

*By three methods we may learn wisdom:
First, by reflection, which is noblest;
Second, by imitation, which is easiest;
And third by experience,
Which is the bitterest.*

Confucius

Introduction

I had been crouched for a long time in the tangy, earthy smelling hayloft, and my baggy pants with patched knees and crumpled plaid cotton shirt were drenched in perspiration. To make matters worse, it felt like a platoon of a hundred fire ants was swarming across my body to the cadence of a silent bugler.

It was probably just some brittle stalks of hay savagely poking through the loosely woven fabric of my hand-me-down garments. Nevertheless, every few minutes I scratched, wriggled, and tunneled my way through the messy piles of hay. It was only when a splintered board noisily groaned under my weight that I became silent.

If the renegade Indians in the cow pasture ventured closer to the barn and heard me, I could be kidnapped, even killed. Earlier when I sprinted to the ramshackle structure for safety, frenzied whooping resonated through the nearby forest. Then galloping horses' hooves splashed through a shallow creek and wildly pounded on the parched ground near the pasture. *I ran for my life!*

The sudden ferocity of the small band of Indians was shocking. The local tribes of Nez Perce and Cayuse were known to be peaceful, even good neighbors. Yet rumors abounded in recent days of gold fever striking settlers and Indians alike when gold and silver were discovered on tribal lands.

The endless waiting in the hayloft was unbearable! Patience is not my greatest virtue; in fact, I don't lay claim to it being my virtue at all. More than anything, I wanted to ease my way out of the prickly hay and steal a look through a broken plank in the roughly hewn wall. But the risk of discovery outweighed my growing crankiness.

Irritably, my lengthy body squirmed back into its prison of hay. My lively imagination added a hoard of spiders and a few field mice to the cavalry of ants fighting for dominance on the moist battleground of my sweating body. At least my vivid thoughts kept me alert and ready to defend myself.

All at once, there was an ominous silence. It not only gave me goose bumps and reminded me of the eeriness of a graveyard tomb overrun with weeds and cobwebs,

but it was unnerving after the ear-splitting shrieks of whooping! My heartbeat rhythmically drummed in my ears like tom-toms in a war dance.

Even stranger, the reassuring splotches of midday sun, which had been streaming through the hairline cracks in the barn timbers, began transforming to a malevolent blackness of a threatening thunderstorm. I trembled in fear for what might be happening in the pasture.

In the six months since being coldheartedly dumped in the Idaho Territory, I found the erratic weather to be a cause for alarm. Especially disturbing were the impressive displays of lightning and thunder roaring through the impassable rock formations of the mountains. The sheer vastness of the breathtaking cliffs sent storms ricocheting in every direction and causing climatic chaos, or so it seemed to a city girl like me from Chicago.

Like the volatile weather, the local Native American population was said to be growing unpredictable. I hadn't lived in Idaho long enough to know much about either the weather or the Indians, but instinct told me it was foolish to take any chances with either one.

For years, the Nez Perce and Cayuse had accepted the presence of white settlers and missionaries in the area. In fact, some regularly attended the Protestant services and even helped with farming chores on the communal mission lands, where I was living with my newly adopted family. Every so often, it seemed something unexpectedly set the local Natives off. Similarly, Native Americans in other parts of the United States became restless when lands were threatened or government promises broken. All guesses were off on what caused the incident in the pasture.

Today's attack occurred at noon. Earlier in the morning, the missionary compound was a deceptive picture of peace with cows mooing and a sultry breeze blowing through the shade trees. Since ten o'clock, I'd been sprawled on a roughly hewn lawn chair made of coarse wooden slats. With a giant canopy of leafy elm branches over my head, the cooling shade thankfully provided some relief from another sweltering fall day.

It would be inaccurate to describe my activity as relaxing in a lawn chair. I was actually serving the terms of my punishment for throwing a tin cup of water at my insufferable older stepbrother Lukas. Talk about being one of the most pig-headed human beings I've ever met!

The morning debacle went down like this. While my stepmother was scrambling eggs at the cast iron stove, Lukas was cracking jokes to his other siblings about my boyish behavior. Although I was peeved, I remained silent. Because I've only been part of the Thompson family since spring and my position in the crowded household is precarious at best, I rarely verbalized my complaints.

Getting back to this morning's episode, throwing water on Lukas' taunting face was a gratifying necessity. Unbeknownst to me, my older stepbrother innocently pretended to drop a half-eaten piece of bread under the family-sized oaken table. While he was supposedly picking up the crust, he secretly knotted the leather shoelaces of my sturdy work boots together.

When the meal was done, I unsuspectingly stood up and began to stack dishes, or at least that was my intention. Instead, my torso lurched forward as my feet got tangled on a chair leg. Several pottery bowls helplessly toppled from my hands and crashed into shards on the hardwood floor. As if all that weren't bad enough, I gracelessly sprawled like falling mop, resulting in a huge bruise on my cheek.

My real father, a devout Christian, always taught me to be well-mannered, but this time my enraged response was swift and uninhibited. Looking back, it was actually quite impressive though out of character for me. After letting loose with a colorful string of expletives my father's railroad cronies regularly used, my entire tin cup of water magically catapulted sideways onto Lukas' sardonic face. His shocked expression was priceless!

It was a definite lapse in judgment. This is a religious mission, and off-color words and temper tantrums are not tolerated. The entire household was thrown into a full-fledged tizzy, except for my nemesis, Lukas, whose inscrutable dark eyes seemed to glint with admiration at my uncontrolled outburst.

Although it was pleasurable watching beads of water drip through my stepbrother's thick brown eyebrows, I was actually filled with remorse. Not only had I offended my strict stepmother but also my impressionable younger stepsisters and stepbrother Josh.

As I was preparing an apology, my stepmother jumped into the fracas and reprimanded only me, not the real culprit Lukas. I became stone silent and swallowed any intended words of regret. Completely ignoring the bruise on my cheek or my shoelaces being tied together, she chastised me for my foul mouth and ingratitude toward my new family.

My punishment was to read a lengthy illustrated book on comportment for young ladies in the hope of learning proper manners and ladylike behavior. Lydia Thompson, whom I address according to her specific wishes as Ma'am or Miss Lydia rather than Mother, warned me my lack of manners and poor attitude would prevent me from finding a suitable man to marry someday. Talk about misunderstanding someone! *If a man acted like Miss Lydia's precious son Lukas, who would want one?* Not me!

So that is why I was relaxing under the elm trees near the pasture with the aromatic smell of cow patties wafting past my nose. It still seems strange I was learning how to say *please* and *thank you* when the Indian raid began.

Because I love writing, I've always kept a daily journal. Rather than outwardly losing my temper again, I began filling the journal with maddening stories about my older stepbrother. The truth is that on the very first night when I innocently arrived at the mission settlement, he unapologetically tackled me to the ground and threatened to pulverize me. His excuse was he thought I was an intruder. It was one welcome I'll never forget!

Later on, he was still enraged I was taking up needed space in his family's overcrowded log cabin. For days on end, he vengefully trailed me through the compound. One day, he caught me off guard in the communal apple orchard, which was shared with other missionaries in the middle of the sprawling grounds. Like a raving maniac, he began pelting me with rotten apple cores. Since my stepmother was nowhere in sight, I grabbed a fallen tree branch and took up hot pursuit.

