Prologue

 The wind outside was still, and the scent of sweet-grass drifted across the air, softly touching her senses. It was April seventh, nineteen hundred and three, a Tuesday, and things were as unstoppable as the looming day to follow.

 The room was quiet, with only her sitting within it. The atmosphere drifted calmly as the minutes on the clock kept ticking in the background of her confinement.  Her thoughts remained steady in the days preceding; however, they had become a whirlwind of fear and resentment, but it made no difference. After weeks of desperate pleas, nothing would have stopped this day, no more than halting the moon for an everlasting night.

 Everything she would be bringing with her lay within one medium-sized suitcase, resting along the wall to her right, nearest the door. Besides its worn leather case, nothing much stood in the room. A painted picture of Jesus's crucifixion was to her left, with a small window just next to it. Before her, a mirror, small table, and chair, from which she hadn't moved since arriving, nearly forty minutes ago.

 She had put on the dress, white of course, but she felt little to no virtue in it. Imagining the fabric turning darker and darker with every step she would take into her new life. Hating its perfect white emptiness, seeing its blank canvas fill with decisions that weren't hers and a future which she didn't want.

 Facing into the mirror, her empty eyes stared back, having no more tears to shed, nor the hope to let them fall.  In dreams of something better, and in the deepest part of her heart, a hope for love to someday grow. Or at least acceptance and appreciation.  She fell far away, into the depths of the mirror again picturing her dress fading, turning darker, an ugly rough gray in its unhappiness and surrender.

 Her hand made its move in a desperate attempt to push her along from her horrible imaginings. Grabbing the brush resting on the table before her, she wasted no time in running it through her hair. Its soft bristles weaving smoothly through the deep red of her looped strands, sweeping her soft curls down, over her shoulder and off, watching as their light spring bounced back again.

 Her hands no longer trembled; after fourteen days, she had learned to control it, the first three days after the announcement being the hardest. After nearly five weeks of negotiations, she had hoped things would have ceased, but on March twenty-fifth, everything fell apart.

 She let the brush fall through her hair one last time and made her eyes drift from the depths of the mirror and towards her reflection. There was no light looking back at her. Her face was tired, the bags under her eyes, giving away her restless nights, resulting in her need to hide it. Her hand moved smoothly. Setting down her brush on the crochet tablecloth and picking up the puff which sat within a tin of pale powder—the second of four items atop the table.

 Lightly, she pressed the soft cotton into the fine powder and swiftly brought the thinly coated puff to her face, gently patting it below each eye. The dark circles slowly began to fade. Wishing the illusion this beautiful little tin held would be able to cover up her sadness and fear was a regretful one. Knowing nothing would change her fate, not a heavy coat of camouflage or anything else.

 Placing the puff back into the round tin, she moved to the left and paused before grabbing the third item on the table. Its pearls and stones still dazzled. Remembering her eyes on it as a child within her Mother’s small jewelry box, softly running her fingers over the smooth gems and pointed ends. The fine comb still felt strong and heavy in her hand. It made her think to the many times she had held it precisely within her tiny fingers as a young girl, waiting and wanting to place it within her untamed red hair.

 Her fingers touched it as they used to, bringing it towards her right side and up to her hair. With her right hand, she pulled back her soft curls while her left swept the jewelled comb up, pulling the red strands away from her ear and up off her neck. It held her thick locks firmly, having waited so many years to do so. She'd dreamed of this day and its coming, about the love she would find and the life she would have. All that waiting, and yet, in her heart, she knew everything about this supposedly perfect day was wrong.

 She turned her eyes away from her reflection and down to the table and the items lying across it. Everything used but one. A small black tube sat on its own to her left, smooth and sleek from the light of the window, its golden ring catching the sun's gaze, making it shimmer.

 Slowly she brought her hand to it and reaching out with her first two fingers and thumb; she picked up the small, glossy tube. A cool chill still held in the smooth polished black, even in a room that had already been warmed by the morning sun, somehow giving her the small reassurance of possibilities.

 It had been one of the only things she'd chosen for herself and, despite everything, she absolutely loved it. Clasping it in her hand, she hoped to take in all that it had to offer, to make her strong, to give her something to stand on and help her get through the next fifty years.

