Texas Oil

Texas, 1868

Chapter 1

"Look, look! There she is," the first man said, pointing through the crowd of people. "Do you see how beautiful she looks tonight?"

"Are you sure about her?" the other man said.

"Am I sure? Of course I'm sure. I have been waiting for ten years, and I am not going to let her slip away again. I wish I could take her in my arms right now and kiss her in front of this entire crowd."

"You really feel that strongly about her?"

"How could I not? She has always been my friend. She has weathered the hardships of her life with grace, and she is just as beautiful as the day I said goodbye to her. Look at the way her brown hair curls so delicately. Just look at her warm brown eyes. If those eyes looked at me for eternity, I would never get bored."

"What makes her so different than your other…*ahem*…companions?" said the second man.

"Everything."

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He was so close to finally getting what was his. What he *deserved*. No, not what he deserved, as if he had needed to earn it. It was already his. What *should have* been his. He burned with anger every time he thought about it. He had been cheated. All of the millions of dollars that flowed from the land should have been flowing directly into his bank account.

Well, it finally would. Everything was in place. Months, nearly a year, of planning was about to go into motion. There was no way he could fail.

When he thought about how years of friendship meant nothing to that cheat, that liar…he automatically clenched his fist. He was angrier than a bull in a rodeo. Angrier than the Texas sun on an August day.

But he had to make sure that no one knew anything. Even in a small town, *especially* in a small town, rumors travelled faster and farther than tumbleweeds. He had to make sure that everything was perfect.

And then he would murder that rat who had stolen his fortune.

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Hundreds of lights were hung from the trees and they shined brighter than the stars, tiny lamps that reflected the burning stars above. They swung gently in the breeze, which still blew as hot as day, but at least it provided some relief from the scorching heat. The chirping of grasshoppers and familiar, comforting drone of cicadas competed with the music that streamed from the band of players. Lively tunes poured from fiddles, banjos, and guitars. Several people had brought tambourines of their own and were quick to stomp and clap along. Once music started in the heart of Texas, there was no stopping it until dawn creaked over the horizon.

The mansion was bedecked in lights, streamers, and colorful arrangements of flowers. Yellow roses formed an arch over the entrance, and their sweet scent mingled with the smell of freshly trimmed grass, cottonwood trees, and the exotic perfumes of the ladies. Hundreds of people gathered in their finest threads: gentlemen were bedecked in starched and pressed suits, and the women wore billowing dresses in soft pastels and strings of pearls. Silk-gloved hands reached for the many glasses of champagne that were being passed around by the most skilled of waiters. As people sipped, they sighed in contentment as they tasted the best champagne that France had to offer, the tiny bubbles tickling their throats and sharpening their hunger.

And what a spread was laid out before them. At first, the host had thought about doing something traditional: everyone wanted to model France these days, including their dinner options. Well, their wine and champagne would serve for refreshment, but he wanted to celebrate his roots and that meant barbecue. Of course, the truly high-brow whispered and tittered about the habits of "new money," and how barbecue came from the lower classes, but those soon stopped once they tasted the perfectly seasoned pork ribs; the tender, pink steaks; sausages bursting with juices and pepper, so spicy that they nearly seared a hole through their mouths. Accompanying these meats were baked rolls with freshly churned butter, collard greens with little specks of fried bacon, and grilled jalapeño peppers stuffed with cheese. If the guests were so inclined to continue, they had their choice of cobbler made with Georgia peaches, delicately sprinkled with cinnamon, or beignets from New Orleans.

Jane had never felt more out of place than she did now, and, as someone with a daughter who had a disability, there had been many, many times she had felt like a puzzle piece that never fit. When she had received the cream-colored invitation, printed with blue ink on sturdy, quality paper, sealed with a silk, green ribbon and smelling of lavender, she thought it must have been some sort of mistake. As she read the cordial summons to a charity ball, she thought the postal service man must have taken a wrong turn that morning. She quite possibly qualified to be the recipient of a charity ball, not a donor. The handwriting was neat, elegantly scripted, and utterly foreign to her. She knew no one rich enough to host a charity ball.

Then, after the many supplications to attend, she found at the bottom a different script. In a much more rushed and crooked handwriting, a personal note:

Jane, it would mean the world to me if you attended. I offer my sincerest apologies that we have not spoken in some years. Please let me make it up to you by extending my earnest entreaty that we may reconnect at this function.

Sincerely, and awaiting your reply,
Your old friend,
Matthew McConnel

Matthew McConnel! She had nearly dropped the letter as she read his name. She had not heard or spoken to him in six years.

Wait, thought Jane. *It was before the War*. Before the world went crazy and tried to tear itself apart. Before Jack died trying to defend something that wasn't even his.

Ten years, she realized, fingering the soft invitation. She wound the ribbon between her fingers and went to check on her sleeping daughter. *How time slips by*.

It more than slipped; it flew faster than a red-tailed hawk diving after prey. She looked at herself in the humble mirror that hung in the living room near the front door.

Would he even recognize me anymore? she thought, noting the silver starting to emerge and the lines permanently etched into her face that had not existed ten years prior.

She and Matthew had known each other since she had moved to the town with her parents. They both went to the same school and got into the usual childish mischief, tipping cows in the fields while they slept, fished in rivers until the sun burnt their skin, and played practical jokes on the local pastor, who was as dried up as a tumbleweed and needed a little humor in his life.

As they got older, they had had a moment…

Well, it was nothing to think of now. It wouldn't do any good anyway.

She looked at the invitation and was startled to note that her heart beat a little faster. Dismissing it as excitement to meet an old friend, she had penned a reply, marking that both she and her daughter would come.

Now, as she stood among the crowd, she wondered whether she had made the right decision.

It was not simply that the throngs of people who stood around her were not the sort of people she normally spoke to; it was also the sheer multitude of them. Jane felt like a tiny cork in a vast ocean, bobbing up and down, saying the same trite things over and over again to some rich, New York stock trader or heiress of a vast fortune in a clothing company. Everyone kept casting glances at Mary, and although Jane thought she had become accustomed to their whispers, and skittish looks, they still stung.

People sometimes openly stared at Mary's large, almond eyes, her too-small chin, and wide forehead; more than once, people had asked her whether she had adopted a little Oriental girl, because of the slant of Mary's eyes.

"No," she said firmly. "That is how God created her."

That shut most of them up. The rest retreated under the manners of well-bred individuals.

Some… were not so nice.

However, this crowd seemed like the well-bred sort, and none of them said anything truly outright nasty. Jane clutched Mary's hand as they made their way through the dazzling dresses, the elegant statues of Southern heroes, and waiters bearing trays of food and champagne.

Mary looked to the crowd of people swaying in time to the music, a lovely southern waltz.

"Dance," she said.

"Mary, use your sentences," said Jane. Mary was a little slow of speech, and a bit delayed in intelligence. Most people would call her a moron, but Jane knew that was not so. Mary could read and write, which was more than what most farmers could do. Still, her abnormality was marked in everything that she said or did. Most of the time, it was difficult for Mary to talk, but Jane always tried to make her speak correctly.

"I want to dance," replied Mary, tugging at Jane's arm. She tried to pull away, but Jane only held her more firmly.

"Not right now, darling," she said, eyeing the crowd. Mary could get lost in the hundreds of people here tonight. She could wander off, or someone could get angry with her for something she said or did…no, best to wait until she was a little older.

She is only twelve, thought Jane. *Still practically a baby*.

Jane was saved by the sight of her good friend, Samantha.

"Sam!" she called out, waving her arm. Samantha turned, and a smile spread across her face. She returned the wave and mouthed that she would be right there.

"Aunt Sam!" cried Mary, running over to Samantha, crashing into guests, not caring whose toes she stepped on along the way.

Jane winced and tried to apologize to the guests as she walked over to Samantha. As she made her way through the crowd, she heard titters and whispers from the other guests. Snatches of conversation assaulted her, and they felt like the angry whiplash of tree branches.

"…heard she's a widow…"

"…single mother, how did she make her man run off on her…"

"…didn't know her daughter was an idiot…"

"…must have been something that *she* did...God punishes the wicked, you know…"

This last rumor always dug into Jane's skin. As far as she had lived her life, she had no regrets. She believed in God, went to church, and always tried to be a good mother, no matter what it cost her. In her youth, she had been quiet and shy and had never done anything out of turn. So why would God punish her with a disabled child?

As far as Jane saw it, if God saw fit to create something as beautiful as Mary, then who was she to question it?

Still, her face burned upon hearing their comments. Sometimes it felt like she and Mary were outcasts; it was people like Samantha who reminded them they weren't.

"Jane!" cried Samantha, embracing her. Samantha always looked a bit pale, as she was naturally blonde-haired and blue-eyed, so her skin was as white as cream, but something in her face suggested that she looked a bit more worn out than normal. Jane scanned her dear friend; was it the dark circles under her eyes or the lack of sparkle that made her seem haggard?

"Dearest Samantha, how are you?" asked Jane, while Mary gave her a very large, very long hug.

Samantha seemed to hesitate but said, "I am fine. I am so glad that you made it. When I heard you were coming, I was nearly bowled over, but I am glad that you did. I am nearly sick to death of these boring Wall-Street types." Samantha turned to Mary and gave her a twirl. "Look at you! So big. Soon you'll be old enough to attend your own parties."

"Yes, someday, perhaps," said Jane warily.

She looked around the pavilion and eyed the donors exchanging pleasantries. She reached again for Mary's hand. "So this is a charity ball. Who is the beneficiary?"

Samantha smiled. "A very good question; all of the donors are raising money to build a new hospital. The new one will benefit people who have especially…uncommon diseases," she replied.

Jane nodded, considering the thought. A new hospital would be a blessing, indeed. The old one was falling apart at the seams. There just never seemed to be enough money to fix it up, hire better doctors, or keep enough medicine stocked. Perhaps with the new wealth flowing in from the discovery of oil, things would change for the better.

“So why are you here?” asked Jane, casting a glance at Mary. She was swaying in place to the music, somewhat off the count, but nonetheless seemed to be enjoying herself. She ignored the people laughing behind their champagne glasses at Mary’s lack of tempo.

Samantha flashed her a smile; there, now it seemed like she was back to her old self. “You mean, what are a bunch of peasants like us doing her?” Samantha had a way of going straight to the heart of things.

“Well, if you put it like that—” Jane began.

Samantha laughed, then brushed it off with a wave of her hand. “I am actually the spokesperson for the hospital,” said Samantha. “We’ll be making a big, fancy speech later on tonight.”

“We?” replied Jane. “You mean your brother is here as well?”

Looking around, Samantha said, “Should be, if he has not arrived late, like he always does.” Glancing at Jane, she added, “Oh Jane, you can let go of Mary’s hand, you know. You have the poor child in a death grip,” said Samantha.

Jane realized that she had, indeed, been squeezing Mary’s hand a bit tightly. It was simply that there were so many people and she did not want her only daughter to get lost.

“But it’s just—” she began.

“But nothing,” said Samantha. “You coddle that child, and you know it. Come on, Mary,” she said, turning to the happy adolescent swaying and rocking to the music. “Would you like to get some punch?”

Mary nodded vigorously, and they both set off.

Jane was so focused on Mary making her way to the table across the courtyard that she almost did not see an equally blond, blue-eyed individual creep up on her.

“Jane? I said, hello Jane,” said a friendly voice.

Jane shook herself and turned to her right. Samantha’s brother stood next to her, offering her a glass of champagne.

“Oh, hello Arthur, I am sorry I did not see you,” she said. She did not immediately accept the glass.

“Nor hear me, either, I gather,” he chuckled good-naturedly. He looked slick in a pressed shirt and handsome vest, and his hair shone under the thousands of tiny oil lamps around them. “Drink?”

Jane eyed the glass as if it were a desert snake about to bite her.

“I am not sure,” she said.

Arthur handed her the glass anyway. “Go on, one will not kill you,” he said.

Murmuring her thanks, Jane sipped the tart, sweet champagne. It reminded her of raspberries and honey.

“You have been gone a while,” said Jane. Jane had known his sister, Samantha, for far longer than she had known Arthur. When she had moved to the town, Samantha had already been living there, and had been quick to show her around and introduce her to the other friendly townspeople. Arthur had been off in the war, like everyone else. He had stayed away, trying to make quick money from surveying lands and the like, but slowly discovered that a war tends to dry up both funds to spend and warm bodies to spend them.

Swallowing, Arthur dabbed at his mouth with a silk handkerchief.

“That’s right, off to seek my fame and fortune. I managed to find fame, at least, if I’m still remembered around her,” he said with a wink.

Jane took another sip and felt the delightful tickle of the drink against her tongue. “Speaking of fortune, have you heard the story of Matthew McConnel?” she asked.

A shadow passed over Arthur’s face, so quickly that Jane thought that she imagined it. She must have. A trick of these fairy lights above, the tiny lights flickering tiny shadows.

“Seems he struck it big with discovering oil on his land,” replied Arthur. “He was nearly in the straights with the bank, but he took a gamble and built a couple of oil wells. When the first three were set to overflowing, they built more, and he hasn’t looked back since.” Arthur polished off his glass and quickly reached for a second. “I wonder if they have anything stronger around here,” he murmured.

Oil. The black gold. Everyone wanted to proctor for oil nowadays. It was the keys to the kingdom of paradise. No wonder Matthew was suddenly wealthy.

“Mighty lucky,” said Jane.

“Luck ain’t got nothing to do with it,” said Arthur, polishing off the second glass of champagne. “Just gotta have an eye for these things. And a good set of maps.”

Jane looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse at the sight of their host. “Wonder if it’s changed him any,” she murmured.

“I’ll say,” said Arthur sharply. Jane quickly turned her head to him. Arthur shrugged. “No surprise that it did. Bought a big fancy house, thinks he owns the whole world and can buy anything. Even the company of ladies,” he added.