Although I'm athletic and tall for a female, it was impossible to catch my six foot six inch behemoth of a stepbrother. When provoked, he resembles a rabid racehorse possessed by the devil. Now if he'd been shorter and stockier like his younger brother Josh, who is sixteen like me, it would have been no contest, and I would have caught him for sure. Plumb tuckered out, I finally gave up the chase!

As my written recollections show, my older stepbrother's harassment continued nonstop through the unusually hot summer. One of his more memorable offenses occurred when I was fishing for the first time with a birch branch pole. As I was leaning forward to yank a slippery fish out of the rock-bottomed creek, Lukas unmercifully dove like a cannonball into the back of my knees. As his mocking laughter trailed him like a wailing banshee through the forest, I remained sprawled on all fours in the icy mountain water. Getting even with him became my full-time obsession.

Ever since my outburst at breakfast, my stepmother began treating me brusquely. It wasn't her fault for not understanding my unconventional past. She couldn't have known my mother died in childbirth, and there had never been a female figure in my life. Not only did I not have lessons in refinement or femininity, but any hint of feminine behavior was the result of mimicking strangers.

I never regretted having only a father, yet how could I explain the necessity of masquerading as a boy for my own protection? As part of a railroad construction crew, my father and I lived in squalid railroad camps around Chicago. In order for me to stay with him, I had to be disguised as a boy in well-worn pants, flannel shirts, work boots, and my dark brown hair lopped off by my ears. It was a rough, dirty, coarse-talking, and sometimes dangerous place to grow up.

Whether it was good or bad, I grew up acting and talking like a no-frills male, even lowering the pitch of my voice to perfect my ruse. I can be blunt, outspoken, and don't beat around the bush when I have something to say. I'd always decided

when the Lord was passing out feminine charms, soft nurturing edges, or flowery language, I was forgotten, and that was fine with me.

Depending on the length of time we stayed in any one construction site, my father secretly enrolled me as a female in the closest parochial school. Over the years, I attended a number of different schools, as my father stressed the importance of learning to read and write, studying the basics of our Christian faith, and learning how to act like a girl for a change.

It was an awkward routine of orientation and being a perennial outsider, and I detested my starched white blouse and pleated plaid skirt that dragged around my ankles. As soon as the brass school bell clanged dismissal, it was back to the comforts of my male clothing and navigating my way back to the railroad construction site.

Unexpectedly, I excelled at reading and writing, and I always could be found with a book in my hand. Most of the time, it kept me out of trouble. One teacher sent a note home saying a diary would help improve my skills. The next afternoon, my father surprised me with a beautiful brown leather journal, which became my most precious possession.

A few years later at another school, two girls became my first female friends. Instead of giving it the mystifying label of *friendship*, I convinced myself I was conducting research on how girls behaved. After my brief six month stint of *research*, my conclusions were to avoid giggling and flirting at all costs. It was downright disgusting!

My most valuable lesson was discovering my writing abilities. Teachers at every school gave me encouragement, and I began keeping a secret journal called *Journeys with My Father*. One day, I hoped to compile enough writings into a book about the itinerant life of traveling with a construction gang from railroad camp to railroad camp.

Reminiscing about my father always brings a profound sense of longing. At times, it feels as if a knife is piercing my chest. When I'm aching for him, grief envelops me like a foggy mist, and my father's lanky body oddly materializes. Usually, an unruly clump of dark brown hair topples on his weathered forehead, and he smiles his familiar smile. It radiates so much sunshine and warmth that the fog slowly dissipates along with my vision, and reality suffocates the space around me. The truth is simple. Except for the Lord, I'm alone in the world.

People have always said I look like my father, tall and thin with the same dark brown hair, but the resemblance stops there. For the most part, I'm ordinary-looking, like a chameleon blending unnoticeably into any surroundings. My father, on the other hand, was so handsome and filled with life, that he was always well-liked and the center of attention.

It's uncomfortable to talk about his intense suffering toward the end. Festering inside of me is an open wound that won't heal. Many times, I've prayed my way through my unending heartbreak, but all I hear is silence. It's difficult to explain what my father meant to me for Shane O'Brien was more than a father. He was my best friend, my only friend, and the center of my entire existence. I loved him more than anyone in the whole world.

Everything I did in life was to please my father. With him gone, the meaning of my life has become blurry. For certain, he would want me to behave as a God-fearing woman and accept my circumstances, not act with ingratitude toward my stepfamily. Rightly or wrongly, I've decided never to love anyone again, including my new family, as love hurts too much when it's gone.

There's one other more personal reason I refuse to grow close to anyone again. Deep-down, I'm nothing but a charlatan, an imposter. On the surface, my behavior is tough and self-assured, but I'm walking wounded through life, and I truly don't fit in anywhere. If a stranger would ever unlock the door to my heart, he or she would see how frightened I really am. My only hope for survival is to remain impervious to any emotional attachments.

Somehow, I need to rebuild my life, yet I don't know how to begin. In your memory, Shane O'Brien, I must try to make the tiniest dent in the world's surface just to prove I existed and you raised me right. *Please, Jesus, if you hear me, help me dream again. Please keep grief from eating away at my soul.*

After a few moments of giving way to my tears, I shifted positions in the hay. I would force myself to quit thinking about losing my father. Healing could wait until another day. Instead, I would retrace my first awkward days at the Thompson homestead shortly after my father's death.

There was nothing reassuring about being unceremoniously dumped during the night at a missionary's small log cabin in southern Idaho. The wagon master of the wagon train decided I was an unnecessary burden and too young to travel on alone after my father's death. The missionary compound was the closest solution to everyone's problem.

The distressed faces of Reverend and Mrs. Thompson made it obvious they didn't want me anymore than I wanted to be there. My own solution was to travel on to Lewiston by horseback, but no one would hear of a sixteen-year-old on her own in the bright lights of a gold rush town. With no alternatives left, I was stuck with my new family until a way to escape presented itself.

A few days after my unofficial adoption, I conned my new stepbrothers into loaning me some old hand-me-down pants and raggedy shirts. Sweet-natured

Josh bought my story about wanting to help in the barn, but Lukas immediately suspected I was up to no good.

Neither of my new brothers knew I was going to use their old clothes to make a scene. The next morning at breakfast, I made a grand entrance in my tattered masculine garb, which was a stark contrast to the modest floor-length skirts my two younger stepsisters were wearing. Since everyone was forcing me to start my life all over again, I was determined to construct an image I wanted—strong-willed, fearless, and outspoken.

It was obvious Miss Lydia found me incorrigible and in desperate need of repentance. Her expression bordered on rage, but when she began to speak with condemnation, I gave her a scorching look. She immediately held her tongue.

All at once, I sensed she tricked me. I'm learning women can be devious. Without warning, as if she were contemplating various Christian ways to break my defiant spirit, Miss Lydia became unnaturally silent. Josh and his younger sisters exchanged nervous glances. They were aghast at my rebellious behavior and worried about the consequences of my actions. Typically, Lukas' reaction was the opposite, and he covered an approving smirk with his hand.