 Slowly grasping at the top of the black metal tube, she gently lifted, revealing the beautiful gold finish on the inside. Twisting the base, the true beauty held within came forward. A deep ruby shade that spoke boldness and strength and, for a moment, gave her the belief that she could do it, that she could walk down the aisle and into her life-to-be.

 She brought the tube forward, the colour sweeping over her lips smoothly, and in that few seconds, the reflection in the mirror had changed. Its bold red pigments shone back at her from lips, which, when capable, gave the most wonderful and beautiful of smiles, but for today the lipstick would do. Twisting the base and sending the lipstick back down, she placed the cap back atop the golden cylinder. Locking it away, she wondered when or if she'd ever use it again.

Her hand shook as she set it back down on the table and rested her wrist against the hard-wooden surface before her, pausing until the shaking had passed.  Her gaze had also fallen towards the table, watching as her hand still flinch against the faded white crochet. When it had stopped, she placed it within her lap, sending her other hand to hold — trying to keep her eyes from going back to the mirror and onto the reflection upon its glass. It would have to do all of it, and the only way she was going to live through it was to stop battling the current and follow it.

 Her eyes were still empty, but since he hadn't glanced at her more than five times since she'd known him, she didn't believe he would see anything wrong. Besides, none of those times had he looked towards her face. Certain this day, her parents wouldn't either.

 The powder created enough coverage on her dark circles. And her lips would be the focal point. Boh would distract from the sorrow visible within her face, forced to hide the truth while her heart was breaking.

 There was a light knock at the door, grateful to look away from the mirror and turn herself back in her chair to face the door four feet behind her. She knew her mother would walk in with or without an invitation.

 She waited and watched as the doorknob turned and slowly opened, seeing the back of her Mother’s head first, as she was talking to someone out in the hall.  She didn't get her hair from her Mother, no Charlotte's hair was fine, straight and nearly down to her waist. It was also dark, almost black. She was English blood and was very proud of the fact. Her grandfather had brought his family to America to seek fortune back in the 1870s.

 There were other things she had in common with her mother, like her stubbornness, taste, and rationality. But what people only ever saw in her was her Father. One look at Owen would tell you those fiery locks had come from him. He had come from a well-known Irish family. Arriving in America as a young boy with his parents, completely unknown and ready to start their new lives in the new world.

 A sigh fell through her lips. Sure that both of them had had a choice at some point or another, to stay or go. But watching her mother come into the room, she knew her future was laid out before her.

 Charlotte stood before her, hands clasped in front of her waist, her outfit, simple navy with a lovely pendant bringing the only bit of light to the outfit. Even in all her reserve and stature, she was a beautiful woman, something the years hadn't stolen.

 She rose from her chair, knowing her mother would wait until she'd seen her dress and makeup in detail, hoping her Mother wouldn't notice her legs shaking as she stepped forward. Fortunately, the long gown had kept Charlotte from seeing it. She watched as her Mother’s head rose and fell, carefully taking in the fantasy and, giving her head a slight nod, Charlotte was satisfied. Doing well herself, to hide the utter turmoil boiling inside her.

 Standing before her, she watched as her Mother's arms came out, and her feet came forward, wrapping around her for a short, but tight hug. She hugged her Mother back, knowing she'd done all she could to stop it, but women never really had any part in these things, men made sure of it. Pulling away, she kept her face hidden, not wanting her mother to see her sadness and lack of will.

 Charlotte didn't fight her, feeling much the same as her daughter, both afraid of what they would see as doubt and disappointment. Breathing a sigh, Charlotte turned back towards the door and into the mostly empty front room, stopping just within the door-frame to look back at her daughter.

 "It’s time, Marie.”

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 The small church could only hold about sixty people, a few more if they chose to stand, but in the west, in these small towns, people were few and far between. Today, only a dozen had come to witness this union. With her parents and his father, Daniel, and brother, Abraham, the place was more empty than full, but most weddings were like that. For things other than Sunday Church and a weekly trip to town, there weren’t many reasons for people to leave their homestead.

 The building had been standing more than a few decades now and had kept its sturdy shape. With the walls still holding their bright colour of white in the odd place, letting those from far see its white purity from many miles.

