a young woman looked back at her.

She frowned. “Who’s that?”

“My future wife.” Phin’s chest swelled like that of a rooster.

“You’re really getting hitched?” She gave the image on the table a curt nod. “To her?” It wasn’t that she was jealous. Not like that. Phin was like a brother to her. She just hated the thought of him moving away or another woman invading her home.

“To her,” Phin said. “Johanna Bruggeman. Ain’t she pretty?”

She was. Her enchanting smile dazzled Amy even in its black-and-white form. But pretty or not, would she fit in at the ranch? Amy looked around the small cabin. “Papa says the cabin isn’t fit for a woman to live in. Not that I think so, but she looks like the kind who’d agree. Didn’t you ever wonder why none of the ranch hands has a wife?”

“They’re too ugly?”

They broke out in laughter, but it didn’t last long.

Amy pressed her fingertips to the table’s familiar contours. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“I can’t be a foreman forever,” Phin said. “I like workin’ for the Hamilton outfit, but I want to have my own place someday. Your father promised to set me up with a few acres of land and some horses.”

It was true, and Phin had earned it, but she still bit her lip at the thought of him leaving. Papa would hire a new foreman, and for Amy, the struggle to be accepted and not sent away to the kitchen would begin anew.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

“Hey,” Phin said. “Why the long face? I’ll still be your friend. Seein’ how Johanna doesn’t know a soul ’round here, she’s goin’ to need a maid of honor for the wedding. Would you do us the honor?”

Amy slapped her hips. “What’s with you and everybody else wanting to see me six inches deep in petticoats?”

Phin eyed her as he would a stubborn filly. “Maybe you should think about gettin’ married too.”

*Not that again.* It was why Amy rarely went into town. The whispers and glances made her feel like the only unwed twenty-year-old on the face of the earth. “Where did you meet her?” she asked instead of answering. “She new in town?”

Shaving soap dripped onto Phin’s shirt, and he wiped it away. Then he found a few more spatters that needed his attention.

“Phin?”

“I haven’t exactly met her yet.”

“What do you mean?”

Phin drew in air as if he were about to face a lynch mob. “I put an advert in three fancy eastern papers, and I got an answer from a young lady in Boston.”

“You advertised for a wife?” Amy had heard of that but never understood it. What kind of self-respecting woman would sell herself to a complete stranger?

His gaze veered away from hers. “I knew you’d think it tomfoolery, but you gotta understand. There’s nary an unwed woman in town and none who’d have me, so...”

“There are a few.”

Phin snorted. “Yeah, the likes of Ella Williams and Fanny Henderson. No, thanks.”

“So you thought you’d just order yourself a woman from the catalog, like you’d order a new saddle?”

“What’s a feller to do if he’s aimin’ to marry? Since you won’t have me.”

His grin was contagious. Amy could never stay angry with her friend for long. “So you’re marrying Johanna Bruggeman.” She risked another glance at the picture of the smiling woman. “Is that a German name?”

“Dutch.” Phin’s grin grew, as if being Dutch were a great accomplishment.



*Lord, he's smitten, and he hasn't even met her.* She watched in silence as Phin continued to shave. Somehow, his simple, efficient movements seemed wrong, maybe because he was shaving himself. Amy had watched her parents share this private ritual almost every day for as long as she could remember.

Papa sat in the kitchen, and Mama lathered his face with the shaving soap, sometimes sneaking a kiss when she thought their daughters weren't watching. Amy always watched. She knew she was witnessing something special, something that bound her parents to each other. Trust glowed in Papa's eyes when he let Mama put the razor to his neck.

A sudden longing for that kind of trust overcame Amy. She shook it off and focused on Phin.

For Phin, shaving seemed to be a necessary evil. There was nothing gentle or loving about the way he scraped lather and stubbles off his cheeks and his strong chin.

*Maybe he really needs a wife.* "So when is she coming here?" Amy asked.

"Well..." He wiped off the rest of the shaving soap and twirled his handlebar mustache. Amy often teased him about it. She liked Papa's clean-shaven look better. "I wanted to talk to you about that. If the stagecoach is on time, she'll get here Monday afternoon."

Meaningful silence spread between them.

"Monday afternoon? But—"

"I'm supposed to leave for Fort Boise with your father on Monday mornin', yes."