Jane felt a twinge of dismay for her old friend. Surely he would not have changed so much, would he?

She shifted from foot to foot, then asked, “Ladies?” It was none of her business, and she shouldn’t engage in petty gossip…but Jane had to know.

Nodding and replacing the empty glass on the tray, he said, “Oh yes. Matthew has become a rather illustrious Don Juan in many a social circle, both this one--” and he gestured with a sweep of his hand. “—and the lower classes. See Wilson’s wife standing over there, by the punch bowl? She was seen leaving his mansion around dawn. And the Collins widow?” Arthur shook his head slowly. “It’s a known secret that they have trysts every other weekend. And don’t even get me started on the houses of ill repute—”

“Thank you, then, I won’t,” said Jane. “Excuse me, please.” She turned to find Mary. She had been gone for far too long.

As she made her way through the crowd, her heart ticked up from not seeing Mary. Surely she was fine. Her head was spinning slightly from the champagne, and Arthur’s words bounced around in her head. Could it be that her friend had changed so much? Had money made him different?

Jane was so occupied with her thoughts that she nearly ran into one of the handsomest men in the entire party.

Matthew.

Chapter2

Jane's heart lurched inside her chest at the sight of Matthew McConnel. He still had his handsome frame, although he had filled out over ten years, and was no longer the scrawny teenage boy she once knew, but a man. She was close enough to him that she could see the rough stubble of his chin and smell his fresh cologne.

"Matthew!" she cried. He seemed older, more sure of himself.

"Jane," he said warmly. "I am so glad you could make it."

The sight of him nearly took her breath. He was tall, towering over her so that her head barely came up to his chest. His broad shoulders were lean and heavy with muscle, and his waist was neat and trim. His white smile lit up his face as he held out his hand to take hers.

Almost unconsciously, Jane held out her hand, in recognition of the manners. When he took her gloved hand in his and brought it to his lips, she could not ignore the tingle that ran down her spine.

The pleasantries aside, Matthew embraced his old friend in a welcoming hug. Jane felt the warmth of his touch travel through her; it was so nice to see her friend again.

She tried to ignore her fiercely beating heart, but she could feel it pounding beneath her skin. When he looked at her, it was as if he could feel her heart beating as well.

"Look at you," he said, holding her at arm's length. "You're still as beautiful as I remember."

Jane lifted a hand to her hair in a fit of self-consciousness. "You are just saying something to appease an old friend," she said. "Emphasis on the old."

Matthew made a *pshh* sound, waving away her concerns. "If you are old, then my name is Midas," he said.

Jane laughed and said, "I am—I am old enough to be a widow now, and I have a daughter." She spoke the facts plainly. Although it still hurt to talk about Jack, it did not sting as much as it once did.

"I am sorry for your loss," said Matthew. Although his tone sounded sincere, there was something in his voice that told her that he was not so sorry as he professed. "And a daughter? Where is she? She must be as beautiful as her mother."

Jane's heart clenched; as a mother, she of course thought Mary was beautiful, but the world did not always think so.

"Over there, with Samantha," she said, motioning to the table laden with sweets and drinks.

Matthew looked, and when he saw Mary, Jane fully expected him to react with disgust; the rest of the world did. Instead, he smiled and said, "Just as I thought—as beautiful as her mother."

Feeling a warmth spread from the roots of her hair down the soles of her feet, Jane said, "Well, I *am* old, because you certainly are a King Midus. How on earth did you come to be so lucky to discover oil?"

Taking two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, Matthew handed her one. "Here," he said. "The French do love to tax the bejeesus out of us Americans, with their export fees, but they do make damn fine bubbles."

Jane hesitated only for a moment, but the way that Matthew held the glass out to her, the look of challenge and friendship in his eyes, she could not refuse. Taking it, she said, “That they do.”

Matthew held the glass aloft. “To friendship—and discovering hidden treasures,” he toasted.

Jane clinked her glass together with his and sipped. She felt the warmth travel down her stomach and her head began to swoon.

“Well,” said Matthew, finishing his own sip. “This land has always been rich with oil, but after a little digging—for information, mind you, we discovered that the land was absolutely drenched. I took a chance to hire equipment and men to dig and went down to all the government offices to make sure Uncle Sam couldn’t lay a finger on it. It took two years of hard work, and at one point, I thought I had lost everything, but the information was right in the end.”

Jane took another drink of the champagne; she could not believe she was here, next to a mansion, drinking French spirits speaking with Matthew McConnell. He was so close and alive and full of vitality that she could scarce believe that ten years had gone by.

And, she had to admit, it was not only the champagne giving her bubbles in her stomach.

“Amazing,” she said. “Well, I cannot think of a more deserving recipient. Wait—” she said. “—You said ‘we.’ Who else was there?”

Frowning, Matthew glanced away. He twisted his lips and took another drink. “Let us simply say a former business partner. He tried to cheat me out of my property, and we agreed to part ways. He helped at the beginning, but things…well, they turned sour between us after that.”

Jane did not truly understand, but she nodded anyway. She felt like there was something missing from his story, but it was not her business to pry. “I am sorry to hear,” she said.

Matthew waved her concern away. “Not a thing to worry about,” he said. “We still remain on cordial terms.”

He glanced around and, upon hearing the band strike up a new song, he turned to her and said, “Will you dance with me? Please say you will, Jane.”

It was a western-style waltz, a bit differently executed than the more well-known European version, but Jane knew it all the same. She had barely danced any more since her wedding.

It might have been the two glasses of champagne coursing through her veins; it might have been the way that Matthew was looking at her, so full of hope and joy at their reunion. But as Jane took his hand, she thought that the reason she accepted was that she had spent enough time in solitude. She could allow herself to have fun once in a while.

When their fingertips touched, Jane was transported to ten years ago, when their hands had first clasped and they had leaned in close and they had—

Well, they had not done much, thought Jane. Otherwise, they would not have separated.

Still, she felt that same charge, that same tingle of electricity shoot through her, as insistent and unrelenting as the revolution of the earth around the sun. Despite herself, she smiled, a wide grin that reached all the way to her eyes.

She had not smiled like in a long, long time.

For all his bravado, Matthew pulled her onto the dance floor with a touch of shyness. They knew each other, yet they felt like strangers. There was so much to cover, so much to tell each other. Who had they turned into over the past ten years? How were they different? How were they the same?

Still, as they took their places on the dance floor, all of Jane's nervous jitters fell away. He led her with an easy grace, and when he placed his hand on her back, Jane felt herself settle into an easy feeling. His touch was at once firm, confident, yet gentle. He was still the same, then, in that way at least.

The waltz began and they took off. Jane's breath hitched as Matthew led her around the circle. Any fears of a misstep were replaced by the sheer joy of dancing, by the comfort of being in his arms. She had not realized how much she missed being in someone's, anyone's arms, and the feeling of protection encompassed her like a quilt on a cold winter's night. Matthew flowed around the dance floor, and he made an excellent lead. He was steady, yet resilient, and the easy pace of the dance allowed Jane and Matthew to look into each other's eyes.

She was surprised to find love there; perhaps she shouldn't have been, but when he looked at her, there could be no mistaking it. She would deny it in the morning, pretend that it had never happened, but for right now, in that instant, she knew the truth.

Matthew McConnell still loved her.

Perhaps she was even more surprised to find that it did not scare her, as it once did. She did not flinch from the feeling, but instead fell headlong into it.

The music picked up and he spun her faster and the bright lights, champagne, and unbridled joy of touching Matthew combined in one heady rush, and Jane felt freer than she had in years, possibly her whole life. The violins thrummed and seemed to touch something inside her soul. Never once did Matthew take his eyes off her.

He had changed; Arthur had been right about that. It was hard to go through ten years and not come out a different person on the other side. In that moment, Matthew seemed like two different people: the person she had known from years before, overlaid with the one who now stood before her. It was a very curious feeling, as if he had become deeper into himself than before. He was the same old Matthew. Quick to smile and to tell stories, quick to laughter and slow to fight or quarrel.

Yet for all that, the years had marked him. They had shown him hardship, and Jane could tell that he had not forgotten entirely the grip of near-poverty. Matthew's family had been like Jane's: always just one disaster away from ending up in destitution. Matthew did not act like the other rich folks who had always been rich and took for granted that money would always be there to solve their problems. Matthew had the look of someone who knew what it meant to pass a night or two in hunger.

As the song wound to a close, Jane could hardly hear it. Everything had faded into one point, and that was Matthew. They slowed and came to a standstill. He leaned forward, and Jane stopped breathing. She knew what was coming. He was going to kiss her, she could feel it, and she wanted it too, she just—

Crash!

The sound of breaking glass filled the air, and guests turned their heads to locate the sound.

Jane closed her eyes and knew what it would be. Turning, she found Mary, surrounded by glass, looking properly shamed.

"Accident," she said.

Heat flooded Jane's face and she said, "I'm sorry…it was…an accident." And she rushed away to grab Mary's hand and lead her home. She could hear the whispers of those around her, and, even though they felt like tiny barbs, she ignored them. She simply wanted to take Mary and leave the party as soon as possible. She had done what she came to do: see and old friend, nothing more.

"Jane, I'm so sorry," said Samantha. "I turned my back for a moment. She was only reaching for the punch."

Jane reassured Samantha; it was not her fault. It was Jane's. She should have known better than to leave Mary alone.

Hurrying past Matthew, she mumbled her thanks to her host for a wonderful party. Then, striding out of the courtyard, she left Matthew standing with a mournful expression. He bit his lower lip in a moment that broke through the façade of a cool, calm millionaire. But it was fleeting, and, he snapped his fingers and ordered the cleanup.

Turning to the party, he said, "I hated that punch bowl anyway! That's the last time I trust in Philadelphia glass," which elicited a chuckle from some of the more easy-going guests. He looked for Jane, to reassure her that nothing was amiss, but she had already fled into the night.

Chapter 3

So he is in love with her, hm? Well, isn't that cute. I can use this to my advantage. He stole something precious from me, now I can steal something precious from him.

Cordial, ha! He has the audacity to think that we are still cordial? The nerve. Then again, it's not really surprising, when you think about it. He thought that he could buy me out. He thought that I would be satisfied with a tiny little piece of his big, ol' pie.

Not so, friend. Not so.

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Jane knew that Matthew was rich, but she did not realize how fabulously wealthy he was until her mouth dropped at the sight of hundreds of acres spread out before her, stretching toward the horizon like the sea.

He has more money than God Himself, she thought, then quickly chastised herself for having blasphemous thoughts.

Still, it was hard not to gape at the emerald fields, the enormous stables, filled with dozens of purebred horses, and four-story, plantation-style mansion. She clutched Mary's hand, not so much to deter the child from wandering off, but for strength. Jane had known Matthew for years, and if he could get used to his new wealth, then so could she.

Jane tried to quell the feelings of nervousness that made her stomach flutter. She was still embarrassed over the incident from the previous night, and she wouldn't show her face to Matthew, if not for his mother. Mrs. McConnell had requested a special, custom-order dress, and Jane was delivering the final product to her.

Jane and Mary walked up the cultivated drive, dotted with fresh bluebonnets as bright as blueberries. She only had to return a dress to his mother, then they would go straight back to their humble, two-room house about five miles outside of town.

"Hot," said Mary, itching at her dress.

Jane shook her daughter's hand. "Use your sentences, Mary," she replied, regretting that she had not brought her umbrella. The gravel crunched underfoot, and Jane wondered if it was a rich person's thing to line up rocks so neatly just to get to the house.

"I am hot," repeated Mary, fanning a hand in front of her face. "Is there tea?"

Jane repressed a sigh. It was the third time Mary had asked. "No, we are only staying for a moment to drop something off, then we are leaving," she replied. "There will be no time for tea."

"Hmph," was all Mary had to say about the prospect of no tea.

When they came to the door, the servant informed them that Ms. McConnell had last been seen at the stables, could you wait a moment while we fetch her?

"That is not necessary; we will go find her," said Jane, taking Mary's hand once more. The walk from the front door to the stables seemed nearly as long as their walk had been to the house itself.

They must own half of Texas, thought Jane.

When they arrived, there was no sign of anyone other than the few dozen stable boys they hired to care for the horses. Jane and Mary wandered around to the training field to see if there was anyone there.

They arrived to see Matthew riding a Painted horse, his shirt billowing in the summer breeze. The spotted fur pattern of the horse reminded Jane of cinnamon and cream, as its muscles rippled with every stride. Jane had to admit that he was not the gangly youth he once had been. He had the physique of someone used to doing hard, manual labor. Digging in the dirt for oil had apparently paid off. Once he spotted them, he rode up.

"Good afternoon ladies," he said, tipping his hat to them. When he smiled at her, she felt her mouth go dry. She tried to tell herself it was simply the Texas heat and that she, like Mary, simply needed some sweet tea.

"Matthew!" shouted Mary. She was the kind of person who had never met a stranger.

"Afternoon Matthew," said Jane. "We just came to return something to your mother, but we could not find her."

Matthew dismounted from the horse and walked over, clutching the reins. Without thinking about it, Jane took a step closer to Matthew. "Not a problem, you can leave it here with me, and I will gladly return it," he said. He spied Mary eyeing the beautiful dappled horse, her face aglow with wonder.

"Do you like horses, Mary?" he asked.

Mary nodded her head vigorously.

He smiled and took a step closer. "Do you want to pet her?" he asked, silently asking Jane if she had permission.

Again, Mary nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, come on over," he said, gesturing with his hand. "She's real friendly, and one of the calmest ones we have. Just touch her real gentle-like." Mary lifted her hand to the horse's neck. "That's it; good job."

The sight of Matthew guiding Mary's hand melted Jane's heart a little. Sometimes folks treated Mary like a pariah, as if her disability were a disease they could catch.