 Stepping out from a small room they used for many such occasions, Marie came again into the gathering room at the front end of the Church. Owen was standing just before the doors, waiting patiently for her. Walking closer and standing next to him, he felt her presence and turned to her, smiling, but his eyes couldn’t hold hers. Facing the doors, Owen’s arm moved around hers, catching her at the elbow and bringing his hand back over towards his stomach, locking them together.

 He didn’t look at her. He couldn't; he only stared forward, into the back of the doors leading into the hall, and to his daughter’s new life. He had been able to go all this time without feeling the sting of shame and guilt, but, at this moment, he feared if his eyes laid on her, he would weep.

 She was still a young woman, and he knew she had a few years yet to find someone more fitting, but after being in town as long as they’d been, he knew things didn’t change that quickly. Nor did the opportunity to meet someone you could form a bond.

 “I’ll be inside.” Charlotte’s voice came from the right, watching her husband hook around her daughter's arm, but now she wanted away. Turning, Charlotte placed her hand on the door and pushed it open, walking through and without stop. Pacing down the aisle, she took her seat within the front pew without looking back.

 Owen’s grip tightened around Marie's arm, feeling his remorse getting the better of him, unable to tell her he was proud of her acceptance and understanding. It was not how he wanted it to be for her, but ultimately believed it was for the best.

 There was a shuffle of feet on the other side of the doors. Followed by the realization their time was growing short and that everything was about to change. Each of them thought about the set, but uncertain, future ahead, both accompanied by visions saturated with foreboding thoughts. His seventeen-year-old daughter was about to be married and, tonight would be this man’s wife. She would be sharing a home, a life and a bed with the man at the end of the aisle, a man she would soon call her husband.

 The doors split away, opening wide to the hall and the few people within. Gradually they stood up and turned towards the bride and her father, waiting and watching.

 With one more squeeze to her arm, her father stepped forward.

 Again, her legs shook, hidden beneath her dress, but she followed him, walking down the well-worn aisle. Everything in her mind seemed to speed up and, at the same time, slow down, making her feel as though she would faint. But her feet keep moving forward, in pace with her father, never faltering.

 The few people she passed all looked distorted. Unable to recognize any faces, a sudden black ball of fear well up within her. Forcing her feet to keep moving, if only to get by their shadowed faces.

 Reaching the end of the aisle, she took her last step alongside her father. Feeling him give her a small kiss on the cheek, Marie pulled her arm away from him, and he reluctantly let go of her, taking a step back and finding his seat next to his wife.

 Marie’s eyes followed him a moment, before placing them on the man standing next to her, holding her gaze only a moment. He had on a dark-blue suit with his hair combed back. He wasn’t a bad-looking man, but looks were a small part of the contract they were about to set out upon.

 He saw her still looking at him, but he did not turn to her again, keeping his eyes straight ahead with his hands clenched together in front of him. He was nervous and was trying not to show it, even though it had been as he wished. Having watched her grow from a young girl into the beautiful woman she’d become, he had set this plan aside for when the time was right.

But even his preparedness didn’t stop him from being nervous on his wedding day. Given the fact he was thirteen years her senior, he couldn’t help but let his head get in the way. He may have been too old for her, but he wasn’t too old to get married. Nor to the woman of his choosing. He had worked hard to earn that position.

He was a born and bred American, his parents had a noteworthy fortune in the new world, and as a young boy, he knew he would acquire the same. He had owned an expansive amount of land and was anxious to start a ranch there, and more, to have a wife and children around to help him do it.

 Doing his best not to let his eyes fall on her face as he stared down to his side and towards her right hand, reaching out stiffly and taking it in his left before turning back to face their priest.

 He never looked at her face, and the hope of his hand about hers deflated.  The room grew perfectly silent as the Priest raised his arms to them, everyone hearing the man take in a great breath.

 “Dearly beloved. We are gathered here today to join Marie Alice Fitzgerald and Lewis Archie Bensworth in the bonds of holy matrimony.”

 The Holy Man's sudden words echoed throughout the closed room and came rushing into her ears, giving her legs one more chance to tremble against the fabric of her dress. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deeply, but calmly. She wanted to run, she wanted to get away, but mostly she wanted to love the man who would now and forever be standing beside her.