This was her chance! Amy hid a grin and tried for nonchalance. "Oh, not a problem. I'll help Papa bring the horses to Fort Boise, and you can pick up your bride from town on Monday afternoon."

He cleared his throat. "That's not what I meant, and you'd have to discuss that with your father."

Who would say no. Not because traveling four hundred miles with a herd of horses was a man's job. Papa never told her something like that. He would say that she wasn't ready for the trip, not while there was unrest among the Shoshoni, and that he wanted her to keep an eye on the ranch while he was gone.

She sighed. "So what did you mean?"

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

“If it ain’t too much to ask, you could put on your Sunday finery and pick up my future wife from town.”

That meant wearing a dress and facing the nosy folks in town, not two of Amy’s favorite activities. Still, Phin was her best friend.

“Please?” He grinned his most charming smile. “I don’t trust any of the boys with her.”

Asking her to pick up his betrothed so she would be safe from unwanted attentions... Amy shook her head. Phin didn’t understand the irony of it. *It’ll be fine. She might be pretty, but she’s not Hannah.* “All right,” she said. Something occurred to her. “So your courtship consisted of writing letters, right? How did you manage that? You can’t write.”

“I’m learnin’. Miss Nattie is teachin’ me.”

“But you always said you’d rather spend winter evenings repairing broken bridles than studying words on a page.”

He shrugged. “Changed my mind. Miss Nattie’s a great teacher.”

“Nattie helped you advertise for a wife?”

“Oh, no.” He rubbed his palms over freshly shaven cheeks. “I wouldn’t bother her with that. Your mother helped. But Miss Nattie knew.”

“Mama and Nattie knew all this time, but no one ever said one word to me?”

“Miss Nattie heard it from the postmaster. The damn gossip told half of Oregon that I’m gettin’ letters from a lady in Boston. I thought maybe you’d heard it around town too.”

“Not a word.” Amy swallowed her hurt feelings. After all, Phin wasn’t to blame for her reluctance to visit town. She tried to stay away from Hannah and the other young women who always knew the latest rumors.

Phin scratched his chin. “I thought you weren’t interested in affairs of the heart things.”

True. She had never given him reason to think otherwise. She and Phin talked about horses but rarely discussed feelings.

When she stayed silent, he ducked to look into her face. “Are you mad at me for not tellin’ you sooner?”

“No.” She wasn’t mad, just a bit hurt and strangely unsettled. Sharing her home with a beautiful young woman could mean trouble.



“Listen up, boys,” Luke said. Decades-old habits made her square her shoulders to appear bigger than she was. “Phin and I will leave tomorrow. Amy is in charge while we’re gone.” She let her gaze sweep over the ranch hands perched on their bunks and standing around the bunkhouse’s cast-iron stove. “Anyone have a problem riding for a woman?”

The ranch hands had worked side by side with Amy every day for the past few years, but working with her and working for her were two different things.

Most of the men shook their heads.

“No problem, boss,” Hank said.

Adam spat out a stream of chewing tobacco, earning a sharp glare from Luke. If anyone gave Amy trouble, it would be Adam. She stared at him until he looked away.

“Amy’s only in charge until you get back, right?” Emmett asked, shuffling his feet. “It’s just for two months.”

Luke suppressed a grin. They had no idea that they’d worked for a woman much longer than that. To the world, she was Lucas Hamilton—rancher, husband, and father. Only three people knew that she was not what she appeared to be: her wife, Nora, her oldest friend, Tess, and their neighbor Bernice Garfield.

“For now,” she said. Maybe one day, Amy would be able to do what Luke couldn’t: run the ranch as a woman.

When no one protested, she gave some last-minute instructions and then left the bunkhouse.

Darkness had fallen, and a myriad of stars twinkled down at her. Luke lifted her head and inhaled the tangy aroma of pines, manure, and sage from Nora’s herb garden. A horse’s whinny cut through the sounds of a gurgling spring and a hooting owl. She wandered across the ranch yard to check on the horses one last time.

The place in front of the corral was already occupied. Amy stood with her elbows on the top rail and one booted foot propped on the bottom rung. She didn’t turn around when Luke joined her.