From that morning forward, my relationship with my stepmother became well-defined, and it became Miss Lydia's passion to save my soul. In the following months, it was apparent I was a bigger test for her proselytizing abilities than all of the local Native Americans combined. I was a new and exciting challenge to test her mettle, and the gauntlet had been thrown down by my insubordination. It made me sad to think she mischaracterized my defiance as my soul's waywardness. How could I explain it was the result of my overwhelming grief?

A few days after blatantly rejecting all things feminine, I decided to test Miss Lydia again to see if she might kick me out. My goal was to escape by horseback to Lewiston, but I should have realized she was a stronger Christian woman than to let a teenager intimidate her.

In my second act of defiance, I sauntered to breakfast with my chin-length dark brown hair brazenly chopped shorter than either of my stepbrothers. In fact, it looked like half-moons above my rather prominent ears and was parted on one side with a ragged thatch on top. My exposed head was slicked down with so much water that I resembled a drowned rat in the sewers of Chicago.

In a fit of tears, I clearly hadn't been thinking straight that morning. When I remembered how my father said my hair reminded him of my mother's, I became furious he died and left me. Without realizing what I was doing, I found a small mirror and a razor blade and then chopped my hair jaggedly all around. By the time common sense prevailed, the damage was done.

Over the course of a silent breakfast, which was fortunately without Reverend Thompson, my severely short hair dried and startlingly looked like a rotary eggbeater had attacked my head and devoured my hair. Insolently, I boldly stared at my new family, daring anyone to react.

Lukas, of course, accepted my dare and laughed uncontrollably. Then he abruptly sputtered and spit out his oatmeal with a whoosh all over the heavily marred wooden table. Josh, who was much more well-mannered than his know-it-all brother, nodded and murmured that my hair didn't look too bad. I nearly smiled at his kindness. My two new stepsisters, Sarah, who was fifteen, and Hannah, who was eleven, were wide-eyed and scandalized.

Across the table, Miss Lydia slowly forced a sip of burning coffee into her frowning mouth. She was annoyed I was blazing a trail of mutiny for the others. My stepsisters, by the way, both had waist-length blond hair curled to perfection. The baby, Sadie, pointed and giggled from her high chair, and then she proceeded to throw a wad of mushy oatmeal onto the planked floor. *Good job, Sadie!* Miss Lydia, however, continued to stare icily at me, the deep blue of her eyes fathomless pits of resentment.

Once again, I shifted my stiff legs under the musty-smelling hay. It was tiresome reflecting on Miss Lydia's constant retribution, even though it was well-deserved.

While I waited for the Indian raid to be over, it would be more constructive to consider the devastating circumstances which led me to the Thompsons' mission in the first place. Sweeping my father's death under the rebellious veneer of male clothing wasn't the healthiest way to deal with the drastic upheaval in my life.

As a Christian, my guilt was overwhelming at my unruly behavior. I couldn't keep bottling up my grief and anger and having it explode in unsavory behavior. Over the past six months, the Thompsons were extremely generous to take an unwanted orphan into their crowded log cabin. After the Indian raid, I would make amends to Miss Lydia privately and explain about my father's death.

After I apologized, I would try to be more cooperative until I came up with a plan to leave, even if it meant running away. There was no way I would permanently stay at the mission, yet I needed a legitimate plan to support myself financially.

Also, it was important to discover why I was plunked down in the middle of Native American troubles. Since the Lord doesn't make mistakes, there must be a reason. Was my mettle being tested? How could I find His purpose for my life? What could my future possibly hold as a single woman in what was reputed to be the lawless Idaho Territory?

Trusting the Lord to keep His promises, I prayed for strength and courage as I sought the answers to my unanswerable questions.

*If a man does not keep pace with his companions,
Perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.
Let him step to the music which he hears,
However measured or far away.*

Henry David Thoreau

PART ONE

Chapter One

While my father and I moved from railroad camp to railroad camp, we lived an unconventional and vagabond lifestyle and never had a permanent home. We owned very little clothing or other material possessions, and everything we had was transportable. Although the workers' quarters provided by railroad management were often dilapidated, I never thought we were poor.

Because I was proud of my father for his dedication to his chosen work, wealth or lack of it never mattered. He taught me by example about having a good work ethic. One of his longest jobs was laying track for the Aurora Branch Railroad, which went from Aurora, Illinois, through the fledgling towns of Naperville, Lisle, Downers Grove, Hinsdale, Berwyn, and eventually the west side of Chicago.

Passenger and freight service began shortly after, and it was an exciting time for the Chicago suburbs. After that, he worked on a mail train route between Chicago and Clinton, Iowa, which eventually established Chicago as a mail hub. The United States was bursting at its seams, and it was exciting to be a small part of it.

With the completion of the mail route, work was scarce, partially from so many new immigrants flooding the job market and wanting a better life. For a few years, my father went through a series of shorter jobs, and he became uneasy about our future.

With the westward expansion of the United States, his previous jobs had fallen right into place but not this last time. The country had nearly recovered from the devastation wrought by the Civil War, and with the economic recovery came an increased competition from ex-soldiers for good paying railroad jobs.

Although my father felt a sense of satisfaction for his contributions to the growth of our nation, the truth was he began feeling too old to keep up with the strenuous physical labor of the younger men.

There was also another reason for his discontent—he was getting the itch to move on. From the time I was small, I noticed my father had what was called a

wanderlust. Because I loved him more than anything, I was more than happy to go along with his desire to travel.

It was easy to describe my father's qualities. He was an extremely hard worker, an intelligent man who had a decent education in Ireland, and an armchair philosopher who always saw the glass half-full. He was also a God-fearing man, which was the opposite of many of the construction workers who drank away their earnings, swore too much, and whiled away their time with dancehall women.

Although he never criticized his co-workers, my father's advice to me was more exacting. He told me to search for a special talent I loved doing more than anything and then to master it. His third requirement was equally demanding, and it was to use my talent to help others. *It will make you happier if you help someone better his life*, he often said. It made sense to me.

When my father settled for tedious construction jobs to pay our bills, I often wondered what talents and dreams he had given up. On the other hand, was it possible that building railroads fulfilled his hopes and dreams? I never had the opportunity to find out the truth.

In all likelihood, he probably gave up his life's goals to raise me, and that made it all the more important for me to succeed, so his sacrifices weren't in vain. *But what does it mean to be successful?* I didn't know, especially since women had fewer options. Although my future was shrouded in uncertainty, my father was always optimistic that women would one day be able to accomplish anything men could in this land of promise.

Sometimes, there were so many loose ends in our lives that my father slipped into the doldrums. When I had to disguise myself as a male for my own safety, he often expressed doubts he was raising me right. He also wondered whether we should put down permanent roots, and if he should find a wife and new mother for me. I'm glad he never did.

Each time he considered a lifestyle change, there was never enough money to make ends meet during the transition. Out of necessity, he would scramble to join another construction crew and postpone whatever dreams he had for us. Although we were stuck in a cycle of accepting life as it was rather than seeking more, I knew he expected me to break out of the pattern and follow my dreams.

While we settled for life as it was, there were definite drawbacks to remaining in the construction camps. I was exposed to a salty vocabulary and many male dominated activities, such as boxing matches, gambling, and drinking. At an early age, I could shoot a pistol, use a knife, hunt wild game, and ride a horse. Eventually, my lack of exposure to feminine activities was the deciding factor that forced my father to find a different path for our lives.

