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ALL SHE EVER DREAMED

Prologue

Cuba, July 1898

The Stars and Stripes fluttered in the hot breeze above the captured trenches of San Juan Hill. Jeremiah West, his thigh bleeding, dropped to the ground beside the other Rough Riders and doughboys, all of them panting and sweating. Numbly, he looked back at the way they'd come.

The wounded and dead littered the slope. Everywhere, Spaniards and Americans lay in pools of their own blood. A gray haze hung over the earth, and Jeremiah's nostrils burned with the acrid scent of gun smoke. A humming sound filled his ears. The moans of the wounded. There had to be a thousand of them.

He caught sight of the colonel standing over a Spaniard's body and knew Roosevelt was reveling in the victory and the gore. Jeremiah had expected to feel the same. He didn't. Instead, he felt empty, the same haunting emptiness he'd felt for years.

A voice whispered in his heart, *Go home, Jeremiah. It's time you went home.* Yes. It was time. Finally, he would go home again.

Chapter One

Boulder Creek, Idaho, December 1898

Bundled against the frigid day, Sarah McNeal hurried along the boardwalk toward the train station. Her younger brother was due to arrive today, and she needed to be there when he stepped off the train. Tom had been away at boarding school for three years, but it seemed longer to Sarah. She missed him more than she'd expected. And come spring he would leave again, this time for Boston where he would begin his medical training. The next time he returned to Boulder Creek, he would be a doctor.

How proud she was at that thought. Her brother, a physician. Tom was young—only eighteen—and already he was on his way to achieving something meaningful, something he'd dreamed about since he was a boy. She envied him.

When she stepped onto the depot platform, she saw Doc Varney standing close to the building, out of the icy wind that stung her cheeks. She raised her hand and waved.

Doctor Kevin Varney was a distinguished looking man with glasses, gray hair, and a bushy beard. It was he who'd encouraged Tom to pursue higher education so he could practice medicine. Many were the nights when her brother, only eleven or twelve at the time, had gone to Doc Varney's home. He'd studied the medical books that lined the doctor's shelves and had asked the older man question upon question. The physician had been impressed by Tom's intelligence and eagerness to learn, and he'd gone to great lengths to help her brother be admitted to the Elias Crane Science Academy for Boys in San Francisco. Sarah would always be grateful for his kindness.

"I didn't know you'd be here," she said as she stopped beside the doctor.

He smiled at her. "Not come and welcome Tom home? You know me better than that, young lady." His expression sobered. "How's your grandfather?"

"Ornery as ever. It was all I could do to make him wait at home. He kept saying a little fresh air would be good for him."

"Catch pneumonia is what he'd do." The doctor tugged at the collar of his coat. "I can't say the two of us won't do the same."

She nodded in agreement, then gazed down the length of track that stretched toward the southeast end of the valley. She hoped the train would be on time. If it was even a few minutes late, her grandfather might disobey her orders and come to

the station after all.

Hank McNeal, at seventy-four, was as strong-willed as he'd ever been. It was only his body that had weakened. At one time a tall, barrel-chested man, he was now much thinner and somewhat bent with age. He lacked the energy that used to carry him through each day. Still, he refused to retire from his position as sheriff. Sarah had been after him for months to hire a deputy, but so far, according to her grandfather, he hadn't found anyone suitable.

After Sarah's grandmother—Hank's wife of fifty-one years—passed away the previous summer, it had become Sarah's responsibility to make sure her grandfather got the rest he needed. That was never an easy task. Perhaps he would be better behaved while Tom was home. After all, her brother would be a doctor one day. Grandpa would have to listen to him. Wouldn't he?

"There she comes," Doc Varney said.

Sarah focused her gaze once again on the ribbon of track. She saw the billowing cloud of soot shooting into the air moments before the engine came into view. Her excitement surged to the fore once again.

"Do you suppose he's changed much?" She rose on tiptoe, her eagerness making it difficult to stand still.

"Of course he's changed. He left a boy. He's coming home a man."

Doc Varney was right. Tom McNeal *had* become a man. Sarah almost didn't recognize him when he stepped down from the train ten minutes later. Taller by a good eight inches or more and sporting a mustache, Tom looked up and down the platform before his gaze came to rest upon her.

She rushed forward and threw herself into his arms. "Tommy!" She gave him a kiss on the cheek, then stepped back. "Look at you!"

"Like it?" Wearing a cocky grin, he turned his head so she could view the mustache from another angle.

She frowned. "I'm not sure."

Doc Varney stepped up behind her. "I like it, young man. Gives you a look of distinction." He held out his hand. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, sir." Tom shook the older man's hand.

"I've heard good reports about you," the doctor continued, his voice oddly gruff.