Side by side, they watched the dark shapes of the horses move around the corral.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

Midnight wandered over and snuffled Amy's sleeve. She patted the gelding's neck and combed her fingers through his forelock. "Did you talk to the men?"

"Yes. They know you're in charge."

"Good."

Luke turned to look at her and leaned her shoulder against the corral. "You nervous?"

"No," Amy said quickly—too quickly.

"Because if you were, I'd certainly understand. I was about your age when I earned my lieutenant stripes. Suddenly, I was expected to command a troop of soldiers, some of them much older and more experienced than me."

Amy leaned against the corral too so that they were face to face. "Were you nervous?"

"Terrified," Luke said. Not so much about not measuring up, of course. Back then, her worst fear was being injured so badly that surgeons discovered her secret. "There's no shame in being afraid, Amy. The trick is not to let it paralyze you."

The whites of Amy's eyes gleamed in the darkness. Her chaps scratched along the corral post as she shifted. "I'm a bit nervous," she finally said. "But you don't need to worry. I won't disappoint you, Papa."

"I know." Luke wrapped her arm around Amy's shoulders and squeezed, surprised as always to feel sturdy muscles under her hand. When had the little girl who begged her for rides on Measles become this strong young woman? She sighed. She'd miss her family. "Come on." She gave Amy one more pat to the shoulder. "Let's go to bed. We both have a long day tomorrow."



Nora folded strips of cloth and handed them to Luke, who stowed them in her saddlebags. "Put them at the bottom so no one will see," Nora said.

"Not necessary," Luke answered. "If one of the boys finds the rags, I'll just tell them those are compresses should one of the horses get hurt." She winked and leaned down to brush her lips over Nora's.

But even the warmth of the kiss couldn't chase away Nora's worries. She entwined her fingers with Luke's, lifted them to her lips, and kissed the

familiar pattern of scars and rope burns on Luke's hand. "I wish you didn't have to go."

Luke stroked the back of her fingers over Nora's cheek. "I wish I could stay, but you know we need the money if we want to invest in draft horses."

"I regret ever suggesting that." If anything happened to Luke on the way to Fort Boise, she would never forgive herself.

"Hey, don't talk like that," Luke said. "You're a clever businesswoman and have never steered us wrong in all these years. Now that the railroad is coming, investing in draft horses is a brilliant idea."

"It's only brilliant if nothing happens to you," Nora said.

"We'll be careful and post guards at night."

"The trip holds more dangers for you than just Indians and horse thieves." Every muscle in Nora's body felt tight, like a rope that was trying to hold a panicked mustang. "You'll have to live in very close quarters with Phin, Charlie, and Kit for over two months. There'll be no outhouse, no bedroom with a sturdy lock, no privacy to change clothes, wash, or take care of private matters."

Luke slid her arms around Nora and held her close. "I admit I haven't had to do that in a while, but I've lived among men for years. People see what they think is true, not what's really there. And I'm the boss, so I can decide when to scout ahead or leave camp under the pretense of hunting for game. I've always been good at slipping away from camp."

"Oh, yeah?" Amusement bubbled up. "Is that why you were shot by our own guard when you slipped away to follow the call of nature?" She brushed her lips against Luke's upper arm, where an old scar reminded of that day seventeen years ago.

Groaning, Luke rubbed her nose. "Thanks for the reminder of that glorious moment."

Nora laughed, then moved back to look into Luke's eyes. The rain cloud gray told her that Luke was as worried as she was; she just didn't want to admit it. "Come on." She tugged on her hand. "Let's go to bed." She wanted to hold Luke and pretend that she'd never have to let go.

Luke walked around the bed and tested the door to make sure it was locked. Only then did she slip out of her clothes.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

In the flickering light of the kerosene lamp, Nora watched as Luke unwrapped the bandages around her chest until she revealed small breasts, pale against the darker color of her arms. Nora licked her suddenly dry lips.

When Luke slipped her nightshirt over her head, Nora changed into her own nightgown and pulled the pins from her hair.

Luke reached for the hairbrush. Slowly, tenderly, she trailed the brush through Nora's hair, often pausing to disentangle an unruly strand or massage her scalp.

The first time Luke had reached for the brush and taken over the nightly task had surprised Nora. She knew it had surprised Luke too. Luke's days were spent in the saddle, working with horses or splitting logs to build fences—tasks that were the epitome of masculinity. She spent so much time convincing others she was a man that sometimes it became hard to tell what was a mask and what was real.