Even when I socialized with girls at school, it was impossible to relate to their interests in my male-oriented world. Conversation was always challenging. Few shared my favorite topics of politics (my father and I always read the newspaper together), women's suffrage, and the plight of Native Americans being forced westward. The main topic of my new friends was boys. *How boring was that?*

During those awkward moments listening to a discussion of Jimmy Henderson's attributes, I remained silent. Instead, I focused on picking up tips on what made boys attractive to girls. Here's what I learned. Chivalrous manners and good looks are a plus, but playing hard to get ranks as high as dimples. Bravery is admired, but a devil-may-care attitude is even more appealing. The shocker was that a slightly scruffy appearance with a hint of facial hair made the girls swoon.

On a whim, I experimented with the idea of adding facial hair to my disguise at the camps. My father put his foot down and said I was taking my role way too seriously. In secret, however, I kept trimming my real hair, and eventually there was enough to glue into the shape of a fake moustache. When that became too cumbersome and kept falling off, I settled for dotting razor stubble on my face with a charcoal pencil. It's good my father never caught me, or at least he never said anything.

The main thing keeping me out of trouble was my father's faith. He was a devout Irish Catholic who lived and breathed his beliefs, and we attended Sunday Mass wherever his jobs took us. *Shane O'Brien was the best father ever!* I never lacked for anything in what I admit was an unusual life.

My full name is Samantha Elisabeth O'Brien. When I was very young, my father's closest friends called me Sam, and it stuck. It was perfect for my eventual charade as a boy. My mother Alysse and my father emigrated from Ireland in 1855, and I was born in Chicago in 1856. Since I was born in America, my father also became a citizen of his adopted country about a year after my birth.

My mother's death in childbirth always filled me with remorse. *Why should I live and my mother die?* There was no answer to my question, yet I could never justify the heartbreak my birth caused my father. One thing was certain. My mother must have been wonderful, as my father remained devoted to her memory. Every Sunday, he faithfully lit a candle for her at church. His indifference toward other women also confirmed that true love can exist beyond the veil of death.

When I was younger and daydreaming about what my future life would hold, I concluded it would probably be a solitary life. As evidenced by my father's loneliness, it was too painful to fall in love. Besides, the likelihood of a man accepting an outspoken and independent pants-wearing woman like me was pretty slim.

The cards were definitely stacked against female independence in the late 1800s. Years before my birth, the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 articulated the demand for women's suffrage in the United States, and agitation for the cause was still increasing as the 1870s approached. Even newspapers featured articles about women's equality. *An odd tremor of excitement raced through me.* Perhaps I would devote my life to equality issues. It seemed like a worthwhile cause.

Impatiently, while waiting for the coast to be clear from the Indian raid, I shifted in the hay. For the first time since my father's death, I wasn't grieving but thinking about my future plans. With eagerness, I wanted to continue my train of thought.

Because writing a book about my father's life seemed like an impractical dream, perhaps my focus should shift to a career with more financial stability, such as becoming a newspaper reporter. Until women got the right to vote, however, even journalism presented a problem. It was still a man's world and unlikely a woman would be hired on the staff of a major newspaper.

Out of the blue, the most absurdly bold, crazy, remarkable idea struck my mind like a surprise bolt of lightning. *When I could go undercover as male reporter Sam O'Brien from Chicago, why grovel for employment as a female?* After all, I'd been working hard to develop the necessary writing skills, and I was confident I could do the job. Additionally, I'd pretended to be a male most of my life, and it would be easy to pull it off again. All it would take, along with the Lord's help of course, was a little ingenuity and courage.

As I settled back in the hay, hope surged through my body . . .

Chapter Two

My father was always intrigued with the westernmost parts of America, which included the state of Oregon, and the Idaho and Washington Territories. It also included all the vast land not yet surveyed between the Pacific Ocean and the Dakota Territory.

When I was younger, he taught me about the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1806, which had explored uncharted lands of the new continent. The backbreaking expedition found a safe haven with peaceful Nez Perce Indians in an area eventually named Lewiston for the famous explorer. Ever since our discussion, the name of Lewiston was always stuck in my mind.

More recently, thousands of settlers crossed the trails to Oregon and California, and Mormon colonists edged north from the Utah Territory into what would split off one day from the Washington Territory and become known as the Idaho Territory.

As early as 1836, Protestant missionaries founded missions among the Nez Perce and Cayuse tribes, and Catholics ministered among the Coeur d'Alene tribe in 1842. Missionaries remained active throughout the West, some living with actual bands of Indians and others living in missionary settlements near tribal lands.

In the 1850s, the Northwest became more unsettled. As the Indians felt their way of life was being threatened, there were sporadic attacks on white settlements. Isaac Stevens, governor of the Washington Territory, held treaty councils with many of the tribes of the Pacific Northwest region, and his goal was to define separate areas for settlers and Native Americans.

In 1855, five separate treaties were formed with tribes of what was called the Plateau or the Inland Northwest. In what was considered an important treaty with the United States, much of the traditional Nez Perce lands were maintained, including the Wallowa Valley of Chief Joseph the Elder and other Nez Perce chiefs. Nez Perce land originally encompassed more than seventeen million acres in the Northwest.

There was much written in Chicago newspapers about the Pike's Peak gold rush in the southern Plains and the havoc it brought to the Plains Indians, resulting in the Indian Wars. In a similar situation, gold was discovered on the Yakima Indian reservation in 1855, and it would forever change the political climate of the Northwest. Although the land was designated as Indian land in a peace treaty, the discovery of gold led men's minds to change course, and the goal of peaceful coexistence was greatly diminished.

Conflicts began erupting between trespassing white miners and tribes of the Plateau, including the Yakima, Walla Walla, and Cayuse tribes. The original conflict was called the Yakima War. The second phase of the war continued in

1858 and was called the Coeur d'Alene War, with the alliance of the Coeur d'Alene, Spokane, and Palouse tribes. The war ended after nearly seven hundred horses of the Palouse tribe were slaughtered.

After Oregon became a state in 1859, more gold was discovered in 1860, an event unsettling the balance of power even more. This time, gold was found on a Nez Perce reservation by Elias D. Pierce, near what would become the town of Pierce. The mining districts in the Clearwater River watershed were soon overrun with prospectors, some heading even further south into the Salmon River drainage. Many towns sprang up in the area, and Lewiston was officially founded in May of 1861. It was located where the Clearwater River flowed into the Snake River, and it became the gateway to the northern gold country.

Business was booming in Lewiston in the 1860s and 1870s. It was reported to have three drugstores, six hotels, seven attorneys, and nine doctors. Less favorable rumors said there were also twenty-five saloons, ten gambling establishments, and numerous houses of ill repute. What interested me most about Lewiston, however, was the number of reputable newspapers over the years including *The Golden Age* (1862-1865), *The North Idaho Radiator* (1865), and *The Lewiston Journal* (founded in 1867).

One night, my father and I were sitting at our kitchen table in a small threadbare apartment in Chicago. It was a place my father usually rented between jobs. During a quiet dinner, we discussed a newspaper report that twenty thousand prospectors had crowded into the goldfields in the West.

