



Betrayal

Book #2, Where the Heart Lives series

Prologue

Spring 1881

The train belched black smoke as it chugged across the wide prairie. In the third railcar were twenty-six orphans and two adults from Dr. Cray's Asylum for Little Wanderers. The children had left Chicago and were headed west for placement, hoping to leave poverty, cold, and hunger behind them.

Technically, the Brennan children weren't orphans. Although their mother had died this past winter, their dad was still alive. Somewhere. Least as far as anyone knew. But when it came to his children, Sweeney Brennan was as good as dead.

Thirteen-year-old Hugh was now the head of the family. He'd promised his mother on her deathbed that he would take care of his younger sisters. He was determined he would keep that promise. Only how? He'd been warned it was unlikely they would find a family to take in all three. Well, he would just have to do some fast talking. If he'd inherited anything from his father it was the gift of gab.

Hugh turned away from the window to look at his sisters. Leaning against each other, Felicia and Diana slept, lulled by the warm temperature inside the railcar. Wisps of Felicia's long hair fell across her face. He leaned forward and brushed it aside.

She opened her eyes, giving him a groggy look. "Are we there?" she whispered.

"Not yet. Soon, I think."

Releasing a sigh, she closed her eyes again.

“I’ll take care of them, Mum. I won’t fail you. You’ll see.”

Chapter One

May 1899

Julia Grace shielded her eyes against the sun as she stood on the bluff and stared south. Far in the distance, a train churned its way west across the plains, a ribbon of smoke trailing from its stack. As always, she wondered about the passengers onboard. What was their destination? Was someone waiting for them once they arrived or were they all alone in the world? Alone ... like her.

A warm wind whistled around her, tugging on her skirt, pulling her hair free from its ribbon. Spring had arrived in Wyoming at last, kissing the mountains and plains with green. The highest peaks were still white with snow, but down below, a harsh winter was forgotten. New life was everywhere, from the shoots of grass in the forest meadows to the leaves unfurling on trees to the baby hawks in the rocky crag overlooking Burt’s Canyon to the calves cavorting in the pastures.

She hated the harsh Wyoming winters. Had since she’d come here as a new bride. Most years it seemed that the cold, snowy, dark season would never end. But spring inevitably came—and with it, Julia’s freedom. Freedom to roam. Freedom to ride. Freedom to dream. Freedom to escape the pain, both physical and emotional.

Only, she didn’t need to escape now. She was free. Really free.

Teddy, her black gelding, nickered.

Julia turned around. “Taking too long, am I?”

The horse bobbed his head.

She laughed. If her brother-in-law were to hear her talking to Teddy, he would declare her insane. Come to think of it, he’d probably like that. It would give him control of the ranch, and he wouldn’t even have to convince her to sell.

She drew a deep breath and forced the unpleasant thoughts from her mind. She wasn’t going to let her husband’s half-brother spoil this beautiful day for her. She knew she would be forced to deal with him again. But not right now.

Julia stepped to Teddy's side and swung into the saddle. By the time she'd collected the reins in one hand, she saw Bandit, her spaniel, racing toward her, bounding over the sagebrush, long tongue flapping like a flag out one side of his mouth.

Laughter bubbled up again. Maybe she was daft, but she didn't care. Sadness and fear had stalked her for too many years. She was tired of it. She refused to allow its return. Rejoice, the Good Book said. Rejoice in every circumstance. She meant to put those words into practice.

She turned Teddy away from the bluff and nudged him into a canter, riding toward the small ranch she'd named Sage-hen. Angus Grace, her husband of eleven years, had mocked her because of the name. Land was land, he'd said. It didn't need a name. But with Angus's death thirteen months ago, Sage-hen had become hers, and she would call it what she pleased. She'd paid for that right in countless ways, including in her own blood.

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Dusk was blanketing the earth by the time Hugh Brennan decided to make camp for the night. After taking care of the horse, he built a fire and warmed a can of beans over it. Not much of a supper, but he'd eaten worse. He'd gone without plenty of nights, too, so he wouldn't complain.

If he was right about how far he'd traveled this week, he should cross over into Idaho by late tomorrow afternoon. Maybe another week or ten days and he would reach the capital city. Of course, if he had the money for train fare, he would be there already, but he was dead broke. Work was hard to come by. Strange, the way people looked at him and seemed to know his history.

With his belly full, he lay on his back and stared at the stars. There'd been plenty of times when he couldn't see the sky, day or night, and he never failed to be thankful that he could see it now. Made the nights spent on the hard ground not seem as long.

Years ago, Hugh had told his sister Felicia that as long as she could see the Big Dipper she would know they weren't far apart, that he would be looking up at the very same constellation and thinking of her and Diana, that he would find his sisters again. He'd been a boy of thirteen when he'd uttered those words of assurance. He was no longer a boy. Eighteen years had come and gone without him keeping his promise. But another week, maybe two, and he might find Felicia at last. Would she be glad to see him? Or had too much time passed for her to care?

Maybe. Maybe not. But he had to try. He owed it to his mother's memory if nothing else.

Felicia Kristoffersen. That's the name his sister went by now. She'd taken the last name of the people who'd raised her. Had they been good to her? Had they loved her? He had his doubts, judging by the so-called relatives he'd met on the farm in eastern Wyoming.

Eighteen years. Maybe it was unrealistic to try to find her after so long. She must have a new and better life. What would she need with a brother like him, coming around to spoil things for her?

Eighteen years. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the memories that threatened. Trying not to smell the stink of a tenement flat. Trying not to imagine himself slipping through a narrow opening into a darkened house that wasn't his own. Trying not to hear the slurred speech of his father, the slamming of iron doors, the harsh orders of guards. Trying not to feel the blows that fell like rain, fist against flesh.

Trying but failing.

This would be another night of bad dreams.

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