But after a few years, with the bedroom door closed behind them, Luke allowed herself the feminine pleasure of trailing the brush through Nora's locks.

Luke set down the brush and lifted Nora's hair.

Warm lips pressed kisses to the nape of Nora's neck, making her shiver. She gasped as Luke nipped her earlobe.

"Turn out the light," Luke whispered. "I want to say a proper good-bye."

Without hesitation, Nora lifted the lamp's glass shade, blew out the flame, and slid into Luke's arms.



Dancer turned his head and whinnied at the horses in the corral, not pleased to leave the protection of his herd.

"I know, boy." Luke wasn't eager to leave her family either. She patted the gelding's neck, and when she felt him exhale, she tightened the cinch.

Hank walked over and handed her a canteen. "Here, boss."

"Thanks." She looped it over her saddle horn. "We're leaving now. You have your instructions."

Hank nodded.

Would he accept Amy's orders as easily? *Only one way to find out.*

Soft steps padded over the veranda, and Luke knew without looking that Nora was watching her. She felt the gaze rest on her like a loving touch. One more tug on the cinch and she stepped away from the gelding.

The dreaded moment had come.

Luke turned, her glance touching everything they had established in nearly seventeen years of hard work: the main house, two large horse barns, a bunkhouse, Phin's cabin, a blacksmith's shop, and a dozen other outbuildings. All that could continue to prosper and grow—if she made the right decisions at this critical time.

In front of the veranda stairs, she stopped and met Nora's gaze. They stood in silence for long moments. Luke didn't need words to know that Nora's heart was aching too. She stepped closer and slipped both arms around Nora, their faces nearly level though Nora stood on the top stair. The brim of her hat bumped Nora's cheek, making them both smile. With a flourish, Luke took it off and set it down on Nora's red locks.

Nora tightened the embrace until she lost her balance.

Luke caught her in her arms. The hat fluttered to the ground, but they ignored it. "I'll miss you," she said, and though new footsteps told her they had an audience, she didn't lower her voice or end the embrace. They had never hidden their love from their daughters. She pressed her lips against Nora's and got lost in her warmth as if it were the last time—and they both knew it very well could be.

A few weeks before, in revenge for the death of a white settler, an expedition of soldiers had attacked an Indian camp on the Malheur River and killed more than thirty Paiutes, including women and children. Who knew whether the road to Boise was safe or teeming with angry warriors?

Luke had thought long and hard before agreeing to deliver a dozen horses to the cavalry at Fort Boise. She preferred staying out of conflicts, but if she wanted to secure a future for the ranch, she had no choice.

One last kiss and they moved apart, keeping their fingers entwined.

When Luke looked up, Nattie stood there with the forgotten hat in her hands.

"Thanks, sweetie." Luke reached for it, but Nattie jumped forward and threw her arms around her, crushing the hat between them.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

“Hey.” Luke kissed the top of her daughter’s black hair and noticed that she didn’t have to bend to do it anymore. At sixteen, Nattie was already taller than her mother.

Phin walked over with his spotted gelding. “You want us to bring you back somethin’ from Boise, Miss Nattie?”

“I’m not a child anymore.” Nattie moved away from Luke and put on a determined expression as she looked at Phin.

“Right.” Phin thumbed back his hat and grinned at her. “So if I happen to come across somethin’ of that Jane Austen woman you mentioned or a copy of *The History of England*, I should just ignore it, right?”

Nattie’s eyes sparkled, bringing out the green flecks in her eyes and reminding Luke so much of Nora that it robbed her of breath. “Ah, well, I’ll make an exception for Jane Austen or *The History of England*. But most of all, I want you to come back safely.”

“We will,” Phin said. He reached out a hand as if to touch Nattie, but then pulled back and just smiled.

Luke wanted to add her own reassurances but knew she couldn’t make any promises. She turned toward Amy, who waited silently. “Walk me to my horse?”

Amy fell into step next to her, with Nattie and Nora following. Her older daughter was half a head shorter, but their steps matched in length and rhythm. How often had they walked like this, side by side, with her teaching or instructing Amy?