With a sparkling glint in his eyes, my father impulsively threw down the newspaper and exclaimed, "That's it, Sam. We're off to the Northwest Territories!"

Having been content shuffling from railroad camp to railroad camp, I reeled in shock at his sudden announcement. Nearly choking on a mouth full of pork and beans, my head jerked up, and I stared at my father's glowing expression. It was apparent he'd caught gold fever like so many others and was determined to make our fortune by going west.

For the first time in my young life, I didn't understand his motivation. We were happy where we were, so why did we need to look for a fortune? Was it even wise for my father to leave his lifelong friends to go to a place rumored to be untamed and dangerous?

The bottom line was I loved my father more than anything in the world. Regardless of my misgivings, I would follow him to the ends of the earth. That night I prayed myself to sleep on a tearstained pillow. My father had always assured me the Lord would be with us no matter where we went. We would soon find out whether his statements were true.

At the time of our trip, I was a teenager, and my understanding of faith was sketchy at best. It never occurred to me the Lord might allow adversity as well as good things. The lesson I would struggle to learn was that all things would come together for good, for those who were called according to His purpose. For me, it would be a long, painful, and sometimes repetitious lesson.

After several months of preparation over the winter, we purchased tickets in early spring on the Butterfield Overland Stagecoach as far as Omaha in the state of Nebraska. After that, we made plans to join up with a small wagon train taking the northern route of the Oregon Trail. Although the transcontinental railroad hooked up from Council Bluffs, Iowa to Sacramento, California in 1869, my father's dream was to go north to the Idaho goldfields by way of the Oregon Trail. The Oregon Trail became our first goal.

With both excitement and anxiety, I greeted the adventure of crossing the vast prairies and wide open spaces, and eventually the majestic rock formations of the snowcapped mountains. Every night, I had restless dreams about grizzle-faced prospectors and war-painted Indians. It was impossible to know what dangers lay ahead, or whether we even had the grit to face our unknown future.

The Oregon Trail was nearly two thousand miles long. My mind couldn't even comprehend the enormous length of the east-west wagon route, which connected the Missouri River to the valleys in Oregon. The eastern part of the trail was partially in the state of Kansas and spanned Nebraska and the Wyoming Territory, and the western part crossed what became the Idaho Territory and the state of Oregon. The trail flourished from the 1840s through the end of the 1860s, and it was the oldest of the northern commercial and emigrant trails.

When my father and I began planning our trip in earnest, we discovered various *jumping off points*, where a person could join up with other travelers already on the trail. After considering costs, we decided to travel as far as Omaha, Nebraska, by stagecoach and join a small wagon train there.

Before heading into more dangerous country, an army fort nearby was like a security blanket for travelers. It was the first opportunity to purchase emergency supplies, make repairs, find medical help, or even post letters to friends and relatives. Although we joined a group on the south side of the Platte River near the fort, another similar group followed the north side and could easily wade across the shallow river to reach the fort.

The journey west was a vast network of interconnected trails—the Mormon, California, Bozeman, and Oregon Trails. There were many variations on travel itineraries on either side of the Platte, North Platte, Snake, and Columbia Rivers. Thousands of people and livestock usually made their way west at the same time, but in different locations and at different times to ease congestion. We were told it

was important for the different wagon trains to spread out to find clean water, wood for cooking, good campsites, and grass for grazing.

In early April of 1872, my father and I were fortunate to find a small group of prospectors heading to gold country in the Northwest, which was our final destination. The prospectors were a congenial bunch, and they had made the trip before. As they thought it was the safest route, we followed their itinerary on the south side of the Platte River.

Our original plan was to purchase a Conestoga wagon in Omaha, but we were later encouraged to get a prairie schooner, which was manufactured by a company called Studebaker. A little more than one thousand pounds, it was a lot smaller and less expensive than the standard Conestoga wagon, which weighed as much as six thousand pounds.

The Oregon Trail was said to have too many tight corners for a larger wagon to navigate, so most of our wagon train chose the smaller wagons. The typical prairie schooner had a cotton canvas cover treated with linseed oil to keep out dust, wind, and rain. Protected by iron rims, the wooden wheels were about fifty inches in diameter and could easily move over the rough terrain, which sometimes was littered with rocks and tree stumps.

With my father's savings from his railroad jobs, we were able to afford a new prairie schooner along with six horses to pull it and two more horses to ride. Although many travelers preferred oxen or mules, my father chose horses, as they were more easily trained and required less care. Anyone with horses or mules was warned by the wagon train master to be on the lookout for Indians, who sometimes slipped into camp at night to steal them. Oxen were the only animals left alone.

The heavily traveled ground was permanently rutted from previous wagon trains, and most travelers rode their horses or mules. Those with oxen generally walked, as they required the most guidance and discipline. As the hard wooden structures literally jarred every bone in a person's body, it was rare for travelers to ride in the bumpy schooners.

Although all of the pioneers took along food supplies, including flour, dried fruit, bacon, rice, and beans, the beginning of every trip began with a buffalo hunt. Hundreds of thousands of buffalo could be seen migrating through the prairies on both sides of the Platte River, which was an exciting sight for those of us from big cities like Chicago.

The men who volunteered for the hunt brought back two carcasses, which supplied fresh meat for the entire wagon train over the next week. Several of the prospectors knew how to make dried buffalo jerky, and they taught the rest of us.

In the beginning, journeying west was a remarkable adventure. It was astonishing to see so many buffalo and to daydream about what life was like for the

many Native American tribes. In the confines of our wagon train, which was mainly prospectors heading to the goldfields, it was surprising to find so few families and only a handful of children.

Practicalities promptly took over, and cooking became a major undertaking along the trail. Sometimes we used wood for fires, but other times we found smelly buffalo chips and started fires with flint and steel. There were a number of communal grills and extra pots and pans to go around, and most of us had an iron tripod to suspend pots and pans over our cooking fires.

At night, the wagons formed a huge protective circle with the animals and people in the center but segregated in separate areas. When we all sat around the central campfire, my father was thrilled to hear stories about gold nuggets the size of stones in the rocky creeks of the mountains. It was a companionable group, sometimes singing songs or playing cards, and the setting wasn't much different from the railroad camps.

The biggest change for me was finding it unnecessary to disguise myself as a boy. With only a few pioneer women sprinkled among the predominantly male population of travelers, I blended in easily. For comfort, I still wore old pants and cotton shirts rather than the women's long cotton dresses.

Everyone seemed tolerant and congenial, and most were willing to help one another on the trail, sharing supplies or helping repair any broken wagons. Although it was early spring, it was already hot, and most of us slept on top of our sleeping bags under the stars. Before going to sleep one night, I happened to glance at my father's peaceful face. It was aglow in the bright moonlight, and as if he were contemplating all the gold he would find and what he would do with our future wealth, he was smiling.

Puzzled by my father's rapturous expression, I remember rolling over on my sleeping bag and staring at the elongated shadows between the wagon wheels. *What if it's only fool's gold over the mountains?*

*There is certain relief in change,
Even though it be from bad to worse!
As I have often found in traveling in a stagecoach,
That it is often a comfort to shift one's position,
And be bruised in a new place.*

Washington Irving

Chapter Three

Our bad luck began with the discovery that the Platte River had muddy brackish water from early spring rains and flooding. The river itself was usually easy to cross, and it was about a mile wide and only sixty inches deep. But certain sections had become treacherous.