He does not talk to her like she is stupid, thought Jane. *He talks to her like anyone else*.

Most people talked to Mary in over-exaggerated tones, thinking that just because she was a bit slower that she was hopelessly idiotic. Matthew seemed to have a calm, easy way with Mary that Jane appreciated.

"Do you want to ride her?" asked Matthew.

Suddenly, all the warmth in Jane's heart vanished, replaced by cold fear. "I do not think that is a good idea," she said.

"Why not?" replied Matthew. "She can do it; it's easy, and I'll be with her. Do you want to Mary?"

Mary looked at her mother, then to Matthew, then nodded her head again.

"Then let's do it!" cried Matthew, hoisting Mary into the saddle. Once she was securely in place, Matthew mounted the saddle behind her, holding her firmly.

"She could get hurt," Jane said. She twisted her dress in her hands.

Matthew winked at her. "I promise that I will let no harm come to your daughter," he said. It was a promise Matthew would come to keep for the rest of his life; he simply did not know it yet.

They took off at a gentle walk, and Mary was too frozen with happiness to say much. Matthew held the reins and guided them and showed Mary how to hold them as well.

After the fourth pass around the training circle, Jane began to relax. She was surprised at how well Matthew behaved with Mary; the famous bad boy of Austin, was unexpectedly tender with a child with a disability.

Maybe he has a soft spot in him after all, she thought. As she watched them in the fading afternoon light, she thought that Matthew's smile was genuine in showing Mary how to ride. Something began to shift in Jane.

"Now," Jane heard Matthew say to Mary. "These horses are incredibly smart. If you want them to go back to the stables, all you have to say is, 'Go back home.'"

"Go back home," Mary repeated.

Just as he said, the horses began trotting back to the stables.

When they dismounted, Jane could not ignore how happy the ride had made Mary. Even though she had been tense the entire time, praying to the Good Lord that she would not fall, she could finally relax now. Matthew walked up to her and she felt herself becoming nervous again, but this time, it was in a pleasant way.

"Tea?" asked Mary.

Matthew laughed. "Would you like some?" he asked.

"Yes please," Mary responded.

"Yes ma'am," said Matthew, winking again at Jane. This time, her heart fluttered slightly in her chest.

He called to one of the stable boys and asked him to take Miss Mary up for a cold glass of fresh sweet tea.

"Come on to the stables, Jane. There's something I want to show you," Matthew said.

She took his outstretched hand and was quickly becoming comfortable with how good it felt in hers; it seemed like the most natural thing for it to be there, touching hers, guiding her.

The smell of horse sweat, hay, and manure mixed potently, but Jane did not mind; she was used to the smell of animals on a farm. Ranch hands were busy brushing down the horses, feeding them, distributing fresh hay, and giving them an extra carrot or two if they had behaved that day.

Leading her further into the stables, he announced, “Men, I thank you for your fine service today, but I would like some quiet company with the lovely Jane.”

The ranch hands all tipped their hats to her, greeted her with a chorus of good afternoons, and left the stables. Matthew led her down the aisle of horses, showing her all the finest breeds that he had recently purchased. Jane heard the occasional whinny or snort as they passed. There were beautiful chestnut-colored horses with manes like silk; dabbled American ponies, and spirited, black stallions.

“They’re magnificent,” Jane murmured, and indeed, they were. She envied the way that the horses could run for miles without stopping. What must it feel like to have that kind of freedom? They did not have daughters to worry about or lost loves to regret; all they knew was the wind and wide, open sky.

“You should see them run,” replied Matthew, stopping at a back wall with an assortment of brick-a-brac: rope, twine, leather polish for the horses saddles, bits of iron for making shoes, and a dozen other objects. “But they’re not what I wanted to show you.” Reaching for an object on one of the shelves set into the wall, Matthew pulled down a small statue.

Jane started laughing. “I can’t believe you kept it all these years!”

She took the soap replica of a horse she had carved and given to him as a present years ago. It was crude, as she had been only a teenager when she had made it. Seeing it, a flood of memories came back to her. She had forgotten how much she had liked to work with her hands, making little works of art out of seemingly simple things: a piece of soap or block of wood. She had stopped after she had given birth, as raising a daughter had consumed all of her time. When she looked at it, she remembered how proud she had been of it at the time.

Of course, Matthew had been quick to set her notions of artistry straight.

She looked up at him. “Do you remember what you said about it?”

Matthew grinned and took it, tossing it into the air. “I believe I said that it was the most beautiful sculpture that I had ever laid eyes on,” he said.

Jane smiled and shook her head. “Try: ‘This looks like a pig giving birth to a donkey.’”

Matthew held it up to the light. “Well, now that you mention it…”

Jane snatched it out of his hand, which surprised them both. Jane had never been playful before but now, she wanted to be. Something in Matthew brought it out of her. “I refuse to stand here and have you insult my pig. I mean, horse,” she said, grinning. “We will both go.” And she feigned a turn away.

“No, no!” cried Matthew, laughing. He grabbed her arm and pulled her close. Jane felt a jolt when he took her arm, a most pleasant sensation. “I was serious when I said that it was the most beautiful sculpture that I have ever laid eyes on.” He took it back gently from her. When his hand touched hers, she was reminded of the charity ball, how gentle he had been in guiding her onto the floor. His voice suddenly turned serious. “I meant that, because it is true. It’s beautiful, because you made it, Jane.”

Jane paused, at once humbled and in awe that Matthew would keep something that she had made for him for so long. It made her feel special, as though he had kept their connection open, a small, burning flame all these years.

"When you made this for me, I had no idea what it would come to mean for me. I remember when I told you how much I wanted a horse. Just one little pony, I said."

Jane nodded. "I remember," she whispered.

Matthew continued, "And you wanted me to have that, so you gave me what you could." He held up the little soap sculpture. "Jane, I never could have imagined that I would someday own even just one horse, let alone dozens. I have every horse from Arabian stallions to American mustangs, and I have to tell you…"

He thumbed the horse in his hands. "This is the most precious one I own," he finished.

At that, Jane's heart melted. She looked up at him, and she saw that he was serious. He gently set the horse on the shelf beside them.

The light filtering in through the windows illuminated his face, and Jane knew what was coming and she did not try to stop it. Matthew leaned forward and drew her in to kiss her.

As his warm lips pressed to hers, she could smell the fresh mint on his breath, the clean soapy scent of his hair, and the wonderful, sweet smell of hay of his skin. When he kissed her, the years melted away and she was transported back to that very first instant she had realized that she loved Matthew. Although her heart beat faster and harder, but it did not become wild. This kiss was not of new excitement or youthful impetuousness; it was sure and stable as stone, as firm and foundational as a cathedral towering into the sky. Her head did not swoon, nor did she feel faint, as perhaps she had in the early days of her youth; she felt stronger, more alive, more confident in his arms than she had ever felt before.

She returned his kiss with a strength that had before lay hidden. As they stood there in the stables, Jane realized that she had dearly missed Matthew all this time.

Chapter 4

When Jane woke up the next day, she felt changed somehow. The kiss with Matthew had awakened something in her that she thought had died and would remain forever dormant. She glanced out the window and thought that the day promised to be beautiful, rich in color, filled with birdsong.

As she threw off the covers and set to preparing for the day, she felt energized, alive, and even the slightest bit giddy. She had hardly fallen asleep the night before thinking about him and the kiss. She had not known, had never dreamed in her life that Matthew had feelings for her. Bustling about her small cabin, Jane hummed an old tune that she had nearly forgotten. When she thought about Matthew, she had a warm feeling at the center of her chest; she had forgotten how easy it was to be around him, how comfortable she felt, how at-ease. Jane was constantly tense from unconsciously thinking about Mary and how the world might react to her.

Mary. As Jane helped her get ready, bathing and dressing her, her heart faltered a little bit. Matthew had seemed comfortable with Mary, and he had interacted with her well, but that did not mean that he was ready to settle down with someone who had such a difficult daughter. He did not know how it was to face the stares and whispers of people every day. She would not

blame him if he did not want to be with her. Still, a tiny voice whispered hope into her ear, and she did not easily dismiss it.

Knock, knock, knock

Startled out of her thoughts, Jane went to open the door. When she did, her heart gave a tiny leap, because Matthew was standing there, filling the doorframe with his impressive body.

"Good morning, Jane," he said, his voice warm.

Jane's mouth went dry at the sight of him. He was so handsome standing there, the morning light filtering around him. He looked larger than life, so confident now, so sure of himself and his place in the world. If money had changed him, then it was for the better; he had a confidence about him that had been absent in his youth.

"Good morning," she replied. How could he look so handsome this early in the morning? How could his black hair fall so perfectly into place and his green eyes sparkle with vitality?

He looked into her eyes and for a moment, neither of them spoke. They seemed to understand that part of their relationship was still awkward, still new; they were still two strangers getting to know each other. Strangers who, for reasons beyond their control or desire to control, were falling in love.

"I was wondering if you would like to accompany me this morning," he said, gesturing to a horse and buggy sitting outside her cabin. "Just the two of us."

Jane hesitated. It would be difficult to find someone to watch Mary at such short notice. Still, the way he looked at her, like she held the secrets to all of life's questions, made her say yes. He was like an adventure she wanted to take, a horse she wanted to ride into distant lands, a journey that would never end. Matthew was all charm and persuasion and utter friendliness.

"But we will have to find someone for Mary," she replied. Mary would always remain her priority; that was something that he had to understand.

"I have someone in mind," Matthew said with a wink.

*

"Of course I'll watch her!" exclaimed Samantha, standing beside a huge tub of soapy water. "I've been needed some extra help in washing the laundry, and Mary is the Lord answering my prayers."

"You are sure that it is no trouble?" asked Jane for the fifth time.

She and Samantha stood in the doorway of Samantha's cabin. She shared it with her brother, since Samantha was still unmarried, and when Arthur had moved back to town, he had needed a place to stay.

"Jane," said Samantha firmly, with a glance at Matthew. "If you do not take this opportunity to go now, I will hog-tie you and throw you in that cart myself. Go on!" At that moment, Samantha erupted in a fit of coughing. She held up a handkerchief to her face, and Mary, seeing Samantha's distress, walked over and gave her a few pats on the back.

"There, there, sweet child, I'm fine," she said. She wiped her mouth on the handkerchief.

"Samantha, have you seen the doctor about that cough?" asked Jane. Looking Samantha up and down, Jane noted that she looked even worse than the night of the ball. She was like a flower slowly fading away into nothing. Samantha looked skinny; when had that happened? Her cheeks were sunken, and her wrists looked like tiny doll-sized bones.

But Samantha just waved her concerns away like laundry hanging out to dry. “It’s just a little summer cold,” she responded. “Nothing to lose our heads over. Now, go and enjoy your day. You deserve it.” And she practically shoved Jane out the door.

*

“So where are we going?” asked Jane as they bumped along the dirt road. Matthew was being uncharacteristically quiet about where their destination was, and she decided to poke a little fun at his new money. “Will we go to the derby track to see your horses race? Or do you have one of those new-fangled hot air balloons? Or will we spend hours lounging in your enormous boat?”

“Jane,” said Matthew laughing. “We’re in northwest Texas. There is not a speck of ocean for hundreds of miles.”

Jane shrugged. “How do I know what you millionaires do with your money?”

To her surprise, Matthew blushed. “That’s actually something I have been asking myself a lot lately,” he said. “I don’t want you to think that I’m someone different just because I have money now. I still feel like I’m the same person. I mean, if anything, other people have changed around me. They see me as their own personal bank, and I want to help people, I do, but I can’t just go around giving money to people like I’m the damn ruler of the world.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jane.

Matthew sighed. “I mean, ever since people have learned that I have become wealthy, they are always asking me for favors. Personal loans, things like that. At first, I helped any person who asked, because I thought that was the right thing to do. But then people kept asking for more and more money, and they would simply spend it on whiskey or worse. I want to help people, but I cannot have them taking advantage of me. It’s a fine line to walk, but I try to do it as best I can.”

Jane paused. “You said that you used to have someone helping you. I am sorry to pry, but what happened?”

Matthew sighed. “It’s a long story, but the basic facts are these: someone approached me saying that my land had oil. He gave me valuable information to start, and when we discovered that oil was indeed on the land, he tried to pull the rug from under me. He tried to go to a crooked sheriff, I will not say which one, but he is now retired and living off thirty years of bribes, and have my own land confiscated from me. I hired a lawyer and cut him out immediately. I even pressed charges against him, but I dropped them when he agreed to renounce all rights to the land or oil beneath it.”

The whole situation was now illuminated a bit better. Jane had been worried that money had changed Matthew. So far, it seemed that it hadn’t.

As they passed fields of cotton and corn, Jane paused. “Well, what do you want to do with your money?” she asked.

Matthew flicked the horse’s reins. “I want to help people,” he said. “I have all these ideas, but I don’t know where to start. Building the new hospital was just the beginning. I want to build things that will help people not just today but every day of their lives. I don’t need all the money I have; I got along just fine without it before, and I will continue to do so.”

“Ok, then, sell your house, sell your horses and be done with it,” said Jane slyly.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, here,” said Matthew, nudging Jane slightly. “But whatever I do, I just know that I want to make a difference. Look, we’re here.”

He pulled on the reins and the horse slowed to a stop.

Jane looked out into the field and her breath caught in her throat.

As far as she could see, there were thousands of bright bluebonnets swaying gently in the breeze. They looked like fragile gemstones, and each one seemed unique in its own way. Past endless fields of white cotton and yellow wheat, the bluebonnets seemed like the sky had flipped upside down and poured itself into the earth. Here and there were bursts of vivid orange Indian Paintbrushes, so that they made the deep sapphire of the bluebonnets that much more beautiful. The wind made the flowers dance and ripple, and it looked like waves in water. The sunlight seeped down from a violet sky, and enormous clouds were piled high. The breeze carried the flower's sweet scent to Jane, and she inhaled the warm, earthy smell of Texas.