"I've done my best, sir."

"I knew you would." Doc Varney cleared his throat as he released Tom's hand. "I won't keep you. It's too blasted cold to stand about, and your grandfather's anxious to see you. When you get settled, come to my office and we'll have a long visit."

"I'll do it."

Sarah slipped her arm through her brother's. "You're home. I can't believe

it. You're finally home."

Tom looked at her again, and his grin returned. "You got even prettier. No wonder Warren's been pestering you to marry him." He shook his head. "It's hard to believe you'll be a married woman in a few weeks."

It was hard for her to believe, too, and she'd rather not think about it. Thoughts of her impending wedding left her feeling unsettled.

Her brother tapped the end of her nose with a gloved finger. "And I always thought you'd wait for that English lord to ride in on his white horse."

She playfully slapped his shoulder, then smiled as she tugged on his arm. "Let's go home. Grandpa can't wait to see you, and I've got lunch ready for you both. I made all your favorites. I know you must be hungry after your long journey."

"You bet I am. Just let me get my luggage."

As Tom turned to pick up his bags, Sarah noticed a man standing in the passenger car doorway. His face was obscured by the deep shadows of the car, yet she sensed he watched her, had been watching for some time. A shiver ran up her spine.

"I'm ready," Tom said, abruptly pulling her attention back to him. "Let's go eat that feast you've worked so hard preparing for your little brother."

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Jeremiah felt a sting of envy as he watched the jubilant homecoming. No one would be on the platform to welcome him back to Boulder Creek the way that young man had been welcomed. Of course, no one knew Jeremiah was coming, but he doubted things would have been different even if he'd sent word ahead.

Hunching his shoulders inside his coat, he stepped to the platform, walked the length of it, then stared toward the center of town. Boulder Creek had changed in the many years he'd been away. He shouldn't be surprised, but he was. Instead of a single street, the town had several. New houses and businesses had sprouted up. From where he stood, he saw a second church at the opposite end of town. There was even a hotel and a bank.

Have I done the right thing coming back?

He turned toward the train again and went after his belongings. There wasn't much. He'd packed everything he owned into a couple of carpetbags. He hoisted them, one in each hand, and headed into town.

Snow crunched beneath his boots as he made his way to Barber Mercantile. Four years ago, Sam Barber, the proprietor, had written to Jeremiah to tell him of his father's death. The news had killed his dreams of ever finding a way to prove himself to his father. Perhaps that was why the rest of Mr. Barber's letter had surprised him. His father's will had left the farm to Jeremiah. Even now, it was difficult to believe. Why him and not his younger brother? Perhaps Sam's wife,

Emma, would be able to answer that question. As he recalled, Mrs. Barber knew everything about everybody in the valley.

A bell chimed above his head as he opened the door to the store. A wave of nostalgia washed over him at the familiar sights and smells. The town might be different, but nothing had changed in this establishment. He could have been a kid again, stopping by the mercantile on his way home from school. He knew where the pickle barrel would be and the jar of licorice, too.

A woman behind the counter turned from the shelves. She was too young to be Emma Barber, yet there was something familiar about her.

“Hello. May I help you?” she asked.

He set his carpetbags on the floor near the door, then removed his hat as he strode forward. “I’m looking for Sam Barber.”

“I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “Mr. Barber died almost two years ago. Is there something—” She stopped and stared. “Why, you’re Jeremiah West.” She placed a hand on her collarbone. “I’m Leslie. Leslie Barber. Well, it’s Leslie Blake now. I don’t suppose you remember me at all. I was a child when you went away. How long has it been?”

“Close to fourteen years.”

“Land o’ Goshen! Is it really? I can hardly believe it. You must not recognize the town. Boulder Creek isn’t like it used to be when we were children. The railroad’s come through and we’ve got our own hotel and that new Methodist Church. The school’s about bursting at the seams, what with all the children everybody’s got. I was saying to Annalee... You remember my sister, don’t you? Well, I was saying to her the other day how much everything’s changed. We’ve watched it happen, but it must be a real surprise to someone who’s been away as long as you.”

It wasn’t so much that he remembered Leslie as that she reminded him of her mother. Plump and warm-natured, Emma Barber had loved to chatter whenever someone was in the store, the same way Leslie was doing now.

Suddenly, she stopped, then said, “I’m real sorry about your wife. And your pa. I lost both my parents. I know how it feels.”

“Your ma’s gone, too?”

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. I remember her well. She was a kind woman.”

The door joining the living quarters to the mercantile opened, drawing both their gazes.

“George, come here,” Leslie called, her smile returning, although not as bright. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” As soon as the man was close enough, she reached out and took hold of his hand, then faced Jeremiah again. “This is my husband, George Blake. George, this is Jeremiah West, Warren’s older

brother.”