At various locations along the deeper parts, there were ferries to help travelers cross. Although our wagon train continued to slowly make its way along the south side of the river, at some point all of our prairie schooners would have to navigate crossing into the North Platte River Valley and the Wyoming Territory on our way to Fort Laramie.

What was most noticeable about the water was the foul smell. Some of the men advised everyone to let the water sit in a bucket for an hour with a fourth of a cup of cornmeal. They guaranteed that most of the silt would settle out. Although it seemed to be a solution, the water was still disgusting.

Because of the continual complaints, our wagon master altered our course, and we camped by one of the many freshwater streams draining into the Platte. Happily, many of the travelers began freely using the abundant water. It turned out to be a fatal mistake for five of our group, including my father. Shockingly, it would have been safer using the muddy water of the Platte than the clear and pleasant-looking stream water, which was infected with bacteria called cholera.

The next week was unbearable with thirty travelers coming down sick. Although I nursed my father through many feverish nights, his condition was among the worst, and his once sturdy physique visibly weakened. After becoming incoherent with dehydration, my father eventually succumbed to the devastating illness.

“Sam,” my delirious father murmured on what would be his last night. “You should go on to Idaho . . . You’re strong, and I know you’ll find gold someday . . . Just think of it . . . You’ll be rich . . . I’m sorry you’ve had to do without so much in your life . . . I’ve always wanted the best for you . . . I love you, *son*.”

I was stunned he had called me his son, and my eyes glanced at my father’s pale face, which had a beatific smile as his eyes floated toward the schooner covering.

Perhaps his glossy eyes were seeing my mother, I imagined, as he stretched out his hand as far as it would reach. Then he gave a last gasp and limply collapsed onto his bedroll.

Momentarily, I was frozen, and in spite of the heat, an icy clamminess clung to me like a second skin. I was startled not only by my beloved father's death, but he believed I was his *son*.

Death isn't as peaceful as some poets opine. Instead, it is final and harsh. It viciously consumed the shrunken corpse of the only person who ever loved me. Deep in my heart, I believed my father crossed over into my mother's arms in the presence of the Lord he loved. Nevertheless, I roiled in resentment. He not only left me alone in a world of strangers, but he hadn't even known my true identity. Worse yet, I didn't know who I was myself.

In despair for the loss of my lifelong companion as well as my fear of the unknown, I fell against his rigid chest. He had found his new world, yet my world had fallen apart, and I wept until I fell asleep in exhaustion.

Where are you, Lord? I prayed for you to protect us, but my father died. Why did you abandon us? Help me understand.

One foot fell into place behind the other. The next few days swept by in a surreal daze. Although everyone in the wagon train was sorry for my loss, the bodies of my father and four others needed to be disposed of hurriedly in the hot weather. All of the men combined their efforts to dig five graves by the side of the rutted trail. They also fashioned crosses from fallen tree branches and pounded them into the unforgiving rocky ground. Then a simple ceremony was led by one of the women, who was the widow of a minister.

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust . . .," she said stoically as her eyes squinted in the noonday sun. Her leathery face had tears streaming down her cheeks. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away . . . Blessed be the Lord forever."

Death wasn't fair, and I rebelled. In the sweltering heat, I felt empty and icy cold like a waterless glass frozen in time. I once read Voltaire's words, *Tears are the silent language of grief*, and tears were the only words I knew.

Chapter Four

Although my heart was broken, it was important to get my wits without delay. The wagon train and prospectors' dreams of gold would wait for no one, especially not a weeping orphan whose limp body was draped over her father's fresh grave. *Hide your grief, Sam*, I berated myself. Surely someone with as many disguises as me could find one more.

When we reached our destination, it would dawn on my fellow travelers I was a child of sixteen with no living relatives. They would be tossing dice on how to be rid of me, and the choices were slim for a suitable place. I could either be dumped on an unsuspecting family along the way or left in a small town to fend for myself. With the last scenario, a local brothel would probably be the only employment for a young woman my age.

As if he had a premonition of his death the week before his illness, my father handed me a leather satchel for safekeeping. It contained his life savings from a Chicago bank, and it was quite substantial. It truly surprised me how much he had managed to save over the years.

Although I wanted to grieve, my life was about to be manipulated in an unforeseen direction by strangers, who didn't have my welfare at heart. My father had raised me to stand up for what I thought was right and be unflinching in a man's world. If I became a shrinking violet, it would be an insult to his memory.

Hurriedly, I wiped away my tears and gathered my thoughts. It was important to extricate myself from the wagon train as judiciously as possible. First, I would negotiate with the wagon master to sell our prairie schooner, horses (except for mine), and supplies. Then I would inform him of my imminent departure for Lewiston in the Idaho Territory. Fortunately, my father and I brought along a map of the Northwest. My plan set, I determinedly tramped to the wagon master's spacious schooner and crawled into the interior after an obligatory, "Hello . . ."

Sure enough, three bearded men were lounging on floor cushions and discussing something in hushed tones, and I figured that *something* was me. Upon seeing me enter, they jumped to their feet. Pluckily, I stood to my full height, which matched two of the men, and stared tenaciously into their eyes. I'd carefully chosen rugged, mannish clothes for the occasion, figuring it would give me more respect. I even tucked away my growing hair in a cap.

"Mr. Marchand, gentlemen," I said in a no-nonsense tone, nodding authoritatively at the group. "I'll remain with the wagon train until we reach the Idaho Territory. My father and I were headed for Lewiston. Before he passed, he said I should continue without him." *My father actually never gave me instructions*, I thought. *In fact, he would have wanted me to return to Chicago.*

“The Hancock’s older schooner was damaged crossing the Platte River, and I would like to sell ours to them. I’ll offer it at a reasonable price, of course, along with five horses, keeping one for my own journey.” *The extra money would be helpful in Lewiston*, I decided.

“Missy . . . ,” the wagon master began.

“Excuse me, my name is Sam O’Brien, not Missy,” I said firmly.

Another man named Mr. Dooley spoke up. “We would be remiss if we took you to Lewiston, uh . . . , Sam,” he said awkwardly. “There are many, well you know, ladies of the evening in Lewiston, and it’s no place for a young girl.”

“I’m almost seventeen, gentlemen, and as an adult I can determine where I would like to live, even if it has *prostitutes*.” *Although I had just turned sixteen, they didn’t need to know that.*

The men simultaneously gasped at my reference to prostitutes, which I had deliberately used for shock value, and then they exchanged amused smiles. I obviously was not being taken seriously, and I loudly cleared my throat. The men grew silent and exchanged uneasy glances at my stubbornness.

“Sam, you may be almost grown up, and you’re right, we’ve all been discussing what to do with you,” Mr. Marchand said with sudden kindness. “If I had a daughter your age, though, I wouldn’t want her to end up in Lewiston. It’s definitely not the proper place for an unchaperoned young lady.” His words were unyielding, and it was apparent the other men agreed with the wagon master’s conclusions.

