

ONE

SET ME AS A SEAL UPON THINE HEART, AS A SEAL UPON THINE ARM: FOR LOVE *IS* STRONG AS DEATH; JEALOUSY *IS* CRUEL AS THE GRAVE: THE COALS THEREOF *ARE* COALS OF FIRE, *WHICH HATH* A MOST VEHEMENT FLAME.

SONG OF SOLOMON 8:6

IT was raining. Not that rain was any sort of unusual occurrence, Rachel Sterling thought with disgust. Just then, she heard the heavy rumble of thunder, and glanced up at the open-beamed timbers that comprised the roof. “Oh, just stop it,” she grouched at the throaty, bone-rattling crash of sound. Rising, she went to the window and looked outside. There was a heavy, threatening line in the clouds just this side of the mountain that divided the dark gray sky directly above from the nearly black sky in the distance. Jagged lightning streaked overhead just then, a yellow and white bolt that was forked like a snake’s tongue. Rachel shuddered. Thunder immediately followed, so powerfully close that the puncheon floorboards beneath her feet vibrated, and the odd scent that almost always came with a thunderstorm permeated the air.

She found herself holding her breath. While she was snug and warm in their tiny cabin, her husband Jared was out in this powerful, wild storm. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle with concern.

Despite the heavy rain, Jared had gone out that morning to cut more logs so that he could finish building their barn, assuring her that he would be back by noon for dinner. However, contrary to his words, he had not made it back at the appointed hour, and now here it was nearing suppertime and he still wasn’t home.

Worry over his absence pressed in on her, but she forcefully pushed those bothersome thoughts from her mind. She knew that Jared would only laugh at her if he knew she was fretful. Jared laughed at her a lot anyway, because she tended to overcomplicate things on a regular basis. He was always telling her to just calm down, to not worry over every little thing, but she couldn't help it. There were some things that it was impossible to not have anxiety over.

Turning away from the window with a sigh, she pulled out a chair and sat down at the small kitchen table. She had gotten out her journal earlier that afternoon, intending to spend some time chronicling the past few weeks. She'd not been so good at keeping things up in that journal lately. Too many other things going on and time always seemed to get away from her.

With one last hasty, prayerful glance towards the window, she shook her head and picked up her small pen, dipping it carefully into the inkwell before scratching her first sentence across the yellowish-gray paper below the date she'd written earlier.

*April 18, 1888
Mt. Hope, Oregon*

I hate living here.

She sighed after reading those words, but didn't cross them out, either. They were the truth. If there was one thing that she was consistent with, it was to be honest with her journal writing.

I know that does not sound fair, not after all the work that Jared has done to make us comfortable and secure here. But it's so primitive. I feel like I am all alone, all the time. We have made very few friends out here in Oregon except for our closest neighbors, the MacKade family. And we don't know them all that well. It's not that the other people here are unfriendly; it's more like there aren't very many people at all! Sometimes the quiet is almost unnerving.

Jared has finally completed our home, and though it is small, it is warm and dry. I had never considered how much it would rain here. It rained a lot at times back home in the Carolinas, but not like here, a never-ending drizzle! Jared has now begun work on our barn. He says that the neighbors will come help him raise it when he has all the logs cut.

Rachel laid her pen down and rubbed her eyes. The light was waning, and she needed to light the lamp. She also needed to move the

stew to the back of the stove where it wouldn't cook down so fast. With a silent prayer on her breath, she went to the window and looked out, hoping against hope that Jared was out there, on his way home finally. He was nowhere in sight. She sighed and went back to her journal.

I love Jared with all my heart, and he is all that makes it bearable to continue living here. He loves the West. He has always dreamed of living here, and his eyes just light up when he starts telling me about his hopes and dreams. I wish my hopes and dreams mirrored his, but I'm afraid they do not. I am simply not happy here.

We have been married for nigh on two years now, and unfortunately, we are still without children. I fear that it is my fault; that I am barren. I pray every night that it is not so, but something worrisome inside of me warns that it is. Jared says I'm being silly, that it is simply not God's timing for us as yet. I wish I had his faith. Sometimes I feel so entirely without faith that I am ashamed. Jared on the other hand, has enough faith for us both, I think! He is so devoted to the Lord. His nightly readings from the scriptures are both passionate and filled with wisdom. How I wish I had his devotion.

We heard from Jared's brother Wade a few days ago. And I pray that the good Lord forgives me, but that man makes me want to say and do things that are not worthy of a good Christian woman. I won't say I hate him; that would be a sin. But I sure don't like him very much. He is just so, oh, I can't say it. He isn't worth wasting my words on. He told Jared that he was planning on coming out here to visit us, all the way from Chicago! We did not even know that Wade was living in Chicago. Of course, Jared is somewhat wary of Wade coming to visit. The last time we saw him he was so drunk that he was falling down, and he was begging Jared for money—and Wade a lawyer! He, I have no doubt, makes a good deal more money as a lawyer than Jared does as a farmer, goodness knows. Anyway, Wade kept badgering and pushing for the money that he insisted Jared had, but Jared just shook his head and refused Wade even a nickel. That's when Wade began hitting Jared, practically pounding him into the floor. I still remember the way Jared didn't hit Wade back, he just covered his head with his arms while Wade pummeled him. It took a friend who was visiting us that day and myself to pull Wade off of Jared. It was just terrible. Not long after that that we packed what we could and moved here. To know that Wade now wants to come here makes me ill. What if he decides to stay?