George shook Jeremiah’s hand. “Good to meet you.”

He nodded his own greeting.

“Are you back to stay?” Leslie asked.

“Don’t know for sure. I think so.”

“Well, then. Tell us what you’ve been doing all these years.”

What had he been doing? Running. Trying to forget. Staying alone so he wouldn’t feel the loss—or the guilt. Living but not living.

He couldn’t say any of that, but he might as well tell her what he could. Leslie wouldn’t be the last person to ask the question. He’d better get used to it. “After Marta died, I moved around a lot. I worked cattle, did some bartending, even spent time with the railroad before going to work in a factory in New York City. Last couple of years, I was in the army.”

“The army? Were you in the war?”

Scenes of the battlefield flashed in his head. “Yes. I was in the war.”

“Were you hurt bad?” She glanced at his leg.

Hard as he tried to hide it, people noticed his limp. But he didn’t want anyone’s pity. Especially not in Boulder Creek. “No. Not bad.” He put his hat on. “I’d better get over to the livery and see about renting a rig. Warren’s not expecting me, and I need to get to the farm before dark.”

Leslie shook her head. “You won’t find your brother at the farm. He’s got rooms above his carpentry shop, right down the street.”

“A carpentry shop?”

“He makes furniture. Real good at it, too.” She paused, then added, “He never mentioned you were coming home.”

“He didn’t know. We haven’t been in touch.”

He saw surprise flicker across her face, and he turned to leave the mercantile before she could ask more questions.

Chapter Two

Jeremiah read the sign above the shop: WEST CARPENTRY. So this was his kid brother's place. It hadn't occurred to him that Warren would do something besides work the farm. But he supposed it was no more odd than their father leaving the place to Jeremiah, the wayward son.

He opened the door to the shop and stepped inside. In the dim light, he saw a man run a hand over the surface of a table in the back of the long, narrow room.

"Be with you in a minute." His brother's voice had deepened. Not unexpected after fourteen years. He'd been a skinny youth back then. He was taller now, too. Probably as tall as Jeremiah. Even bent over the table, his height was obvious. This was not the boy of Jeremiah's memory.

He cleared his throat as he took a step deeper into the shop.

Warren turned and squinted.

Jeremiah supposed he was nothing but a dark silhouette with the light from the windows at his back. "Hello, Warren."

The squint turned to a frown.

"Have I changed that much?"

The silence stretched into what felt like an eternity before Warren said, "Jeremiah?"

"Yeah. It's me. You've changed too."

"I didn't expect to ever see you again."

Jeremiah's gaze traveled around the shop, his eyes now adjusted to the dim light. "A business of your own. Dad must have been proud of you."

"I didn't have the shop until after he died." His brother took a step forward. "What brought you back to Boulder Creek?"

"It was time. I heard you're staying in town. Is there room for me at the farm?"

"The house is empty." A muscle flexed in his jaw. "I put the farm up for sale."

Jeremiah heard the challenge in Warren's voice and chose not to respond at once. Instead, he set his carpetbags on the floor and walked around the shop, stopping to run his fingers over the tables, bedsteads, and chairs that filled the room. When he'd come full circle, he faced his brother. "You can't sell the farm. It's legally mine. Dad left it to me."

"So what if he did? You weren't here. You never came back, never wrote.

For all I knew, you were dead. That made it mine.”

“I’m not dead.”

“I need the money. I’m getting married in a few weeks.”

“Married?”

“Yes.” Warren spun around and walked to the table at the back of the shop.

“Why’d you return?”

“Sorry it’s inconvenienced you.”

His brother didn’t look at him.

Jeremiah drew a deep breath. “Tell you what. I’ll pay you half what the property’s worth. That should help set you up with your bride.”

“You’d do that?”

“Yeah. I’d do that. Half the farm should have gone to you anyway.”

“I guess that’s fair. As fair as it could ever be.”

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Sarah carried the dish of steaming vegetables into the dining room and set it in the center of the large table. “I’m sorry Warren couldn’t join us for lunch, but he’ll be here for supper.”

“I don’t mind having you and Grandpa to myself.” Tom smiled at her. “Or the food to myself either. You don’t know how much I missed home cooking. They didn’t serve meals like this at the academy, I can promise you that.”

The compliment warmed her heart. “Grandma taught me the best she could. I hope this is as good as hers.” She settled onto her chair. “Why don’t you say grace?”

Tom nodded, then bowed his head. “We thank You, Father, for bringing us back together. Bless this food You’ve provided from Your bounty. Amen.”

“Amen,” Sarah and Grandpa whispered in unison.

Tom glanced at them both, a mischievous glint in his eyes, then reached for the platter of roast beef. “I’m starved.”