“I should be back in two months, maybe a little more. I’ll try to send word from somewhere along the trail. You take good care of your mother and sister,” Luke said. Nora didn’t need someone taking care of her, but Amy would feel better about staying behind if she felt she was doing something important.

Red locks bounced up and down as Amy nodded.

“If it continues to rain like this, you’ll have to rotate the horses off the east pasture.” Luke’s gaze swept over the paddocks and corrals and over the far hills. “And depending on how the hay crop is doing, you’ll need to bring in the first cutting on your own. Don’t wait until—”

“—it’s in full bloom, I know.” Amy quirked a grin.

“Don’t be such a mother hen.” Nora caught up with them and kissed Luke’s cheek. “Amy knows what she’s doing.”



She did.

Pride flowed through Luke, and she smiled. Still, she couldn't stop worrying. Amy was a top hand with the horses, but she'd never had to run the ranch on her own.

*Seems it's gonna be a time of new challenges for all of us.* She turned to Phin. "Ready?"

"Ready, boss."

One last kiss for Nora and hugs for the girls, then Luke swung into the saddle. "Let's go."



*Darned thing!* The ribbon of Amy's sunbonnet just wouldn't give. She fumbled at it with one hand while holding the wagon's reins with the other. When the knot still didn't come undone, she clamped her teeth around the reins and, using both hands, finally freed herself of the bonnet.

Not that Old Jack needed her to hold on to the reins. The gelding had pulled the buckboard to town so often that he probably knew the way better than she did.

She lifted her face and let the light, steady drizzle refresh her.

"Whoa." A soft tug on the reins brought the buckboard to a halt on the edge of a rocky ridge overlooking Baker Prairie. Below her, the Molalla River, a frothing mountain stream, joined the broad, glittering band of the Willamette River on its journey north.

She sat up taller as she glanced back at gentle hills, lush grass, and groves of Douglas firs. The roots binding her to this land were as deep as those of the ancient firs.

Above her, a flock of Canada geese formed a large V, and a red-tailed hawk glided through the air. Amy watched as he rose and fell with the currents, drifting wherever he wanted, completely free.

She wished she could be like that, riding freely instead of having to spend the afternoon in town. But Phin's bride was bound to have some baggage with her, so riding Ruby to town was out of the question.

With a sigh, she placed the sunbonnet back on her head. The ribbon tightened beneath her chin, and she swallowed. Then she clucked at Old Jack. "Hyah!"



When Amy slung the reins over the hitching rail, the door to the dry-goods store swung open. Hannah and her husband stepped out. Joshua doffed his hat, mumbled a greeting, and escaped to their buckboard with their little boy, leaving the women to talk.

Amy smoothed her hands over the unfamiliar contours of her skirt and tried a smile. "Hello, Hannah."

"Amy." A smile dimpled Hannah's chubby cheeks. "How have you been?"

"We had a lot of work out on the ranch, trying to get a herd together so Papa could drive them to Fort Boise."

"Fort Boise?" Hannah's brow furrowed. "Josh says there have been massacres up there."

"I heard."

The mines in the Boise Basin lured hundreds of new settlers to the area. In reaction to that intrusion, small bands of Indians began sporadic raids on the settlers. The cavalry promptly retaliated. Papa said the Snake War was a conflict between people who both saw the other as a threat to their homes and their way of life.

"My father took Phin and two of our best hands, just in case. I'm sure they'll be fine," Amy said, willing it to be so.

"How are your parents doing?"

Amy stiffened. Most people asked about her parents just so they could gossip about them afterward, but not Hannah. She never criticized Mama for teaching school even though she was a married woman or Papa for letting Amy ride around in pants. When other girls whispered and laughed at Amy, Hannah never joined in.

"They're fine," Amy said.

"Listen, we want to build a new barn before we bring in the first crop of hay this year." Hannah looked at her husband, who waited on the wagon bench. "You think your papa could help Josh lay the foundation when he's back from Fort Boise?"

Amy nodded. Papa never said no when a neighbor needed help. "I'll let him know. If he's not back in time, the rest of the family will be over to help."

"Thank you." Hannah gave her a soft squeeze.

Amy glanced at the hand on her arm. Her skin tingled where Hannah touched her, and she clamped her teeth together, cursing those unwanted feelings. "I'd better go." She pointed at the dry-goods store. "Mama gave me a list as long as my arm."