I know that it is all in God's hands. But it still makes me worry.

Night had finally fallen deeply by the time Rachel finished her last sentence. She stood and went yet again to the window, as if that would somehow make Jared come sooner. There was no way she could go to look for Jared. Not only was it pitch dark and pouring rain out, he

had both of the horses with him. The MacKade's farm wasn't that far away; perhaps she could go to ask them for help.

That decided, she bundled up and picked up one of the oil lamps to guide her on her way. But the moment she stepped outside, she knew that carrying a lamp was going to be impossible. The wind was so strong that the lamp went dark before she got ten feet from the front door. Turning around, she put the lamp back indoors, turning to try to see which direction she should go in. Tears of frustration mingled with the rain as she realized that she would never find her way in the dark. All she could do now was pray.

Rachel had no idea how many hours had passed when she awoke. She'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table, her head lying on her folded arms, which rested there on that red and white gingham tablecloth. Glancing around, blinking, trying to come to grips with why she was sitting at the table sleeping, memories of the evening before rushed in. Her heart sank when she realized that Jared had not yet returned. There was little doubt in her mind that something dreadful had happened to her husband.

Rising, she glanced out the window, seeing that the early dawn sky was pearl gray, and still not bright enough to see much by. Her heart sped up when she became conscious of something moving out in the yard, near the half-built barn. Hoping it was Jared, she squinted in that dim light and realized that it was only the horses. Jared was nowhere in sight.

Quickly, she stepped into her shoes and went out the door, running towards the south end of the small fenced corral, where the horse's lean-to stood. As she drew near to them, they shied away a little, whickering softly. Both of them looked bedraggled and were covered with mud. They still had their lead halters on, though they were loosely hanging to the ground. Surely if the horses were here, Jared couldn't be far...could he?

By now, the dawn had broken in earnest and it was plenty light enough to see. Rachel went inside the house and put on a heavy coat. Her heart was pounding with thick, heavy, fear-filled beats as she went back out to saddle Jeb up. Her stomach churned, her mind whirled, and she felt faint and sick. Just one thought pounded through her mind: She had to find Jared.

She was heading to where she'd known Jared was working when she saw their neighbor, Patrick MacKade, working on the fence line that divided their land tracts. Quickly, she rode to him.

"Mornin', Mrs. Sterlin'," Patrick greeted, his thick Irish accent very pronounced. He took off his hat in greeting, while a kind smile wreathed his red-bearded face.

She didn't take a second of time for pleasantries. Blinking against the sting of tears that had been brought on by having to voice aloud her fears she said, "Mr. MacKade, please, I need help. Jared didn't come home last night, and the horses were at the house this morning. I think something has happened to him."

Patrick looked a bit alarmed, but didn't say anything. Instead he nodded his head with one brisk bob, then immediately went to his horse, which was standing mere yards away. After he tossed the tools he'd been using into the saddlebags, he mounted with the grace of long practice, and rode the very short distance back to Rachel. "Let's go then," he said, not wasting even a second on unnecessary words.

Rachel could see the pinched paleness of worry in the man's face, and it didn't soothe her own fears at all. He probably had the same thoughts as she had. If Jared had been out here in the cold and rain, with that terrible storm overhead all night, the odds were not in his favor.

She couldn't allow herself to think that. Not unless or until she had to.

She and Patrick rode a few yards apart, combing the area that Jared had been logging, when she saw Patrick abruptly pull up on the reins, stopping his horse nearly in its tracks. Watching him closely, Rachel saw the slump in his shoulders, the way he bowed his head, and knew that he'd found something. He dismounted and went to kneel beside a fallen tree. Quickly, she rode over toward where Patrick knelt, leaping off Jeb quickly.

That's when she saw Jared. A tree had fallen on him, across his legs. "Jaaared!" Rachel screamed. She scrambled to his side, kneeling on the soaked, brush-covered ground at his side. Brambles from the wild roses that covered the area stabbed at her knees and legs, but she ignored the painful sensation, her attention completely riveted on her husband. Icy water soaked through her clothing next, chilling her. She ignored that too. Trying to see through the half-blinding tears that she couldn't seem to control, Rachel reached her hands out, placing them gently on Jared's face. He looked dead, Rachel realized. His eyes were closed, and his skin waxen. There was blood everywhere. "Wake up! Jared, please," she begged. Finally, his thickly lashed, hazel-brown eyes opened to mere slits.

"Rachel," his voice was rough, ragged, and weak. "I'm not going... to make it," he told her. "I feel the Lord pulling me home."

"No!" Rachel screamed, bending over him and resting her forehead on his chest. "Don't let that happen. It can't be time yet. Do you hear me? You tell God no, Jared." She sobbed, coughing, all but gasping

for breath as the shock of the moment stole all coherent thought from her. “You can’t leave me,” she cried, a near scream breaking from her. Her chest burned with the agony of that moment’s terror. She lifted her head again, lightly pressed her lips to his, and then pulled back to look into his beautiful eyes. She knew that she had to get a hold of herself and control the panicked hysteria that had all but overtaken her. With a deep, calming breath, she forced herself to gain a bit of composure. Then she spoke to him, her lips touching his. “You just tell God you’ll come later, Jared, please... Don’t do this. Don’t let go. Stay with me...”

Jared lifted a weak hand to her face, his thumb lightly stroking her cheek. Then he smiled a small half-smile. “I won’t tell God anything... of the... kind, Rach. You know... I wouldn’t do that...”