"You're wrong," she whispered in awe. "We have the ocean right here."

Matthew smiled and helped Jane out of the buggy. Reaching into the carriage, he pulled out a basket with a couple of blankets.

"I thought we could have a small lunch here," he said. "I told you I'm still the same. I don't need fancy restaurants or gold-plated silverware or an entourage of toadies telling me how I should spend my money. I just need you here with me to have a good time."

Jane's heart melted at the earnestness of his comment. As he held out his hand for her to take, Jane felt as though she were about to embark on a great journey, as though the field before them really were a great ocean.

He led her through the field of bluebonnets, and Jane felt as though her feet were not touching the earth. The grasshoppers jumped out of their way when they walked through the grass, and the robins sang out overhead. The cicadas kept up their long, unending song, a steady hum that Jane knew by heart. She did not know exactly where her relationship with Matthew was going, and she did not want to question it, either. All she knew was in this moment, she was happy.

Spreading out the blankets on the ground, Matthew took out sandwiches, fruit, and some cut-up vegetables for a picnic. As they ate and drank, they talked about nothing and everything, just like good friends do. They gossiped like old women about the latest scandals in their small town and wondered if anything would come of them. The late-season apples had never tasted crunchier or sweeter to Jane, nor had the ham and cheese tasted any better. The bread was soft and flaky, as though it had been made by French pastry chefs. Slowly, bit by bit, the awkwardness between them dwindled, as they reconnected. It felt as though they were building a bridge through time, stretching from when they were teenagers to the present day.

As the sun climbed higher into the sky, some of the billowing clouds passed over it. The shadow through the earth into a muted clarity for a while. Matthew turned to Jane and said, "Jane…What happened to us?"

Jane swallowed the last of the homemade blueberry pie. She had been wondering and asking herself that question for days now. It seemed like it was yesterday that Jane and Matthew had looked at each other like they were doing now, but something had been off. The lines of their lives had diverged at just the right moment, and it had sent them careening apart for a decade. Now that they had come together again, she had to wonder what had made them fall away in the first place.

"I think…it was the war," she said softly.

The war. That great, damned waste of time and human life. No one wanted to have a civil war, not really. No normal, working-class, everyday sort of person like Jane, Samantha, or Arthur. All the newspapers had screamed about day in and day out leading up to it was that the sneaky northerners were going to take away their slaves, their property. Jane and other poor farmers of the area had looked around at themselves: *what slaves*? They were too poor to own slaves; that was something for rich people. Yet, somehow, it was poor farmers like Jack, Jane's husband, who went off to fight.

Jane had once saw a slave family being sold at an auction. The mother had been sold to a different master than her children, and when the owner came to take her away, she had screamed like they were cutting off her arm. As a mother herself, Jane understood that woman and her pain for just an instant. The experience had left a sour taste in her mouth regarding slavery, and she thought there may be something to the abolitionists, after all.

But still, when the letter came for Jack to fight for General Lee, he had to go. Jack didn't care a donkey's behind about what they were fighting for. He just wanted to get paid to save enough to buy a couple of horses and support his family and get out of the army as soon as possible. Everyone expected to be back within a year. No one had known that it would take four, long, bloody years before the South finally capitulated.

Jane and Jack were in love when that conscription letter arrived. He was sweet and humble, and Jane thought she could do a lot worse than marrying Jack. So when the letter came, it was as if someone had thrown a brick into a quiet pond, exploding all their carefully laid plans. That letter had been like some rattlesnake had shown up in the post, and Jack had looked like it might bite him if he opened it. Still, guided by fate, he did, and he would have to leave immediately for the army. Jane knew that if they stayed unmarried, they might have to wait years for the war to end.

Neither of them wanted that.

So, in her best muslin dress, with barely two pennies to call their own, Jane and Jack were married. They enjoyed approximately one month of marital bliss before he had to ship out. That month changed Jane's life forever; she fell pregnant almost immediately with Mary. William sent as much money back to them as he could, and he was able to meet his baby girl once before getting blown up by a cannonball two years into the war.

Her grief was spent quickly. Her very first thought was fear; she had no idea how to raise a child by herself. All of the energy she would have been mourning Jack's death went into raising her child.

Jane had not known that Mary was special until she was about two years old. She did not walk like the other children, nor did she speak very well. She was always slower, both in learning and physical movement. When the doctors had finally diagnosed her with the "Mongoloid Disease," Jane was already too far in love with Mary. It scared her, those first months, but she soon shouldered the responsibility like a soldier does his pack.

Thus, Jane's life had turned into an endless series of caring for Mary, finding special doctors for her, and finding work to keep them both off the streets. When Jane discovered that Mary was "special," she did not cry. She did not weep or clench her fists at the sky, angry with God. She already loved Mary with all her heart, and nothing could change that. True, there were nights when she wanted to give up, where she broke down and cried into her pillow. But, Mary

would do something to capture her heart once again—give her a bunch of flowers, taker her hand and kiss it—and she went forward with her head held high.

Still, it was hard; it was hard enough raising a child, harder still as a widow, and most difficult of all a daughter that needed special help. When Mary was older, she could not go to school and keep up with the rest of the children; she was simply too slow, physically and mentally. Jane spent almost every extra cent she had on a tutor for her. Other people asked her why bother with a "dumb" child.

"She's still *my* child, by God, and she may grow up dumb, but she will not grow up ignorant," said Jane. That shut folks up pretty fast.

And so the years flowed by like river water. Jane mourned Jack's absence for the better part of two years, until the day she woke up and realized that she had not cried over him in almost a month. The pain of losing him had been sharp and had cut her deep, but Jane was, above all things, resilient. She mourned Jack, but she was able to let him go.

After his death, Jane did not have the time or energy to go searching for another husband. She had been without one for so long that she had grown comfortable with the idea of always being together with Mary, just the two of them.

"And that's the way we've been ever since," said Jane, finishing filling in the gaps of the past ten years. "Just Mary and me."

Matthew paused and looked out over the field of bluebonnets. The wind whispered among their velvety petals, sighing and reminding him of memories long past.

"There has to be more to it than that," he murmured.

Jane turned to him. "What do you mean?" she said.

Matthew took her hand and brought it up to his lips to kiss it. "I mean, Jane, I—I was rather fond of you, you know," he said.

Jane looked up and her heart twisted with the bittersweet sense of lost time. "You were?" she asked.

"Of course," he replied. "Don't you remember that time we…you know," he said.

"Kissed beneath the maple tree?" she finished for him.

Matthew nodded. "That was my first kiss," he said. "I remember that you looked so lovely in the moonlight. Your hair was longer, and it curled perfectly at the edges, just like right now." He took a strand of it in his hand and let it fall through his fingers like silk. "I was so nervous," he continued. "You were wearing this beautiful dress and your eyes were looking up to me from beneath your lashes, and my heart was pounding so hard that I thought it was going to come out of my chest. I wanted to kiss you forever and ever, but I stopped, because I didn't know what the hell I was doing."

"I remember it a bit differently," said Jane. "You dared me to kiss you, as if it were a game. 'I bet you've never kissed a man before,' you said. You seemed so confident, so sure of yourself. I thought that you must have spent hours kissing other girls beneath other trees, because it seemed like you had done it before. And when you stopped, I thought I must have been boring to you."

They had always been friends, but one summer, they had begun to look at each other differently. Neither of them admitted it, but they had developed feelings for each other.

Matthew shook his head vehemently. "Never," he said. "I wanted to tell you how I felt about you, Jane. I know it seemed like a silly, trivial thing, but that's because I thought that's

what men were supposed to do. If I would have known, I would have shouted from the rooftops that I was…well, I was in love with you."

And the bittersweet feeling grew. Time was a potent wine, that only grew stronger as the years passed. Jane drank from it now; if she had known how Matthew had felt, where would she be now? Where would they be?

I cannot regret what has happened, she thought. *Otherwise, I would not have Mary*.

And they would not be together, right now, sitting in the field of bluebonnets, lost in each other's eyes.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she whispered.

Matthew looked down at the ground. "I was young," he said. "And foolish. And terrified of my own feelings. I thought if I said anything, then I would look foolish to you. Then you began courting with William, and I thought that I had missed my chance. I have spent the last ten years wishing I would have said something."

Say it now, Jane thought. *Please, say it now for both of us*.

But Matthew kept silent. All he did was hold her hand, and somehow, it was enough, for both of them just then.

As Jane's thoughts wandered, her mind struck upon Arthur's comments from the party. Even now, she wondered if having money had changed Matthew.

"I heard rumors that you are…a bit of a Don Juan," she said, turning scarlet.

Matthew had at least the decency to look down just then. "I will not deny all of them," he replied. "But at least half aren't true. Most are made up by people with nothing better to do than poke their nose in matters that have nothing to do with them."

That was…not as comforting as Jane would have liked to hear, but she was ready to forgive him. Men were weak; they succumbed to loneliness far easier than women.

"But it's not what you think," he said quickly.

Jane raised an eyebrow.

"Ok, so it's a little bit of what you think," Matthew replied. "But I swear to you Jane, I needed a way to fill the hole that was left in my heart after you were married. Watching you go into the arms of another man…it almost destroyed me. All I had left was chasing after oil in the dirt."

"Well, you acquired one of those things," said Jane.

"But I know which one I want the most," he replied.

Then, taking her in his arms, Matthew kissed Jane again, long and slow. There was no making up for lost time; there couldn't be, and they both seemed to understand that. After so long, they realized that there was no rush; there didn't have to be. They were with each other now, and that was all that mattered.

The sun kissed Jane's skin and the breeze cooled them both; they kissed softly and tenderly, a slow, sensual burn.

"Jane?" asked Matthew softly.

"Hm?"

"I would like to invite you over to lunch tomorrow, to meet my mother and father," he said, pulling away gently.

"Matthew, I've met your mother and father," giggled Jane.

"Yes, but I mean, re-meet them. I want to ask you something…well, just come over tomorrow. And bring Mary," he said.

"All right," agreed Jane. "I will."

After a while, it could have been days for all that Jane noticed, they laid down on the blanket together, Matthew wrapping his arms around Jane. He did not need to take off her clothes to make her feel any more special than she did right now; he did not need to see her naked body to feel fulfilled, as he did right then. As for Jane, his arms seemed to melt the ice that had formed in her heart from so many years of solitude and grief. As the flowers swayed around them, they held each other, and it was all they needed.

After a lifetime, (or was it only a few hours?), Jane suddenly felt a frisson of fear. What if Mary needed help? What if something happened to her? What if…what if…?

She sat up and said, "I should go now. Mary probably needs me."

Matthew looked at her, and repressing a sigh, nodded.

As they rode back into town, it was all Jane could do to not think about the one hundred possibilities of danger that could have befallen Mary.

If anything ever happened to her, Jane would never forgive herself.

Chapter?

Jane watched Matthew drive the horse and buggy away as she waved goodbye from the porch of Samantha's house. When she knocked on the door, she was surprised to see Arthur open it.

"Samantha had a terrible coughing fit," he explained, as he ushered Jane inside. "It was no trouble to watch over Mary."

"Well, thank you," said Jane. "I sure do appreciate it." She paused, then said, "How is Samantha doing, Arthur? Please tell me the truth."

Arthur's face fell. The façade he normally kept up was stripped away, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "Not good," he said. "She has some sort of liquid filling up her lungs. The local doctor said it is just seasonal, but she has had it for more than a year now." He put his hands in his pockets, jingling the loose coins that were there. "They say that she will be all right, but the new doctors, the ones that are coming to work in the new building, they say…they say…"

Jane paused, fear gripping her heart like a vise. "Go on," she prodded gently.

Arthur looked up at her, his eyes shiny and wet. "They say that she does not have long to live," he whispered. "They have not told her yet, for fear that if she knew, her condition would worsen. But that is how things are."

Jane gasped. She could not imagine losing one of her closest friends. She suddenly felt guilty for not saying something sooner, for not seeing the signs. Taking care of a child was one thing but ignoring her dear friend was another.

"I'm so sorry that I haven't done more to help," said Jane.

Arthur lifted one shoulder in a bit of self-recrimination. "I did not notice sooner, either. But she will improve. I am sure of it; I am working right now to secure some money for her," he said.

"Oh really?" asked Jane. "What are you doing nowadays?"

Arthur looked askance. “Well, I actually lost a lot, but I am working to reclaim what is mine,” he said. He looked back and her and patted her shoulder. “But not to worry. I will soon have all that sorted out.”

Jane thanked him once again for looking after Mary and left with her in tow.

As Jane went about her errands—going to the general goods store, picking up more fabric to sew, and stopping by the bank, her thoughts constantly shifted back to Matthew.

She was absolutely astounded that he had had feelings for her; he had not said a word to her when they were younger. More amazing still that he still had those same feelings. As she floated along, in almost a dreamy daze, she realized that she too, loved him back. Seeing him again had rekindled all her old feelings, and she felt the strong, insistent tug on her heart whenever she thought about him.

This felt like she had been given a second chance; they could start over. Every time she thought about him, her stomach leapt, and her heart began to pound. Her mind latched onto a comment he had said. He said that he wanted to ask her something. Could that mean…?

Don’t get ahead of yourself, Jane, she told herself. *He probably does not want to ask you to marry him*.

Still, once she had that thought, it was hard to put it out of her mind. Marry Matthew? Would she, if he asked her?

Yes, a small voice responded instantly. *Absolutely*.

Jane admonished herself. There was so much to consider about marriage. What would people think? They would say that she was simply marrying for money. After all, Matthew was a millionaire now. Every socialite from here to Dallas was probably circling him at the moment.