“In a week, we pass through a place called McCall. It would be suitable for you, temporarily of course. Several families have a missionary settlement among the Nez Perce Indians, and while you adjust to the loss of your father, I’m sure one of the ministers and his wife will let you stay there. Take some time to consider your future options. After you’ve given it some thought, you’ll make a better decision than one made in haste and grief.

“We’ll do as you requested with your schooner and horses, and you should have a tidy sum to lock away. If you decide to hitch a way back to Chicago, I’ll leave an address where you can contact me.” All of the men stared expectantly at me and hoped I would accept their plan.

Their obstinate looks told me I’d come in at the tail-end of their discussion, and their minds had already been made up. At least I would get the money rightfully owed me. Reluctantly, I nodded my acceptance and left.

What could I do? There was no alternative. When I sensed the time was right, my future plan would be to leave the missionary settlement. *Would I even have the courage to set out for Lewiston on my own?* I didn’t know. With the Lord’s help, my horse, and my father’s nest egg, maybe I could manage.

A week and a half later in the long shadows of early evening, wagon master George Marchand and I arrived by horseback at a secluded log cabin settlement nestled in an area of towering elm trees. The cabins, maybe four in all, were spread out over several acres, and flickering lights beckoned from within each one. A rickety barn, a cow pasture, and even an apple orchard could be seen in the distance.

Though the skies over the compound were darkening, the hazy outline of mountains to the west was silhouetted against a bright orange horizon. It was stunningly beautiful yet mysterious and foreign to me. The rugged landscape was such a contrast to the manmade uniformity of Chicago's bustling streets.

"It's important for me to talk privately with the Thompsons," the wagon master curtly said, motioning me to stay in the dark shadows of the trees. His brow furrowed with the dilemma of what he was going to say. "I've met them before, and they're good people. However, until I give you a sign to come, don't barge in. Okay?"

With reluctance, I nodded obediently. It was such a temptation to flee with my pockets full of money, but it might be foolish. There was always the possibility I could be robbed, or not even find Lewiston on my own.

For my own protection, I instinctively began to eavesdrop. Shoving aside a thick hedge of lilacs and feeling the rough branches unmercifully scratch my arms, I edged closer to a cabin window. The shutters had been pushed wide open on the warm spring night. The warning about *little pitchers having big ears* immediately came to mind.

An authoritative, diminutive woman in a stark gray cotton dress stood beside her rounded balding husband, and she angrily thrust her hands on her hips in dismay at Mr. Marchand's words.

"What do you mean you brought a teenage girl to live with us?" she complained in a shrill voice. "Do you know how overcrowded this cabin is with five children?"

Five children? The woman's lack of enthusiasm for another mouth to feed didn't sound too promising. Silently, I rejoiced. Maybe the wagon master would consent to take me to Lewiston after all.

"It's unfortunate I have to bring her here at all, but her daddy just died on the trail, and she's grieving. It isn't proper to take her to the goldfields with the prospectors. I thought with you being the Lord's servants and all that Sam could stay with you for a while, just until she knows what she wants to do."

"*Sam?*" the woman's harsh voice mocked. "What kind of Christian name is that for a young woman? Is she even a God-fearing girl or a heathen?"

After hearing the woman's disparaging words about a complete stranger, I extracted myself from the overgrown foliage and defiantly marched through the

darkening woods to find my horse. There was no way I would grovel like a pauper to stay where I wasn't wanted.

Just as my legs began mounting the sturdy body of my chestnut mare, two enormous hands grabbed my shoulders in a vise and forcefully yanked me backwards. My lanky body came flying off my horse like a rag doll and slammed against what felt like an immovable boulder. *It had to be an assailant!* Before I could even consider the implications, my limp body was spun around to face my attacker.

My frightened eyes, which were crushed flat against a roughly woven cotton shirt, flew upward to see an enormous man a year or two older than me. He towered over my tall frame. Resembling a hardy mountain man, he had unkempt shoulder-length brown hair, the shadow of a two-day beard, and heavily lashed dark brown eyes flashing angrily on a sharply chiseled face.

Our eyes locked in surprise, then anger. Mine became furious. *How dare this stranger manhandle me! Who was he anyway?* As if ordering me to tell him why I was prowling around the cabin, the man stared defiantly.

When he didn't lessen his iron grip, I jerked my body forward and then stomped his instep with my heavy boot. Rendered speechless, the wild-looking man momentarily loosened his hold to grab his throbbing foot.

Seizing my opportunity to escape, I raced toward my horse, hastily jammed my left foot in the stirrup, and pushed upward. Instead of landing in the saddle like I expected, my body once again catapulted backwards in the air. I landed in an undignified heap in a clump of grassy weeds. Caught off balance by my quick descent, my assailant's colossal body harshly tumbled down next to me.

It took me a moment to catch my breath and hide my pain. I slowly pushed myself to a sitting position. "*What are you doing, you overgrown bully?*" I hissed quietly, not wanting anyone from the cabin to hear my words. "Don't you know how to treat a lady?"

"Of course I know how to treat a lady," the man growled as he brushed himself off. His dark brown eyes glowered at me. "*Where is one?*"

"You-you . . ." I was so thunderstruck that my words came spitting out. In exasperation, I gave him a spiteful shove. It was like moving a brick wall.

"This is starting to be fun." With a conspiratorial grin, he shoved me backward. Still on the ground, I slid about a foot in the dirt.

"I swear, you have no manners," I remanded. It became apparent the man didn't intend to hurt me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "You're so rude!"

"*Me?*" a low masculine voice protested threateningly. Even sitting on the ground, he towered over me. "You stomped my foot and shoved me first. Don't give me your *damsel in distress* look. You're no delicate, swooning damsel, and you can

definitely take care of yourself. Now I'd like an explanation why you're prowling around my parents' cabin."

My jaw dropped. In an instant, it made sense why he attacked me so vehemently. When I was hiding in the bushes eavesdropping, he thought I was ready to attack his family. I was just about to make amends when the man absentmindedly began wiping dirt off my face. His coarsened fingertips against my cheek made me completely lose my train of thought.

"Sam!" a loud male voice yelled from the cabin door.

It was George Marchand, the wagon master. Although it was impossible for him to spot us in the shadows of the woods, he was grandly motioning for me to approach the cabin. His thumb was pointed up.

My attacker, who slowly rose to his feet like a lumbering bear, heard the voice and looked down questioningly at me. "*Sam?* Who are you anyway? And what kind of name is that for a female?"

His reproachful attitude made me bristle. Indignantly, I brushed some loose dirt off my already soiled pants, which was a useless exercise. Obstinate, I held up my hands for assistance.

"The least you could do is help me up, *you big oaf*. You're the one who threw me on the ground in the first place."

"Answer my question. Who are you?" he asked more respectfully as he effortlessly yanked me to my feet. He temporarily imprisoned my hands in his own to keep me from stalking away.

His lack of contrition pushed me over the edge. With a smirk on my face, I planted my feet in front of him and stared into his confused face.

"This must be your lucky day. It's nice to meet you, *bro*! I think I'm your new *sister*," I said beaming, easily pulling away from him as he was so stunned. I would have given a solid gold nugget to preserve his enraged expression. As I strode to the cabin to meet my new family, his footsteps crunched after mine.