"Come over and visit soon," Hannah said. "We used to spend so much time together, and now I never see you anymore."

With a noncommittal nod, Amy hurried into the store. The bell over the door jingled as she entered. Familiar smells of licorice, leather, and vinegar tickled her nose.

"Amy Hamilton! Come over here and let me look at you," Jacob Garfield said from behind the long counter. "Haven't seen you in some time. How are you doing?"

"Keeping busy," Amy said.

Jacob pointed outside to where Hannah was now climbing on the wagon. "My daughter says she hasn't seen you in a while either. I remember a time when you two were joined at the hip."

Amy fixed her gaze on racks of sewing thread and embroidery floss. "Things change when you grow up. But I promised to help Hannah and Josh with their barn." Before he could ask more questions, she handed her list over the counter.

Jacob turned and measured out a pound of salt. "You wanna take a look at the dresses while you wait? I hear there's gonna be a wedding at the Hamilton outfit soon."

Word traveled fast in a small town like Baker Prairie.

Amy's gaze skimmed the new skirts and dresses, ribbons, and bolts of fabric laid out on a long table. "No, thank you." A new dress worn only to church was a waste of hard-earned money. Her Sunday dress would do for the wedding.

Jacob heaved a sack of flour onto the counter and piled the rest of Amy's order on top. Finally, he opened a big glass jar and scooped lemon drops into a small paper bag. He'd done that since she had been a little girl, coming into the store with her parents, and she always shared her bounty with Papa.

But now he was gone, and the lemon drops and the responsibility for the ranch were hers alone.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

When she reached for the sack of flour to heave it onto her shoulder, Jacob stared at her with wide eyes. “Oh, no, leave that here. I’ll have Wayne bring it out to your buckboard.”

Amy bit the inside of her cheek. Did Jacob think the Hamiltons were uncivilized, just because her papa never told her she couldn’t carry a sack of flour? She liked the freedom her father gave her, but visits to town made her painfully aware of how different she was from other young women.

A few minutes later, she said good-bye to Jacob and left the dry-goods store.

Across the street, two young men left the saddle maker’s shop and glanced at her. One of them said something, and the other laughed and looked at Amy again.

Amy swished her skirts and marched away. She gazed at the stage depot, but the street was still empty. The stage hadn’t arrived yet, so she was stuck in town.

She shuffled her feet and glanced down. *Damn!* Mud crusted her lace-up boots. Knocking her heels together didn’t help. Instead of dislodging mud and manure, she sent spatters all over her skirt.

Every minute that she waited made her more aware of her not very ladylike appearance. At least the rain had finally stopped. She glanced at the sun, half-hidden behind a pile of gray clouds. The stage was late. When working with horses, Amy had her father’s patience, but she would rather wait for a horse to trust her than for some woman who married herself off to a stranger.

Grumbling, she popped a lemon drop into her mouth. The sweet sourness prickled along her tongue. Had Mama remembered to hide some candy as a surprise for Papa in his saddlebags? Then, with a grunt, she spat out the candy. The stagecoach would arrive any moment, and it wouldn’t do to greet Phin’s betrothed with a bulging cheek.

A high-pitched squeal drew her attention toward the livery stable’s corral. On their ranch, Amy had never heard a horse make a sound like that.

Her feet moved toward the corral before she could stop to think.

The two men from the saddle maker’s shop blocked her view, and Amy shouldered past them. The urge to help the horse propelled her forward.

Half a dozen men drove a trembling grulla—a gray horse with a black stripe on her back—into one corner of the corral. Ropes flew at the horse from all directions.

The mare reared, her eyes white-rimmed with fear. She pranced to the right, and when another man cut her off, she tried to escape to the left.

A loop snaked around one of her legs, and another rope fell down around her neck, choking her. With one quick pull, the horse crashed into the mud.

Men jumped on her and held her down.

The mare squealed and kicked.

One man rammed both knees into her side to keep her from moving while another bit down on the horse's ear.

Amy's fingers clamped around the corral rail. *No, no, no.* Didn't they understand that the mare was fighting for her life? For the mare, this was a vicious attack by a pack of predators. How could they expect cooperation?