Well, she thought. *I have been dealing with people’s whispers all my life. And they haven’t gotten to me yet*.

Of course, she would not marry Matthew for his money; she had loved him before he was rich, and she would continue loving him if he were a pauper. She couldn’t ignore the fact that the money existed, but he wanted to do something good with it, something noble. That alone made her fall even more deeply in love with him than she already was.

Would he care about marrying a widow?

Again, people tended to flap their jaws, but Jane doubted that Matthew would care. He would understand how she had felt about her first husband, but he would also know that her heart now belonged to him and him alone.

As Mary went around the store, picking things up without asking permission, Jane’s throat suddenly clenched.

Oh, Mary. Jane knew, with all her heart, that the real reason she was afraid of marrying Matthew was because of Mary. What if he did not truly accept her as she was? Would he ever get tired of a disabled child? Would he be able to withstand the gossip and rude stares and mean, snide comments all his life?

With that, Jane took Mary by the hand and led her home. Tomorrow, she would see Matthew again, and she could hardly wait.

Chapter ?

Matthew's mansion seemed even bigger on the inside than it did on the outside. Marble staircases wound up into vast heights, the ceiling dripped with crystal chandeliers, and the large windows let in the sunlight. Mary openly gawked at all the finery while Jane was able to control her own expression a bit better (but not much). Jane tried to quell the rising tide of nerves in her stomach; this lunch seemed so official somehow, as though it were more a pageant or a show than an informal occasion between friends.

As Jane stood waiting in the entrance, she marveled at the elegant pieces of furniture gracing the halls, the huge bouquets of flowers on nearly every surface, and the servants going to and fro. When Jane heard Matthew's voice echoing in the hallway, her heart gave a little leap.

"Jane! And Mary! How wonderful to see you," he said, embracing them both. Turning to Mary he said, "Mary, would you like to play with the dogs? We have two new puppies."

Mary turned to Jane with a hopeful expression and Jane nodded her permission.

"Come on, then!" said Matthew, taking Mary's hand. "They are two beautiful golden retrievers, and you will absolutely adore them."

Just as I absolutely adore you, thought Jane, watching them walk away.

While they were gone, Matthew's mother walked up to Jane.

"Hello," she said. "So you are the dressmaker with the lame daughter."

As charming as a dried-up lemon, thought Jane.

"Yes, that's me," she said. "Don't you remember me, Mrs. McConnell? Matthew and I used to attend the school together."

Mrs. McConnell squinted. "That's right," she said, not at all remembering. "Well, come in, the lunch will be cold by the time we get to the table."

Despite the rather frigid salutation, the lunch passed by in a rather agreeable manner. The food was exquisite (Matthew's tastes had at least improved from boyhood), and Matthew set Jane's nerves at ease.

"So is that all you do? Sewing?" asked Mrs. McConnell, raising an imperial eyebrow. The scrape and clink of cutlery on fine china stopped as Matthew turned to Jane to listen to her response.

Jane set down her water and responded, "Yes, but I have many esteemed clients, such as yourself. They appreciate the quality of my work, and it keeps me afloat in lean times. Mary takes up the rest of my time."

"I see," responded Mrs. McConnell. "Yes, Matthew gave me the dress that you made for me. It is very fine quality, indeed. Your stitches are almost invisible, and I know that did not take simply one night to learn."

Jane shook her head in humble acceptance of the compliment. "No, it did not," she said. "I learned from my mother that taking your time and having patience is the best way to create something beautiful. Sewing cannot be rushed."

"And is it very difficult raising…a Mongoloid?" Mrs. McConnell quickly glanced at Matthew to gauge his reaction.

Jane was used to the question, so she did not take offense. "It is one of the most difficult things you can imagine," she said. "Every day seems more difficult than the last. As Mary grows up, I constantly worry about her and if I am doing a good job as a mother." Jane looked at Mary across the table, slowly, but politely eating. She had not spilled one drop of food on the exquisite lace tablecloth, nor on herself.

“But,” Jane continued. “It’s the most rewarding things I’ve ever done. And I learned that raising Mary is a lot like sewing: I need a lot of patience, sometimes, but in the end, she is worth it.”

Matthew took her hand across the table and gave it a squeeze and said, “You’re doing a wonderful job,” he said. “You’re the best mother I’ve ever known.”

“Except for Mrs. McConnell, of course,” said Jane.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Matthew, giving his mother a playful smile. Mrs. McConnell narrowed her eyes but said nothing in response.

While Mary played with the two goldens, their fur as yellow as daisies, soft as corn silk, Matthew took Jane’s hand and helped her from the table. As they made their way to the garden, Jane noticed Matthew’s hand nervously checking his pocket every few seconds. He pushed a hand through his hair, a trait she had now come to recognize as a habit when he was flustered.

Still, when they went out into the garden, Matthew seemed to relax. Jane could see why. The sculptured ground was beautiful; yellow roses grew in elegantly manicured bushes, rosemary perfumed their air with its heady fragrance, and an abundance of trees gave them plenty of shade. A cool breeze drifted through, stirring the ends of Jane’s hair. Anyone with a garden like this would be well-pressed to relax.

“This is beautiful,” Jane whispered.

“Not half so beautiful as you,” Matthew replied.

Jane felt a warmth begin in her stomach and flow through her; it had been so very long since anyone had called her beautiful. When was the last time someone had taken her hand, gently pull her in for a slow, sensual kiss, or look at her as Matthew did now, with a mix of adoration and loyalty?

Far too long. Jane realized that she had worn her solitude like armor, impenetrable and steely. She had toughened up over the years, both in response to the cruel jokes and whispers of people about Mary, and from her own need to wrap herself in solitude. If she could not feel anything, then she would not need to feel the sting of loneliness. But now, as Matthew leaned forward and kissed her, taking her in his arms and pulling her close, Jane’s tough exterior cracked and she let the warmth of love seep deep into all the cold spots in her heart.

He led her around, and they paused to look at the lemon trees, with fruit the size of her fist. Their fresh, clean scent seemed to scour the air around them, purifying it, rinsing away ten years of doubt and confusion, lost hopes and forgotten dreams. It gently scrubbed away Jane’s hardened exterior to reveal her soft, sensitive soul beneath. As they walked from rosebush to rosebush, their feet cracked the fallen pecans, and with each step, the ground crunched beneath them.

“How did you survive the war?” asked Jane. “When so many didn’t?”

Matthew paused before a clump of yellow roses. He murmured, “Sometimes I do not even know. I ask myself every day why I was spared. Sometimes dumb luck, sometimes through the protection of my army unit.” Matthew smiled softly and said, “To be honest, I was a yellow-bellied chicken. I stayed in the back of the march, kept my head down, and never tried to be a hero. I did not feel like dying just so some rich planter could keep his slaves.”

Jane nudged him softly. “How do you feel now that you are one of those rich planters?”

Matthew shrugged. “Still the same, I suppose. At any rate, I was eventually glad I fought in the war. That’s where I met—” Matthew paused for just a moment, but enough for Jane to notice. “—the person who eventually helped me find the oil reserves. We kept each other from being blasted by smithereens. Then, when we were discharged, we came back and started digging. The rest is history.”

Although Jane noticed the hesitation in his voice while he told the story, she said nothing. “And you have never wanted to be a hero? Never considered it?” she asked playfully.

“Never,” said Matthew. “Absolutely not. I like living, thank you very much, and I plan on doing it for quite a long time. Unless,” he paused looking at Jane. “I had something very, very worthwhile to be a hero for.”

They paused, listening to the pecans falling to the ground, the cicadas droning, and the barks and giggles from Mary and the dogs not too far away. Jane and Matthew were falling into an easy rhythm. They did not feel the need to fill every silence with words; they gained strength and energy just by being around each other.

Matthew took her over to a tree, a towering maple, its leaves waving at her in the wind. The chirps of robins could be heard nearby, and high overhead, a red-tailed hawk screeched.

Matthew pulled back and looked at her. “Jane,” he said, his voice husky and full of emotion. “When I invited you to the party, I did not know if you would accept my invitation, and I stayed up half the night leading up to it, pacing around my room. I was so nervous, and even then, I did not realize the depth of my feelings for you. I wondered if you even alive or living here anymore. After the war, things became so chaotic. But now is my chance to fix some of that chaos, put things back on the path they were meant to be.”

Jane paused, allowing Matthew to continue.

“I brought you here, because I want to ask you something. Now, I have stayed up half the night trying to get this right, but every time I say it, it sounds so trite and common, but I’ll try to tell you just one tenth of what I’m feeling. So here I go.”

Matthew took a deep breath, then said, “Is it hot, here in this shade? Please tell me you feel incredibly hot.”

Although Texas in the summer could be unforgiving at best and hellish at worse, it was a rare day when the breeze blew up from the Gulf of Mexico and clouds skittered over the sun to create a brief respite from the heat.

“I am fine,” said Jane. “But you know you don’t have to feel nervous around me.”

“I am not nervous,” said Matthew nervously. He opened and closed his hands, as if he were trying to release something. “I just don’t want to mess this up. Do you remember when we kissed beneath that maple tree, all those years ago?”

Jane nodded, the sweet smell of the leaves drifting around her taking her back to when she was a teenager, half in love with Matthew but too young and foolish to recognize it.

We should have run away right then, she thought. *I should have taken his hand and fled into the night, not caring what anyone thought*.

“I know it is not the same one, but it is the same kind,” said Matthew. “I knew that when we kissed, that I loved you. I didn’t know how to tell you, and I have spent the last ten years regretting not saying anything.”

He gripped her hand tighter, and Jane’s heart swelled. This moment felt so good, so right. She could hardly believe that it was unfolding before her eyes.

“So I am saying it now: Jane, you are the strongest, most beautiful, kindest, and most wonderful person that I know. You have raised a beautiful daughter all by yourself, and she is the sweetest creature ever to walk the earth, besides her mother, of course,” he continued.

Jane felt the sting of tears prick her eyes. She was so happy that tears threatened to spill over.

“You are wonderful too,” she said. “We cannot waste any more time regretting the decisions we have made. All my life, I have wanted one thing: to see my daughter grow up safe. I cannot regret how things turned out, because otherwise, I would not have Mary.”

And then the tears did start falling; it felt too good to be true. She had Matthew and Mary. What more could she possibly want?

“No, no, no, not yet,” said Matthew, pulling out a handkerchief to dry her eyes. “Don’t start crying yet. If you start crying, then *I’ll* start crying, then I’ll lose my place and forget what I was saying. Then, I’ll have to start over and we’ll both end up crying again.”

Jane laughed through the handkerchief and blew her nose. “Ok, ok,” she said, wiping away the stray tear. “I’m fine. Please continue.”

“Thank you,” he said, winking and straightening his shoulders. “Where was I?”

“How wonderful I am,” Jane said, giggling.

“Right, right,” said Matthew, suddenly putting on a serious face. “Jane, what I’m trying to tell you is that I have loved you for ten years, and I could love you for one hundred more.” He pulled out a small, black velvet box from his pocket. When he opened it, a ring inlaid with diamonds sparkled in the afternoon light.]“So will you please,” he whispered. “Please do me the very great honor of becoming Mrs. McConnell?”

Jane could hardly speak; she heard her heart thumping loudly in her chest. Once again, the tears threatened to spill over her eyes. She looked up at Matthew and found that he was completely and utterly serious. It seemed like everything Jane had wanted was coming into being. Jane and Matthew loved each other, and there was no reason why she should not accept. She was ready; she had mourned her first husband, but she was tired of living alone. She was ready for a companion like Matthew, someone to fall completely in love with and spend the rest of her life loving. She had not dared to dream that she could end up married to Matthew, and now it was becoming a reality.

As she opened her mouth to accept, they heard someone clear their throat behind them. Jane turned her head at the sound.

“Pardon me,” said the cool voice of the butler. “But the lively Miss Mary needs your assistance, ma’am. She is in need of something, but…” the butler cleared his throat. “We cannot quite understand her speech.”

Jane blushed a little but nodded. That was no surprise; it was difficult to understand Mary on a good day. She felt a slight frustration. It seemed sometimes that Mary was always needing something, and Jane wished that for once, Mary did not depend on her quite so much. She was slightly embarrassed in front of Matthew, but if he wanted to marry her, then he had to realize what it meant to raise a disabled child.

Turning to Matthew, she said, “I am so sorry; I’ll only be a moment.”

“Do not worry, my darling,” he said. “I have waited for you for ten years. I can wait a few more minutes.”

He kissed her, and Jane ran to the house to see what was the matter. She did not know that she would hear something that would break her heart.

Chapter

Jane's heart was a hot air balloon. Matthew had proposed to her! She could already feel her days of loneliness and solitude melting away before her. Her feet barely seemed to touch the ground as she walked. She knew that she loved him, just as much as he loved her. She had not dared to think that it was possible that he loved her all these years, and yet, here he was, proposing matrimony to her. She just needed to see what was bothering Mary, and she could go back to her state of bliss.

As she passed the rooms of the house, she looked for Mary, but could not find her. Jane decided to go back to the dining parlor, to see if she were there.

Her footsteps fell softly on the floor; so softly, that, apparently, Matthew's family did not hear her approach. The sharp voice of his mother rose through the room.

"—don't know why you would want to marry someone like *that*," said Mrs. McConnell. "After all, she is a widow."

Jane stopped; her heart began to pound, and not in a good way. She crept closer to the door that was nearly shut. It was cracked, just enough that Jane could hear all that was said in the dining room.

"Being a widow is not her fault, mother," replied Matthew. "And if you mean one of the smartest, kindest, most resilient women that I have ever met, then yes, I do want to marry a woman like that."

Jane heard the scrape of silverware as it clanked against a plate. "Really, Matthew? And you would want to take on the poor, dumb girl as well?"