"Great, just great," the masculine voice muttered in a disgusted undertone. "You will never be my sister, do you hear me? *Never!*"

When I reached the muted light of the weathered log cabin, I sneaked a backward glance at my new stepbrother and nearly laughed out loud for the first time since my father's death. The Idaho Territory could prove to be interesting after all!

And that is how I came to temporarily live at the homestead of Reverend Hollis Thompson, his wife Lydia, their sons Lukas and Josh, and their daughters Sarah, Hannah, and baby Sadie.

*Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her.
But once they are in hand,
He or she alone must decide
How to play the cards
In order to win the game.*

Voltaire

Chapter Five

I'd waited long enough for the Indian raid to end, and at least two hours passed since taking refuge in the ramshackle barn. Rehashing everything from my father's untimely death to my abrupt arrival at the mission brought me a new sense of peace. At least I could move forward with a fresh perspective.

My father would have been proud how I analyzed the problems facing me and had chosen the safest path. It was obvious I was temporarily stuck at the mission, but someday I would leave. It would be a challenging problem to figure out how.

The shadows of dusk looked like ribbons of elongated smoke, and it was time to venture out of my prickly hiding place in the hay. Although the thunderstorm never materialized, an eerie wind whistled through the rafters. With trepidation, my hand slowly moved a rusty latch, and the weathered barn door creaked open. My stiff legs walked forward in slow motion toward the empty cow pasture near our log cabin home. The air was foreboding and pregnant with a chilling silence. *Something was definitely wrong!*

In the distance near the leafy tree line, several plainly dressed figures were hunched over the blowing prairie grasses. So that's where I headed, picking up my pace to a jog. Within hearing distance, a mixture of high-pitched sobbing and serious-toned voices floated to my ears.

It became obvious my younger sisters, Sarah and Hannah, were crying with abandon, and their brother Josh, who was a foot taller than either of his sisters, had his arms comfortingly around their stooped shoulders.

Beyond the huddled gathering, the stout balding figure of my stepfather Reverend Hollis Thompson was wildly hurrying to and from the cabin. His arms were overflowing with patchwork quilts. Keeping pace with his frantic footsteps was a neighboring pastor, Reverend Josiah Martin, whose eldest daughter held baby Sadie in her arms. The young woman's face was ashen, and a pale hand covered her mouth in horror.

It was then my anxious eyes spotted a lifeless crimson red form contorted sideways on the hard ground. The entire scene was gruesomely macabre from so

much blood, and I nearly gagged! Hastening toward the unrecognizable figure, a wave of shivers swept over my body. *Was it my stepbrother Lukas?*

The thought of his grisly murder made me sick to my stomach. It was true he always annoyed me, but I never would have wished him dead. It had actually been entertaining being a thorn in his flesh.

“Sam,” little Hannah’s quavering voice cried out. She threw her tiny body into my arms for comfort. It felt a little awkward with my arms around a stepsister I barely knew, but my arms remained there. I was determined to extend the arms of sympathy very few offered me when my father died.

“That’s our mother,” Josh tearfully whispered, nodding in disbelief at the crumpled figure on the ground. His thicker arm drifted around my waist and mine found his waist in return. I realized he needed comfort as much as his sisters.

With a gasp of revulsion, I peered over Hannah’s mass of silky blond hair. There was Miss Lydia, bludgeoned to death with a tomahawk in her chest. A basket of spilled blueberries was scattered by her body in a pool of blood. My stepmother died with a look of shock frozen on her face, and her glassy eyes were appealing to heaven for justice.

It was so horrific, yet at the same time the unexpected violence was riveting. *What made the usually peaceful Nez Perce attack a missionary?* Then an anxious thought raced through my mind. *Where was Lukas?* Panic swept over me.

My stepfather reached us by then and after grimly nodding at me, he sternly ordered Sarah to help him and Reverend Martin cover her mother. Wiping away her tears, Sarah obediently swallowed her revulsion and did as she was told.

It was a curious interplay between father and daughter. *When she was grieving for her mother, why would he speak so harshly?* Before my mind could form any semblance of a conclusion, he respectfully began draping his wife’s mutilated body in quilts, and huge tears were dropping down his cheeks. Miss Lydia was obviously beloved to her husband.

When he was done, Reverend Thompson looked up with concern. “Where is Lukas?” he hastily asked as if repeating my previous question. He stared straight at Josh for the unknown answer.

In confusion, my eyes spun to Josh’s ashen face. *How would Josh know the answer? Had he seen the whole attack?* Sarah and Hannah also glanced questioningly at their brother.

“The Indians took him,” Josh whimpered as huge tears began to trace their way down his ruddy cheeks. My arm reached tighter around Josh’s waist to give him support. “There were three of them, though one was hiding in the woods. Two of them said they were hungry, and they asked Mother for some berries. She told them to leave the property at once and find their own berries.

“I was on the far side of the lilac bushes over there,” he pointed, “and I saw everything. Lukas was about twenty feet from Mother, and he began yelling and rushed forward to protect her. The third Indian, who was concealed with their horses in the woods, attacked Lukas from behind with his hunting knife. Lukas somehow managed to throw him over his shoulder. Then the second Indian came from his blind side and bludgeoned Lukas with a heavy timber. He was knocked out cold, and his face was covered in blood.

“Immediately, Mother grabbed a tree limb and attacked the Indian nearest her. He pulled out a tomahawk and slammed it into her chest. It was over so fast. She died within moments.

“The Indians swiftly gathered their horses. Two of them struggled to throw Lukas’ unconscious body on top of one of the bigger horses. Then after doubling up on another, all three rode off in a cloud of dust. All of a sudden, the sky got pitch dark like it was going to pour, and I was shaking so badly I stayed hidden in the woods.

“Mother was already dead, and Lukas was bleeding everywhere and maybe dying. It all happened so fast. I’m so sorry, Father, but I was scared. I didn’t think you would have wanted me to chase after them, as you might have lost another son.” As if feeling he’d made the wrong decision, Josh hung his head in shame.

Reverend Thompson walked over and shakily put his arm around his younger son’s shoulders. I withdrew to the background. “You did what was right, son. Nothing could have changed the fact that your mother was already dead, and Lukas was probably mortally wounded. Let’s go get the shovel and dig a proper grave. We wouldn’t want any wild animals to get your mother’s body. Girls, take Sadie into the house. Go with them, *Samantha*, and supervise. When we’re ready for the burial, we’ll come and get you.”

Somewhat surprised my stepfather called me by name and even told me to supervise, I obediently followed my stepsisters into the small log cabin. We sat on the roughly hewn furniture in a miserable silence, each of us contemplating private thoughts of loss and fear. Just as I felt when my father died, Sarah and Hannah would be feeling afraid without their mother. At least they had the rest of their family to lean on for comfort. *Except for Lukas*, I thought with sadness.

My thoughts on Miss Lydia’s death were filled with horror at the way she died, and self-condemnation for having given her such a difficult time when she was alive. I deeply regretted not saying I was sorry. When I realized I was more concerned with Lukas’ kidnapping and possible death than with Miss Lydia’s actual death, a rush of guilt filled me inside. Silently, I prayed for both and realized I’d begun to care for this family more than I ever intended.