Two of the men blindfolded the mare with a cloth while others wrestled a saddle on her and thrust a bit into her mouth. Then a young man climbed into the saddle. With a big "whoop" of excitement, as if it was all great fun, they snatched the blindfold away and sprang back from the horse.

The mare leaped and bucked, reared and twisted, kicked and arched her back. Her front legs slashed through the air, and for a moment, Amy feared she would flip over backward. But her hooves came down. The mare ducked her head and kicked out her hind legs.

The broncobuster catapulted over her head and splashed into the mud.

Part of Amy wanted to rejoice, but she knew this was far from over. If no one else had the courage to climb on the horse, they would hobble the mare to the snubbing post in the middle of the corral, where she might break her leg or choke to death by getting tangled in the rope. They would leave her standing there on three legs, without water or food. Then, hours later, they would untie her and another man would climb on and buck her out until the mare had no fight left in her.

Amy had seen it often on the neighboring ranches and farms. She couldn't stand watching it again. She ducked between two corral rails.

"Hey!" A man gripped her arm. "What are you doing? This is no place for a woman. If you want to watch, do it from outside the corral."

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

Amy narrowed her eyes and glowered at the hand on her arm. "I don't want to watch."

The man scratched his head. "What are you doing, then?"

"That's Amy Hamilton, Buzz," someone shouted.

The hand withdrew from Amy's arm. "So your father is Luke Hamilton, the horse rancher?" Buzz asked. "You wanna buy the horse?"

Amy started to shake her head, about to tell him she had no money, but then stopped. The two half eagles Phin had given her for his new bride rested in her pocket. After a moment's hesitation, she fished them out and let Buzz glance at the two five-dollar gold pieces.

"The horse is worth at least twice that much," Buzz said.

"If I can ride her, will you give me the mare for the ten dollars?" she asked. It was crazy. The mouse-colored mare was not a beautiful horse. With the dorsal stripe on her back and the faint stripes on her legs, she wasn't fit to be bred to an Appaloosa stallion. Still, Amy couldn't leave the mare to her fate.

Buzz exchanged glances with his friends, including the broncobuster who was now getting up, spitting out mud and one of his front teeth. "All right," he said. "But if you can't ride her, I get the mare and the ten dollars. Deal?"

Amy's lips twitched. She wanted to spit at the hand he held out, but she kept herself in check and shook it instead. "Deal. Now give me some room to work. Please," she added after a moment. Out on the ranch, the boys were used to taking orders from her, mainly because they knew Papa would back them up. But in town, no man would ever accept her as an equal.

The men climbed over the corral rails, and that was the last time Amy looked at them. From then on, nothing existed in the world beyond her and the mare.

The grulla retreated into one corner of the corral. Sweat and rain darkened her gray coat. Her flanks quivered, and her tail was clamped between her legs. She watched Amy with flared nostrils and pricked ears. When Amy strolled over, the mare ran.

Amy followed, walking calmly but without hesitation. She ignored what the mud in the corral did to her lace-up boots.

Again, the mare fled to the other end of the corral.

Hundreds of times, Amy had watched their horses play the same game of catch. Measles and her daughters had been masters at this game. They chased away the other horses, sometimes by threatening a bite or kick, but mostly by stomping toward the horse. In a herd, the mare that could make the others move established herself as the leader.

Amy had learned to do the same. Jutting her chin and squaring her shoulders, she marched toward the mare.

The mare tossed back her head and looked beyond the corral fence for a place to flee.

*Wrong move.*

As long as the mare paid attention to anything but her, Amy kept driving her around the corral. She switched sides and slapped her thighs, making the startled mare swivel and sprint in the other direction.

After a few rounds around the corral, one of the mare's ears flicked toward Amy. Another lap and the second ear followed.

Amy relaxed her arms and stayed in the middle of the corral instead of moving toward the horse, taking off some of the pressure.

The frantic racing around the corral slowed.

"Come on, Joe," a man shouted to his friend. "Let's go. This is getting boring."

*Fools. If the horse isn't terrified and the broncobuster doesn't lose a few teeth, they aren't interested.*

The mare's circles around her became smaller and smaller until she turned her head to look at Amy. She chewed on the unfamiliar bit in her mouth.