Jane's heart began to sink. It was nothing that she had not heard before. She briefly felt a flash of anger toward Mrs. McConnell; she had said something new, but neither did that gie her the authority to insult her daughter. Now Matthew would realize just how foolish he was to think that he was in love with her.

She knew exactly how this would all end. Matthew would pause and think to himself that his mother was right. No matter how much he loved Jane, surely he did not want to take in a disabled girl like Mary.

Jane backed away from the door. She left to find Mary and take her leave from the house, tears stinging her eyes; she had heard enough.

*

What Jane did not hear, though, was Matthew's reply.

"She is not dumb, Mother, and if you continue to insult her, I will leave this instant," replied Matthew. "She is slower than most, yes, but she is sweet and can learn. Perhaps more slowly, yes, but she can learn and is capable of more than you think. So don't you dare say another word against Mary."

Mrs. McConnell turned to Matthew. “My dear son, if you marry that woman, you will take on all the responsibilities of a father, and a father to that poor, hideous creature. What will everyone say? Can you imagine the gossip of this town?”

“The gossip of this town be damned!” Matthew said. “I do not care what you, or anyone else thinks. I love Jane with all my heart, and if I must be a father to Mary to marry Jane, then so be it. I cannot think of a sweeter daughter to raise.”

Mrs. McConnell practically fainted. “Oh Matthew,” she said. “You are breaking my heart. Are you to raise her as your own daughter?”

“Yes, mother, that is exactly what I am saying,” replied Matthew. “She will take my name.”

“Goodness gracious, Christ Almighty,” said Mrs. McConnell. “In that case, Matthew, you leave me no choice. If you marry that Jane and accept her daughter as your own, you will no longer be welcome in this family. I will raise a suit against you to make sure that you lose every cent belonging to the McConnell name.”

Matthew stood up, throwing down his cloth napkin. “Fine!” he said. “Be that as it may, I am marrying Jane. I love her and her daughter. Yes, I love Mary too, and I want to be a family together. I know it will be hard; it will probably be the most difficult thing in my life, but it’s worth it to me. I don’t care a horse’s ass if I lose everything. All of this,” Matthew gestured around to the crown molding, the elegant ceiling, the chandeliers, the marble countertops, “means nothing to me if I don’t have Jane. Do you understand me? *Nothing*.”

With that, he strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter

It’s all in place. Everything has been set into motion. Instead of taking him, I will lure him out. I will snatch what he cares about most. I have no wishes to harm the pathetic child, although she probably should be drowned in a river for her own sake. No, she will simply be the bait. If Matthew wants to take what was precious from me, I will show him that I can make what he cares about disappear. She won’t be harmed…as long as they do what I say.

I planned it all out. I will kidnap her, take her deep into the foothills. There is an old, abandoned mine, and there we will stay until the ransom has been paid. Then, I will take my leave to Mexico, and leave this wretched place, living the rest of my life on the pure white beaches, along a turquoise coast. Not before I help…well, she will receive all the care, the best doctors, the best treatment. And after, I will receive what belongs to me. He thought he could cheat me out of my share of his oil money. I was the one who showed him the possibilities! I was the one that showed him exactly where the search, where to dig. He is sitting on a throne made of black gold, while I am left digging and scraping in the dirt.

I do not even care about the money, not really. It’s the principle of the matter; nothing in this world is consequence-free. And Matthew McConnell will discover what happens when you steal from friends.

*

Jane felt the sharp sting of embarrassment settle over her skin; it felt like hundreds of bee stings, pricking her skin over and over. She gripped mary’s hand far too tightly, as she strode

down the road, practically running. Hot tears burned her eyes and made her vision swim and blur.

How could she have ever thought that she had a chance with Matthew? How could she have been so foolish? This was why she had not dated anyone, anyone at all: the fear that they would not accept Mary, and now that fear reared its head, like a snake about to strike. Mary was not like other children; she knew that. She felt it deeply in her heart every single day of her life. But, around Matthew, she felt that Mary could have almost been…normal. He did not treat her as an infant, the way Jane herself did. He had shown her how to do things and when she did them, it had felt like watching Mary grow up and blossom before her very eyes. With Matthew, it had felt different.

Which was probably why she now felt as though she had stepped off the top step on a flight of stairs, only to discover it wasn't there, to go tumbling down. Mary had proved to be too much for Matthew and his family. Well, that was fine. If it came down to the choice between love and Mary, she knew which one she would pick every time.

When they arrived home, Jane gave Mary a pencil and paper to draw with, then went inside her room, locked her door, and allowed herself to cry.

She cried for all the lost years between her and Matthew, all the missed opportunities they never got to have.

She cried for Mary, knowing that she could never make her the same as other people. No matter how hard she prayed, she could not wave a magic wand to make her better. Seeing her with Matthew had shown her the spark of possibility that she might have, and honestly, it terrified her.

She cried for the broken bits of her and Matthew, that could never be put back together again. Jane knew that Matthew would stay with his family; if she were in his position, she would do the same. She knew how important family was, and Matthew would not easily turn his back on them.

As she clung to her pillow, she tried to ignore the tiny knocks that came from her bedroom door, as Mary asked what was the matter with mama.

*

As Matthew strode from the room, he was so angry that he could hardly see straight. His fists balled at his side. How could his own mother have said those mean and terrible things? Jane as the love of his life; he knew that as surely as he drew breath. He had waited for ten years, and the majority of that time without hope. He loved Jane ever since they were teenagers and shared that kiss under the maple tree. It did not matter to him that she was a widow, that she had a daughter, and a disabled one at that. He saw a glimmer in Mary, a light that even Jane herself kept hidden under a table. Mary could do so much if the world would just give her a chance.

His shoes made clicking sounds agains the smooth marble as he went from room to room, looking for Jane. He passed by the garden, where they had been, to each of the rooms in the mansion.

No Jane.

Taking the arm of one of his servants, he asked if they had seen her, or Mary.

"The lady in question left a few minutes ago," said a uniformed butler. "She was holding the hand of her daughter, and, if I may say so, looked quite distraught."

Matthew nodded, afraid to speak for anger, and waved away the servant.

She had left. Matthew knew instantly that she must have overheard his conversation with his mother, and his face flushed in shame. How much had Jane heard? What did she think of him? Of his family?

Matthew turned and went to the door. He was so angry at his mother, and at himself, for not defending Jane better. She must think that he was the rottenest egg in Texas. If he were her, he would probably hate himself. No wonder she had fled. He was going to chase her down right now, explain everything.

She probably never wants to see you again, he thought. *She will spit in your face if you come near her*.

He paused, one hand on the door. Guilt crippled him from going further. He had proposed to her, had poured forth his heart and soul, and she probably thought it was all lies, if he could not even stand up properly for her. He should have left right then, taken her in his arms, and rode away from the mansion without another thought to what anybody thought.

For, in his heart, Matthew could not ignore that he was terrified. Of course, he was nervous about what people said. He couldn't deny that he felt a little apprehension, and for that, he felt guilty. If he truly loved Jane, would he not then be able to accept every part of her? Accept that she had a disabled daughter? And what would people say about him?

It was petty, it was foolish, and Matthew hated himself for it.

And yet, for all those reasons, there was one that kept him from leaping off the porch and running to Jane.

Would he be a good father?

To Matthew's incredible surprise, he had realized that yes, he wanted to be a father, he wanted a family with Jane. He wanted to adopt Mary, despite all the challenges she would bring. And the thought that he would do something incredibly stupid, mess up somehow, make a cowpie out of fatherhood…well, it was more than he could take. He could not bear the thought that he would make a mistake as a father. He loved Jane, and he knew that he would come to love Mary, but would that be enough?

Matthew didn't know. And so, despite his heart screaming at him to go to the stables, pick the fastest horse, and race after Jane, he stood, frozen to the spot. Fear kept him immobilized from chasing after his love.

After it all happened, Matthew would wonder what would have happened if he had chased Jane down. Would it have ended differently? Would it have made a difference? Would it have prevented all the tragedy to come?

At that point, Matthew had no idea that he was about to face his greatest challenge of his life.

*

I have no choice but to act now. She is becoming so weak. She can barely breathe. I've watched her waste away, slowly, before my eyes. She thinks that I do not know about her, but I've known all along. She cannot wait any longer.

Tonight, I steal the child.

Chapter?

When Jane woke up that morning, she instantly knew that something was wrong. It was far too quiet. Mary was not up, rattling dishes, speaking quietly to herself. All she could hear was the wind screeching through the cracks in her cabin.

Jane threw off the covers, her heart already pounding. Mary had probably just wandered outside again. She did that, despite Jane's best admonishes to stay inside; anything could happen in the wide, wild world: a rattlesnake could bite her, a horse could trample her underfoot, she could fall in a well, she could get lost in the woods…

Jane glanced out the window to her bedroom, but all she could see was her laundry flapping in the wind. She did not see the flash of Mary's brown hair, nor the swirl of her dress.

She opened the door to Mary's bedroom, but she was not there. As she scanned the room, her eyes fell on a piece of paper placed just so on top of her pillow.

Jane picked it up with trembling hands. Her heart was pounding, and her stomach felt queasy.

Her eyes raked over the paper. They fell upon one word, one little word that sent Jane into a sprint for the town, the paper clutched in her fist.

"…Taken."

*

Jane's feet pounded against the gravel as she ran down the road. Her mind spun like a water wheel, and her breath came in spurts. She could not believe this was happening. All she could think of was to run faster, faster, faster. Her legs burned with the strain, but still, she pushed herself faster. A jagged pain shot through her side, and her lungs felt like they were on fire, but she hardly noticed. Her only thought was Mary.

Her stomach clenched with every step. She should have watched over her better; she should never have let Mary out of her sight, not even for a single second. Everything that she had done to protect Mary had failed. The thought that she was a bad mother tore at Jane, and the guilt threatened to overtake her.

When she burst into the sheriff's office, he thought that a ghost had come, so white was Jane's face.

"They took her!" she screamed. "They took my baby!" Jane clenched her fists into her hair.

The sheriff, normally quite relaxed in their small town, stood up at the panic in Jane's voice.

"Jane, now, you're going to have to calm down," he said. "Tell me slowly—what has happened?"

"Someone took Mary!" she said, shoving the letter into the sheriff's dry, cracked hands. "God, please find her."

The sheriff seemed maddeningly slow taking his time to read the quick, scrawling script across the page:

I regret to inform you that you have mixed with the wrong company. I am very sorry to say that I have taken your daughter. If you want to see her unharmed and safe, then you will tell Matthew McConnell to gather a bag full of gold bars. Do not contact the Sheriff and do not try to find her. Any attempts to save her will not end pleasantly for either you or her. I will wait for

the bag at the edge of town. Set it by the large, bleached cattle skull near the general goods store.

The sheriff looked up. “You did the right thing by coming here. Now, we just have to find Matthew,” he said.

*

Jane had wanted to sprint to Matthew’s house herself, but the Sheriff convinced her to let the deputy fetch him. By the time he showed up, Jane’s eyes were red-rimmed and her face blotchy from crying.

“Matthew!” she cried, falling into his arms. “They took her.” Her voice barely rose above a whisper. She had never been this frightened in all her life, and that included when she had pulled back her bedsheet and found a rattlesnake in her bed.

“We’ll get her back,” he said, wrapping his strong arms around her.

“But what if—” Jane began.

“We *will* get her back,” Matthew repeated more firmly. “I swear we will. Remember I promised that I wouldn’t let any harm come to Mary? I don’t make promises I do not intend to keep. Now, chin up. You can cry when this is all over.”

Jane nodded and took a shaky breath.

Although the deputy had informed Matthew of the situation, he still gestured to the letter to read it. As his eyes scanned the page, Matthew clutched the paper in anger. He shook his head.

“Do you have any enemies, Matthew?” aked the sheriff. “Anyone that we could start looking for?”

Matthew shook his head. “None, that I know of. I have no idea why anyone would bear a grudge against me.”

“You don’t owe money to anyone, never defaulted on any loans?” asked the sheriff.

Matthew dismissed that with a wave of his hand. “No, nothing like that. I have no idea.”

The sheriff paused, then spoke up. “We should go over to Jane’s house and see if there are any clues to indicate where they might have gone,” he said.

“Let’s go,” said Jane instantly.

With each bump of the cart, Jane’s stomach clenched. It seemed like time had slowed down, and each moment was as painful as pulling teeth. She felt she was one breath away from screaming and never stopping. She held Matthew’s hand for strength, and he was only too glad to give it.

When they arrived at Jane’s house, the sheriff and Matthew began inspecting around the house.

“Look,” said the sheriff pointing to the ground. “Tracks. You don’t have any horses, do you know, Ms. Jane?”

Jane shook her head. She reached up and began to bite her thumbnail.

“And they’re fresh,” said Matthew, looking at the ground. “Those cannot be more than hours old.” He looked off into the distance. “They’re going in the direction of the old mine, up in the foothills.”

The sheriff nodded and said, “Right. Well, me and the deputy’ll go on up. We’ll follow the tracks and see if they lead to Miss Mary.”

"I'm going too," said Jane immediately. She needed to do something. She needed to hop on the first horse she saw and race off to find her baby. She could be cold, hungry, hurting…She must be so scared.

"No, Jane," said Matthew. "You need to stay here, just in case she comes back. If this kidnapper is angry with me, then he might return Mary to my house. Stay there with my mother." He turned to the Sheriff. "The deputy can stay here with you. I will go with the Sheriff."

"Really?" asked Jane. "Are you sure?"

Matthew went over and kissed her swiftly. "Jane," he said softly. "You know my intentions toward you. I want you as my wife, and if that means that I must be a father to Mary, then this is how I will start. Once this is all over, I will adopt her as my daughter."