Sarah laughed. As a little boy, Tom had been constantly hungry. He’d pestered their grandmother for something to eat from the moment he woke up until it was time to go to bed. With those sweet memories playing in her head, she watched her brother heap mashed potatoes onto his plate, then smother beef and potatoes in gravy. He might have changed in other ways, but his boyish appetite remained.

Grandpa accepted the platter from Tom. “This is a treat. Sarah brings lunch to me or my deputy at the jail most days of the week. It’s always good, but nothing like this. She’s trying to spoil you, Tom.”

“It’s working.” Her brother poured gravy over the generous portion of roast beef on his plate.

Sarah beamed with pleasure.

Tom passed the gravy boat to Grandpa. “Did I tell you Dr. Crane visited me at the academy when he was in San Francisco? He told me all about the institute.”

Grandpa shook his head. “No, you didn’t tell us that.”

“I’ve never met anyone like him. He’s dynamic. Truly brilliant. He’s the best teacher of medicine in the country. No matter what you ask him, he never makes you feel foolish, like you should already know the answer. Boys at the academy talk about him with awe, and now I know why. I can’t believe I’m going to study under him. There were only a few in my class who were selected for the institute, and I’m one of them.”

Sarah studied her brother as he spoke. Except for the mustache, he resembled their father at around the same age. She knew because her parents’ wedding photo was on the table beside her bed, and she looked at it almost daily.

Tom gestured with his hands as he shared more stories. They would soon be the hands of a doctor. Hands that would be used to soothe and heal. Oh, how proud their parents would be of the man Tom had become.

Would they be equally proud of her? Or would she be a disappointment to them? Her schooling had ended when she was sixteen. She’d never traveled farther than Boise City, never seen an ocean, never been to any of the large cities in the east nor to any foreign country. All she knew of the world was what she’d read in books. She was nearly twenty-two and unmarried while most of her friends had husbands and families of their own.

Of course, she could have been married long before this. Warren West had first proposed to her when she was sixteen. She’d turned him down because she wanted to travel the world, to see places far beyond this valley. She’d wanted something . . . more. In addition, the man she’d imagined marrying had been so different from Warren. A handsome nobleman who rode up on a magnificent horse or perhaps a brooding hero like Mr. Rochester or a proud one like Mr. Darcy. Never once had she imagined Warren West.

Undaunted, he’d proposed again when Sarah turned seventeen. Another refusal. That year, she’d thought she might study medicine, like her brother. She could be a nurse and work with Tom. That would be her ticket to new adventures.

When Warren asked her again on her eighteenth birthday, she’d told him maybe. She knew by then she didn’t want to be a nurse, and the longed-for travel was beyond her reach. As for her romantic fantasies, she’d decided they were foolish. She would never meet an English lord or a European count or a Mr. Rochester or a Mr. Darcy.

Still, she hadn’t accepted that proposal. Or the one after that.

“*Marry Warren,*” her grandmother had urged. “*He’s a good man. He’ll provide well for you. Don’t waste your life wishing for things you cannot have.*”

And so, when Warren proposed once again on Sarah’s twenty-first birthday,

she agreed to marry him in one year. Her grandmother had passed away by then, but at least Sarah knew the decision would have made Grandma happy.

But am I happy?

“What do you think, Sarah?”

Her brother’s question brought her attention abruptly to the present. “I’m sorry. What did you—”

“Daydreaming, sis?” He glanced at their grandfather. “Remember when we used to go fishing at your favorite spot on the river and she’d sit on those rocks and stare off into space, dreaming about the Eiffel Tower and Buckingham Palace and pretending she was royalty or something? She had that same look on her face just now.”

“I remember.” Grandpa turned a fond gaze on her. “And I wish I could’ve made all those dreams come true for her.”

She felt a tightness in her chest. Whatever would she do if he were to die? He’d been the rock she depended on all her life. Shaking off the melancholy thought, she said, “If they’d come true, you would have to call me Lady Sarah whenever you visited me in the castle.”

Tom hopped to his feet, swept off an imaginary hat, and executed an elaborate bow. “Lady Sarah, how kind of you to allow your lowly kinfolk to join you for lunch in your beautiful castle.”

“Do sit down, my good fellow.” She stuck her nose in the air and sent him a censoring glance. “The servants shall clear the table soon, and you’re liable to trip them.”

Both men laughed.

She grinned, concerns for her grandfather—and her approaching wedding day—forgotten.

“I’ll help you clear.” Tom picked up a few dirty dishes. “And I promise not to trip any of the servants.”

She pushed away the niggling doubts about her bridegroom and led the way into the kitchen.

ALL SHE EVER DREAMED

Learn more at robinleehatcher.com