*Good.* Chewing signaled that the mare was starting to relax. In response, Amy softened her own body.

Two more rounds and the mare's head lowered, and she sniffed the ground while she walked. It was a sign of her beginning trust in Amy. A horse that dropped its head couldn't look out for predators. Finally, the mare stopped in the corner where she had been when Amy had first seen her.

*Her safety spot.* Amy made note of it so she could use it to work with her. She stepped back and half turned, showing the mare her shoulder instead of her front. She had seen lead mares do the same when they allowed another horse into the herd.

## HIDDEN TRUTHS

The mare took a single step but then stopped and snorted at her. Curiosity gleamed in the big brown eyes, but the stiffness in her neck signaled that she wasn't ready to approach Amy.

*All right.* Crooning soft words, she walked toward the mare's shoulder. She moved slowly, but without hesitation. It wouldn't do to sneak up on the mare like a predator on the hunt.

The mare stood stiff-legged, her ears twitching.

Amy stopped an arm's length away.

With wide nostrils, the mare sucked in her scent.

Calmly, Amy touched the mare's shoulder, just for the length of a heartbeat. Then she took her hand away. "See?" she whispered. "Getting touched doesn't hurt."

When the mare didn't move away, Amy scratched the stiff neck and around the withers, the way she had seen horses groom each other. Her hands slid over the mare's wet flanks, then down to her belly. She flapped the stirrups around, letting the mare know that the bouncing thing on her back was not a mountain lion out to kill her.

After a few minutes of retreating and advancing, the horse relaxed under her hand. Amy reached for the mud-crusted reins. When the mare pranced away, she stayed with her.

"Easy, easy, girl." She smoothed her fingers into the horse's mane and grabbed a strand. When she moved to put one foot in the stirrup, she remembered that she wasn't wearing pants. Mama had even made her wear a dress instead of the split skirt she usually wore to town. In a dress, she could either ride sidesaddle or pull up the skirt and petticoats to straddle the horse—which would give the audience a good, long look at her legs.

Amy shivered. *No, thanks.* She didn't want to give Buzz that kind of buzz. She reached down and, using a tear in the hem of her skirt, ripped the checkered fabric until she had enough freedom of movement.

She slid her left foot into the stirrup and slowly, without bouncing, rose up until some of her weight rested on the stirrup.

The mare snorted and sidestepped.

Amy dropped down. "Everything's fine, beautiful. Let's try that again." She grabbed the reins and a handful of mane and rose up in the stirrup, this time a little longer. After a few more tries, she could do it without the mare dancing away. Gently, Amy swung her leg over and slid into the saddle.



For a few moments, she just sat, keeping her body relaxed. It had been hard to learn—staying calm and relaxed while she waited to see whether the horse would explode under her. The first time she had seen Papa do it, it seemed like magic.

The mare's back felt stiff as a board, but when Amy didn't pierce her with sharp claws or spurs, the grulla bent her head around to send her a startled glance.

Chuckling, Amy patted her neck. "It's all right, girl."

Gray ears flicked back to listen to her voice.

Amy gathered the reins in one hand and squeezed with her legs.

The mare took a startled step, and Amy relaxed her legs, rewarding the horse for reacting to her cues. One more squeeze with her legs and the mare walked around the corral. It took a while, but she finally dropped her head and her back muscles softened.

Tightening her legs, Amy urged the mare into a jog.

Instantly, the mare's head reared up, and she hopped twice before settling down.

Amy grinned as she rode her around the corral. Despite her mousy look, the mare promised to develop a pretty smooth gait.

With light pressure, she reined in the mare and dropped to the ground. When she looked up, she realized she had lost her audience. Only Buzz waited in front of the corral. The other men and women gathered farther down the street, in front of the stage depot.

*Oh, no, the stagecoach!*

Amy wasn't in town to gentle a horse. Phin's betrothed was waiting for her and had probably been waiting for some time. The stage's horses had already been exchanged for fresh ones, and the stage was pulling out.

She opened the corral gate and led the gray mare toward her buckboard.

"Hey!" Buzz called. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Amy whirled around. "What?"

"My money." Buzz thrust out his hand, palm up.

The two gold coins felt heavy in her hand. It wasn't her money to spend. *Too late.* She gritted her teeth and handed over the ten dollars.