That took Jane's breath away. "Go," she whispered. "Just bring back my baby."

Chapter ?

Jane paced in Matthew's house, her footsteps clicking on the hard marble. She could not stay still, not for a single moment. What if something happened to Mary? What if she…?

No, thought Jane. *That cannot happen. That will not happen*.

The more Jane thought about what had happened, the more she blamed herself. She should have kept a better watch over Mary, should have given her every protection. The click-clack of her shoes on the marble increased their tempo as they thought.

She could not imagine how Matthew still loved her, still wanted to be with her. How could he when Mary was such a liability, when she would always be a liability?

A servant came around and asked if Jane needed anything.

"Only my baby," she whispered. She refused anything to eat or drink. She would stay vigilant, as she had not the night she was taken.

In the midst of her pacing, a tiny voice whispered to Jane that she could not have foreseen, nor done anything to prevent, her kidnapping. It was not her fault that some evil soul had got it in his mind to steal an innocent child.

Jane dismissed the voice. She could not stop the flow of guilt that washed over her. She kept glancing at the clock, then pulling back the curtains to see if there were some sign of Matthew or Mary's return.

Nothing. The clock kept ticking, the curtain drifted in the breeze, and nothing ever appeared.

Jane thought back over to what Matthew had said. "The daughter I am planning to adopt."

Could he mean it? Did Matthew care enough about her to adopt Mary?

Something deep inside Jane told her that he was telling the truth. He would not risk his life for someone that he did not love. When he had leaped to his horse, Jane's heart had swelled in love and deep gratitude. Matthew was the bravest person she knew, if he was willing to track down Mary's kidnapper.

Jane swore that she forgave Matthew for his family's remarks. Perhaps this meant that he really did love her. When Mary was returned—and she would be returned—Jane could not

think of any other possibility, she swore that she would marry Matthew. She prayed and promised that she would love him until the day he died, to forgive everything between them if he brought her daughter back to her.

*

The hooves of Matthew's horse pounded into the dirt. The dust flew up into his eyes, but Matthew did not care. He did not notice how the wind brought the smell of smoke, or how the sun beat down on his head. He could not focus on anything except finding Mary. He and the sheriff galloped over the trails, up into the foothills of the surrounding countryside. A bag filled with rocks banged against Matthew's side; it would be a decoy to the kidnapper. They were following the path of hoof prints found at Jane's house, now leading up into the hills. Both Matthew and the sheriff suspected where Mary was. There was an old mine that had long been abandoned; if anyone were to hide out in a relatively obscure location, that was it.

The grass faded to scrub as they climbed higher over the hills. Matthew's heart was in his throat. He prayed to the good lord above that he would be able to find Mary. Fear clawed at his stomach, and he urged the horse to run faster. He had to save Mary; for Jane's sake, as well as his own. He meant what he had said; if he wanted to take Jane as his wife, then that meant that Mary was now his daughter. He felt responsible for her now, both because of his duty as father and also because the letter had accused him; that had cut as deep as an ax. His insides twisted with guilt to think that someone had kidnapped Mary because of him.

But who? Matthew did not think he had any enemies. He had always been kind and respectful to everyone. Who had he met in his life that wanted to do him harm?

The trail led them to a dusty cave; Matthew and the sheriff had been right. They dismounted, and they did not bother to tie up the horses. Yellow dust from the ground blew up into their eyes, making them water. The cave opened up before them, a yawning, black mouth that seemed to warn them against entering. The hills were the same beige, faded-yellow color of old sand. Nothing grew along the outside of the cave except the hardiest shrubs and cacti. A lizard lay basking in the sun but slithered away at their approach. Drawing his pistol from the holster, the sheriff motioned to Matthew to do the same.

As Matthew clutched the bag filled with rocks, they walked slowly into the cave. There were large boulders everywhere, and walking in the cave was like weaving his way through a maze. Matthew held his breath. Inside, he could hear the wind blow, but he could barely see anything as the light faded. It was a silent as a tomb. He could not even hear the squeak of bats, nor the drip of distant water. Only the wind that shrieked outside.

"Stop right there now," said a voice from the darkness. "Put down your guns and the money." The voice seemed familiar, but Matthew struggled to place it. The cave warped sound, twisted it until it became unrecognizable.

"Let her go!" shouted Matthew. "Who are you to steal a little girl? Show your face, you coward." Matthew gripped his gun tighter. His palms were sweaty and his nerves felt as tight as a wire. What he said to Jane had been true: he was no hero. He didn't know how to be one.

"Who am I? You know me quite well, Matthew," said the voice, low and menacing. A shadow moved across a wall, and Matthew and the sheriff flinched.

Bang!

A shot rang out, and the wall behind Matthew exploded as the bullet buried itself in stone. The echo of the shot faded into the cave, the sound being swallowed as if by a great monster.

Matthew and the sheriff ducked behind two boulders. He drew breath in ragged gasps. He could feel the rough stone through his shirt, which was sticky and slick with sweat. Where was Mary?

"There's no need for that!" shouted the sheriff. "We just want the little girl. No one has to get hurt."

They heard the gun cock. Matthew's throat was dry, and he heard his own heart pounding. He tried peaking around the boulder to see if he could get a view of the kidnapper.

"That's just the trouble, you see, sheriff," said the man, lifting his head over the top of a boulder. "I've already been hurt." The man came into view.

It was Arthur.

Bang! Bang! Two more shots exploded above Matthew's head. He yelled, instinctively.

Matthew was floored; it did not understand why Arthur would betray him. He felt as though the floor had opened out beneath him or as if he had fallen into quicksand.

"Arthur!" cried Matthew. "Why are you doing this? Where is Mary?" Matthew scanned the room; there was no sign of Mary anywhere. He would give anything to see her sweet face, her awkward way of walking, her simple, pleasant way of smiling.

Bang!

The sheriff screamed and gripped his shoulder. Blood ran down his shirt. Matthew felt panic begin to rise. He would have to take the sheriff back quickly, or else he would bleed to death.

"You know why!" Arthur shouted. "You cut me out! I helped you discover the oil, and you threw me to the side like garbage. You would have found nothing if not for me! I was the one who told you of the possibility; I was the one who showed you where to dig. All that money you have…I deserve half. So I'm here to get what's mine."

Matthew tried to see where he could get a good shot in; the only problem was, he had no idea where Mary was, and he did not want her to get hurt in the cross fire.

"Just give us Mary back, Arthur. Your quarrel is with me, not Mary. Not an innocent girl," said Matthew. He leaped behind another boulder. He tried to leap between boulders, throwing off Arthur's sense of where he was.

"Mary will be returned as soon as you set down the money," Arthur continued.

Matthew glanced toward the sheriff; his face was as white as a sheet. His breathing was as ragged as Matthew's. He needed to act and quickly.

"Why Mary, though? Why her?" Matthew said, looking wildly around the cave. Where was she?

"It was obvious how much you are in love with Jane," said Arthur. "You're too well-guarded. I don't want to kill, you, Matthew, although you deserve to rot. I just want what's mine. What you took from me. I needed a way to make sure that you suffered if you failed to give me what was mine."

Sweat dripped down Matthew's face. He needed to distract Arthur somehow, or make him reveal where Mary was. He took his handkerchief out of his shirt pocket to wipe away his sweat. He suddenly had an idea.

“You tried to cut me out of my land, Arthur,” shouted Matthew. You tried to rob me from under my own nose. What else was I supposed to do? You got greedy, Arthur. Whatever you lost is your own fault.” He clutched the handkerchief, knowing that he would have only chance.

“And now my sister has to pay the price?” Arthur shrieked. “And what about Samantha? She will die if she does not get medical treatment. You rich folks think you can just gain money and forget about the people who put you there, up on your golden throne?”

Matthew threw the handkerchief in the air. Seeing the flash of movement, Arthur emptied his gun.

He doesn’t have any more bullets, thought Matthew. *It’s now or never*.

“Here’s the money,” said Matthew, tossing the bag into plain sight. “Now give us Mary.”

Arthur slowly made his way down to snatch the bag. When he was five feet from Matthew’s hidden position, Matthew attacked.

He leaped, landing on Arthur. Arthur quickly reacted, punching Matthew in the face. Matthew spat blood but was able to land a punch of his own. Arthur pulled back his fist and slammed it into Matthew’s stomach, and for a moment, he lost his ability to breathe.

That was when he saw Mary walking toward the mouth of the cave.

*

Mary looked around in the dark. She was scared. She had wanted the candy the bad man had given her. She thought they were going to the store. She liked the store. They had candy there.

This was not the store. This was someplace scary. Where was Mama?

Mary heard yelling. She heard the sounds of punching. That was not nice. Mama did not like fighting. She wanted to go home to Mama.

Go home.

Mary remembered something about those words. *Go home*.

She looked around. There, standing on the outside of the cave, was a horse. She remembered the horse she rode. That was fun. It was scary. But also fun.

She walked out of the cave. She did not want to see the bad man again. He was also scary. He had a mean face. Mary did not like mean faces. But she did like horses.

There was Matthew! She liked Matthew. Matthew had a nice face.

“Mary! We have to go home!” shouted Matthew.

All at once, Mary felt herself being picked up and set in the saddle. It was very high up here. That was kind of scary. She wanted to go home so much.

Go home.

Mary leaned forward and shouted into the horse’s ear. “Go home!” she cried. “Go home, go home.”

As the horse trotted away into the fading afternoon light, Mary kept repeating, “Go home, go home.”

*

A split second after picking Mary up and throwing her into the saddle, Matthew turned to find Arthur’s fist slam across his face.

Once he had seen Mary leaving the cave, he had kneed Arthur in the fork of his legs, hoping to disable him for a moment. He had hoped that if he just secured Mary in the saddle, then he would be able to take the other horse and race into town with her.

But Arthur's anger had pushed him forward. He had grabbed the bag and wrenched it open. When he discovered that the money bag was not, in fact, filled with bars of gold as demanded, but rocks, he became white with rage.

Arthur had rushed over to Matthew, his anger turning his face into that of a wild animal. As he attacked, he tackled Matthew to the ground. The two men fought and wrestled each other in the dust. Matthew kicked at Arthur, hoping to drive him back, but Arthur held firm. He reached for the gun at Matthew's side. As his fingers wrapped around the holster and yanked, Matthew, too, made a grab for the weapon. The two men struggled for control of the gun.

Then, a shot rang out.

Chapter?

Jane still paced back and forth. Her nails were bit down the quick, and they were starting to bleed. She still glanced out the window curtain for the thousandth time for some sign of Matthew or Mary. It was growing darker, and Jane worried that night would come, bringing with it despair. The stars had already come out, dazzling, a thousand diamonds on a blanket of velvet, but Jane could not appreciate their beauty. The moon was full, blazing down on the grassy lawn, so bright that it illuminated what Jane saw next.

She saw a dark figure approaching. The moon shone behind, making a shadow obscure the details. From the silhouette, it looked like a rider on top of a horse, but there was something peculiar about it. The horse clip-clopped at a steady canter, but the rider seemed to be bent over, hugging the horse's head for dear life.

Jane's heartbeat ticked up. She could not believe it. It could not be possible…

But it was. There, holding onto the horse's neck, bent over the saddle in the worst riding stance ever, was Mary.

"Mary!" she cried, rushing from the house. Her heart leaped, and she began crying, out of sheer joy and relief. She threw open the doors of the mansion and sprinted across the lawn. Her feet seemed to fly over the ground; she was nearly faint with happiness. She was here; she was safe. That was everything Jane needed.

As the horse came to a stop, Jane gripped the reins. Mary's eyes were squeezed tightly shut. Although the horse had come to a stop, she still gripped the horse's neck in a fierce embrace.

"Mary!" Jane shouted again, and, at hearing the voice of her mother, Mary opened her eyes. She looked down from the saddle and smiled.

"Mama! Went home," she said. There was an undeniable note of pride in her voice.

"Yes, my baby, yes you did," said Jane, threw her tears.

Jane helped her down from the saddle and threw her arms around her. She could not believe that Mary was here, unhurt. With tears streaming down her face, she embraced Mary and kissed her over and over.

"Mama, no crying," said Mary, and Jane could not help but smile.

"I'm not sad, my love, I'm happy," she replied. Mary would never know just how indescribably happy Jane was at that very moment.

Jane squeezed her just to feel that she was physically there. She prayed a thousand prayers of gratitude. It was beyond her wildest hope; Mary was safely returned.

Even more astounding was that Mary had traveled several miles completely on her own. She had ridden the horse all by herself, at night, through a desert to get back to town. She must have been terrified, but somehow, she pushed through.

"Home," repeated Mary.

"Yes, my love, you're home, you're safe," said Jane. "Are you hurt? Or hungry?" She would give her the world right then, if Mary asked for it.

"Hungry," said Mary simply, and Jane took her to the house to find something to eat. She did not even correct her sentences. There would be time for that later; she was too happy to say anything else other than, "I love you."

As the servants plied Mary with food, Jane stood behind her, stroking her hair, marveling at her daughter. Her instinct was to never let Mary out of her sight again. That was her first reaction. She wanted to take Mary and keep her always at her side.

Yet, something began to shift in Jane. The worst possible thing had happened: Mary had disappeared, yet somehow…she had returned safely. Not only that…she had done it on her own. She had been brave enough to ride alone through the desert and return to town. As Mary nibbled on her sandwich, Jane began to see her with new eyes.

Perhaps she can do more than what I thought, said Jane to herself. *Maybe Mary is not quite so feeble as I imagined her to be*.

Now that Jane had calmed down enough to think straight again, her thoughts turned to Matthew. Why had Mary returned and not him? Did something happen to him? Was he still alive?

She felt a small sting of guilt that she had not thought of Matthew, but now that she had calmed down enough to think, she once again began to feel her nerves becoming taut.

Please bring him back to me, she prayed. *Please, give me one more chance*.

Luckily for Jane, she did not have to wait long. A second horse came galloping up after Jane had made sure that Mary was completely unharmed. As Matthew dismounted, Jane ran to him, breathless. She threw her arms around him, not believing her luck. The two people that she loved most in the world had returned to her, safe and sound.

"Jane, I have to go back," he said. "Mary is still missing. I…" Matthew shook his head. "I tried to get her on the horse. When I turned around, she was just…gone."

"Matthew, my love, Mary is here," said Jane.

"She's *here?* Where is she?" asked Matthew, pulling away from Jane, his eyes scanning over the house.

"Mary is inside," replied Jane. "She rode her all by herself."

Matthew seemed to melt at the words. His shoulders slumped and he leaned into Jane. He suddenly seemed about to collapse with relief. He embraced her fiercely. They stood in the white moonlight, not speaking, just reveling in the feel of each other. Jane could spend a whole year, just right here, feeling Matthew's warm chest against her own, his fingers through her hair, his rough hands bringing hers up to his lips to kiss.

Jane whispered, "Thank you for bringing home my baby." She felt Matthew tighten his grip on her.

"Don't thank me too much," he said. "I was sure that I had lost her. After I helped her get up on the horse, Arthur attacked me. When I turned around again, she was gone." Matthew

shook his head. “I was so afraid that the horse had been spooked, taking her to God knows where. I came back here as soon as I could.”

“What?” said Jane, not quite believing Matthew’s words. “It was *Arthur*?”

“Yes,” said Matthew through clenched teeth. “He had the nerve to suggest I cheated him. It was he who tried to turn me in to the corrupt sheriff.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you did business with Arthur?” asked Jane.

Sighing, Matthew ran a hand down his face. “Stupidity. Pride. I didn’t know what you would think of me. And I didn’t want your relationship with Samantha to change,” he said.

Matthew’s hands clenched and to stop himself from getting too angry, he raised Jane’s hands to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

“Well what happened?” said Jane, pulling his arm to lead him into the house. Now that both Matthew and Mary were home, she did not want to let either of them out of her sight. This was the happiest night of her life.

As they walked into the house, Matthew related everything to Jane: how they followed the tracks up to the old mine, how Arthur had shot the sheriff, helping Mary escape, and the scramble for the gun. When he saw Mary, he rushed over to hug her. Matthew was silent for a moment, and Jane heard him sniffle softly. He hugged her so long that Mary said, “Ok, ok,” and he parted from her, laughing.

“We fought outside the cave, and he managed to grab the gun, but I managed to wrench it away from him. I didn’t want to shoot him, but…” Matthew closed his eyes. “I didn’t have any choice. I knew that if I didn’t do something, he would just keep coming. I didn’t want to kill him.” His voice went low, and he glanced at Mary happily playing with the two goldens.

Jane’s stomach dropped for a moment. She didn’t want to ask him, but she did anyway. “Is he…is he still alive?”

Matthew opened his eyes, his mouth set in a hard line. “Yes,” he said. “But I will have to leave again soon to take a team up there to get him. He ain’t going nowhere, and that’s for sure. He won’t die, but I’d be mighty surprised if he managed to make it more than two feet without passing out from pain. I rode back with the sheriff, as he was bleeding pretty badly. I took him to the hospital as quickly as I could, then came straight here, to see if by some miracle Mary had turned up.” He looked over and smiled at Mary. “And it seems that God granted one tonight.”

Standing in the kitchen of Matthew’s mansion, Jane felt a weight slide off her shoulders. Mary was returned, and Matthew was alive. She could not ask for anything more. All the fears and doubts that she had had about him slowly began to lift. If he had gone to rescue Mary, risked his life for her, then he would make an excellent partner. In that moment, as Matthew looked at Mary, Jane realized that he loved her too, which was more than anything she could have hoped for. Jane’s heart felt full enough to burst with the love she felt for both of them. As she stood, wrapped in Matthew’s arms, listening to the happy giggles of Mary, the whines of delight from the retrievers as she pet their bellies, and the slow pounding of her heart, Jane thought that she had everything she ever wanted: her family.

Chapter?

After Matthew’s mother had fell over in a dead faint to see him alive, Matthew had indeed gone back into the hills with a team of men to retrieve Arthur. He was weak and his face

pale, but he would live. Matthew was slightly disappointed in that fact, but then again, he did not want the burden of a man's soul on his hands. They brought him to the nearest hospital, where he was promptly put under arrest by the deputy sheriff for kidnapping, extortion, and attempted murder of a sheriff.

As Matthew watched Arthur lie in the white hospital bed, surrounded by men of the law, he felt disappointed, both in his friend and himself. He could not believe that Arthur had been so blinded by greed that he would try to steal Mary, just to hurt him, just to make him pay for the grievances he thought he had. On the other side, Matthew kicked himself pretty hard for being taken for a fool. He had trusted in the wrong person; he had allowed himself to be fooled. All the signs were there; he had just been blind to them.

Once the excitement of the kidnapping died down, Matthew knew what he had to do. He took his mother aside and began to speak with her over afternoon tea. Jane was in the garden with Mary, showing her how to plant seeds into the ground. Ever since Mary's return, Jane had changed toward her daughter. She no longer did everything for her. She tried to teach her how to do things her own self, knowing that, if she were capable of rescuing herself, then she could handle learning how to do things as any "normal" person. Jane was still very nervous about leaving Mary alone, but that gradually eased after a few weeks. Even Matthew remarked how Jane was more confident with Mary and how proud he was to see her learning something new every day.

So as Matthew's mother fawned and doted on him, she nearly burst into tears every five minutes, saying how thankful she was that he was alive. He was actually grateful for the life-or-death situation; it had softened his mother for the blow that was coming. Once they had finished the last of their tea and swallowed the last of the delicious morsels of scones, he turned serious.

"Now mother, before you say anything, I need to tell you something. Jane is my entire world, and if going after Mary has not shown you, I am very, very serious about marrying Jane. I do not care what the world thinks or says. If you are bothered by that, then fine. I am prepared to leave," he said. His body was half-turned toward the door, as if he would get up at that moment and leave.

Matthew threw everything down at once, not mincing a thing. He did not have any time to waste. He still needed a response from Jane, and the suspense was nearly driving him mad.

Mrs. McConnell had the decency to look ashamed.

"Matthew dear, there is something you should know," she said. "I'm so very, very sorry for what I said. I was wrong." She looked up at Matthew and sighed, and he could hear the repentance in her voice. "You should know that I had good intentions when I said all those things." She crumpled a napkin in her hand.

"Mother, you know where good intentions lead," said Matthew.

"Yes, yes, straight to Hell, and now I'm burning up with embarrassment," replied Mrs. McConnell. "But you see, I enjoy Jane. I *want* you to marry her."

The revelation came as a shock to him; his mother, actually approving of someone for once? Matthew waited for her to continue.

"Jane has a fine head on her shoulders, she works tirelessly in her profession and raising a…difficult daughter." Mrs. McConnell squeezed her eyes shut. "Growing up, I had an uncle…like that. Like Mary."

Matthew felt he could have been knocked over with a feather. “What?” he said.

Mrs. McConnell nodded. “He died very young, before you were born. But I never forgot how people treated him, and how people treated my grandparents because of him. I thought that if you really wanted to marry Jane, you would have to get used to how people talk about people who are different,” she said.

Mrs. McConnell raised a hand to touch her son’s cheek. “Matthew, dear, for all your bravado, you’ve always been a sensitive soul. You needed to be tested. You needed to know how it felt to be insulted and how you would react to those insults. Would you cave, under embarrassment, knowing that the whispers will follow you all of your life? Or would you stand up for what you love, taking all the risks to defend your family?”

She lowered her hand. “I suppose after all that has happened, you have proved yourself more than enough. Go, my son, and go with all my blessing,” she said.

“Mother…” Matthew closed his eyes, smiled, and slowly shook his head. “If you ever do something like that again, I swear I will never forgive you.”

They embraced; later, Matthew would make Mrs. McConnell apologize to Jane in true Southern style, but that would have to wait. Matthew needed to talk to Jane urgently. He needed to know the answer to his question.

*

Matthew found Jane inside her house, while Mary played outside. Every once in a while, she would remember that she was supposed to be washing the laundry and hanging it up, but the butterflies were flittering so beautifully between the flowers, that Mary could not help but be distracted.

Jane was taking a rare moment of rest. She watched the shafts of light that fell through the window grow brighter and dimmer, depending on the whims of the clouds in the giant, azure Texas sky. She found herself in a moment of peace. Mary was safe, Matthew was alive, and she knew that she had changed for the better. She would no longer hide Mary under a rock. Perhaps there would always be danger; the world was full of it. Even in a small town, she had been unable to guard Mary from the malevolent forces on the earth.

But there were people who cared; there had been people who loved her enough to come to her rescue. Perhaps she could not guard Mary from everything, but she could teach her enough to defend herself and grow up into a young woman, instead of remaining a baby all her life.

It was there, in the solace of her thoughts, that Matthew found her. He knocked on the door, and when Jane opened it, he stood there, clutching a huge bouquet of bluebonnets.

“Jane,” he said. “I came by to see…how Mary was doing.”

Jane could see that Matthew was suddenly struck shy; the way he stood, the way he shifted his feet from side to side, indicated that he had much more on his mind than Mary.

“She’s out front,” said Jane, pointing. “Mary! Look who’s here.”

Mary glanced up from peering at a butterfly as bright yellow as corn. “Matthew!” she exclaimed and rushed over to give him a hug.

“Present?” she asked.

“Use your sentences, Mary,” he replied, with a wink at Jane.

“Did you bring me a present?” she responded, casting an obvious glance at the flowers he had clutched in his fist.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” he said, bringing a smaller bouquet of bluebonnets around his back for her.

Mary took them reverently.

“What do you say, Mary?” Jane whispered.

“Thank you,” whispered Mary. She ran off to renew her game with the butterflies.

Matthew turned to Jane. “Shall we go inside?” he asked.

Jane nodded, her heart beginning to pound. She knew why he had come over. And she knew the answer she would give. Still, something kept her from shouting out the answer to his question. Perhaps, she too, had an attack of shyness, so she led them both to the table and asked, “Any word about Arthur?”

Matthew’s face curled in disgust. “He’s alive and making a full recovery. His trial is set six months from now, and he is sure to spend a very, very long time in prison. It will be years before he is set free,” he said.

Jane nodded, then said quietly, “Samantha was devastated when she heard. I was so afraid for her. I thought the shock might push her health over the edge.”

Jane had been the one to break the news to Arthur’s sister. She had been lying on a hospital bed, her breathing ragged, her face as pale as milk. Her condition had worsened considerably in the last few weeks. Only the best medicine and doctors could save her.

Inexplicably, Jane had felt guilty over telling Samantha; it felt like she were betraying their friendship to bring her news so terrible. Yet, she had been the one to want to tell Jane. She wanted to let her dear friend know that she did not blame her for what happened with Arthur. Perhaps he had wanted the money to save his sister, and perhaps not. Either way, what he did was inexcusable, and Jane wanted Samantha to hear it from her, no one else.

When Samantha found out what happened, she had broken down into sobs. She said that she was so ashamed and that she would never forgive her brother. She loved him still, but her heart was as hard as a horny-backed toad when it came to forgiveness. Samantha had cried so hard that she had more than once broken down into coughing fits so strong that Jane thought she would cough up part of her lungs.

“That’s one thing I wanted to talk to you about,” said Matthew. “I had no idea that Samantha was so sick. If she had just said something…”

“Pride,” said Jane. “Samantha ignored a lot of her own symptoms, and she did not want to ask for money from anyone. She was afraid that if she asked you, she would seem like one of those no-good hangers-on that you’re constantly complaining about.”

Matthew reached over and gave Jane’s hand a squeeze. “If I had just known…I would have paid for a passage to the miracle waters of the River Jordan itself for her,” he said. He shook his head. “Perhaps I was too wrapped up in my own world. So I have decided that she will not want for anything. I have already contacted the best doctors in this great nation of ours, and they will arrive within the week. They will be able to treat her,” said Matthew.

“As for Arthur…I cannot deny that he tried to cheat me, but neither can I say that I do not owe him a great debt. He forfeited that right to receive it, but…he has a point. I would not have found the oil on my land if not for him. Therefore, I have set up a trust in Samantha’s name. She will never want for anything the rest of her life.”

Jane smiled, her heart soaring. Her best friend would be saved. She would live a long and happy life, and they would grow old together. They would sit on the porch, drinking sweet tea and watching the fireflies light up the night.

"Also, Jane, I must apologize, on behalf of my mother," said Matthew. "I realized that you…overheard some things that she said, and I want you to know the truth."

Jane's stomach dropped; perhaps he was not going to ask her again. Perhaps she had wasted her only opportunity for love.

"If you do not want to proceed, I completely understand," she whispered. "I know that raising a child like Mary is not exactly what you had in mind when you fell in love with me."

Matthew shook his head vigorously. "No, no! That's not it at all. I love you, and I adore Mary." He told her about the conversation he had had with his mother, how deeply embarrassed he was by all of it, and how he needed to beg for her forgiveness.

"I should have searched for you," he said. "I should have gone and immediately apologized to you. But the truth is," and here Matthew swallowed the very hard lump in his throat. "What she said got to me. I was so afraid that I would not be able to be a good father to Mary. I was afraid that I would not be able to love her as I should." He closed his eyes. "But when Arthur kidnapped her, something inside me just snapped. I knew that no matter what happened, that I wanted to raise her with you. I want you in my life so badly that I am willing to face anything anyone says about Mary. If they say anything, I will lay into them like a bull to a rodeo clown."

"So Jane," said Matthew, sliding out of his chair and onto one knee in front of h