 Instead, she stood still, not giving herself the chance to engage her rattling legs, and solemnly turned to face their priest and waited to become this man's wife.

Chapter 1

 It was high noon, and the heat of the day would still gain a few degrees before the cool of the evening would take its grip over the land. But she had been through harder days.  They had lived for over nine years on a large piece of land out in central Wyoming, having travelled from northern Nebraska right after their wedding.

 It was a tranquil piece of land, not completely barren, nor lacking in water. They had a well and many strong, standing buildings to use within the property, and Lewis made sure to use them all. They had chickens and horses, and, for a few years, they’d even had pigs, but Lewis had opted-out after three seasons.

 The house was built several years before they moved in. Even without inhabitants, it had kept up against the elements. The stable needed some repairs, as did a few of the more secluded buildings, but after the first year, things were running smoothly.

 Her life was quiet, with Lewis was often away in the fields. Leaving her to deal with the daily chores, tending the house, animals and garden. Being sure to always have a meal to set in front of Lewis when he’d finished for the day. It took some time before she had come to terms with her new life. Once she had, she’d built a home for Lewis and herself, and still pondered to know if she made him happy, or if he genuinely cared for her.

Almost ten years had passed since the day they said, ‘I do.’ She couldn’t help but wonder if Lewis would do something to celebrate, even if the previous nine years had yet to yield any such merit. Still, she couldn’t stop herself from feeling a small spark of excitement trying to ignite itself somewhere deep inside. She thought of her ruby lipstick and the green dress still wrapped within its tissue paper resting in the bottom-right drawer of her vanity. Of the softness of its fabric and imagined it against her skin. Marie thought of wearing that green dress, and red lip-colour excited her, and she wondered if Lewis would enjoy it as well, only hoping things, that day, would bring her joy and not tears.

 Their home lie over seven miles from Ashill. A small but prosperous town five hours from anywhere or anything within the dusty northern center of America. The town wasn’t lacking, having more than fifty people within its population, and almost everyone one hundred miles out knew about this small place of refuge.

 Over time, she’d come to meet most of her fellow townsfolk, but wasn’t sure if she could call anybody a ‘dear’ or ‘close’ friend. And even though the woman she accompanied, rarely had good news, Marie never missed the opportunity to join in the gossip. It was her only option for conversation.

 At home, speech was more than deficient, and coming into town on Fridays was her only vocal outlet. Lewis wasn’t much of a conversationalist, nor did he enjoy sharing. They had never found a solid connection, and, for more than a few years now, she’d yearned for something more. More than anything, Marie wanted someone to love. But, having endured nearly a decade of lying next to her husband every night, she worried her time was slipping away, as was the chance of having a child.

The only days she looked forward too now, the ones where she mounted her horse, Jasper, and rode away, leaving the ranch behind her. It only happened twice a week, attending Church on Sundays with Lewis, which didn’t often count as freedom, and Fridays. On those days, she had her chance to go unattended into town for supplies and groceries. Not to mention being able to leave the shackles of her life, if only for a few hours.

 Closing her eyes from the hot midday sun, she leaned against the hoe she held in her hands. Usually, her garden work took some of her cares away, but today, it only seemed to add to them. Often, her daydreaming would fill the void with some mild form of stimulation, and she would work until the sun was to her back, but today would be a short day, she knew it.

Gripping the handle, she raised her head and straightened her aching back, feeling more than one place sharply object to the decision. Her eyes fell closed, and she tried to rid her mind off the doubts and woes of her own life and attempted to fix an idea of the future.  She let herself dream, refusing to let her imagination take her too long from the ground or away from this barren land, to someplace green and exciting. It wasn’t something she wanted to do to herself, to long for such an escape, so she held back, keeping her dreams simple and modest, always finding them happier than real life.

 Slamming the hoe into the hard turf at her feet sent the strong realization achingly up her arms: real-life had no escape. That’s how it went, for many more people than just herself, seeing it in her day-to-day life. It was in the behaviour and gestures of other couples and, under her roof, things never appearing as rosy as she wished they were.

 She thought ahead again to their tenth wedding anniversary and her twenty-eighth birthday later this spring, both staring her in the face. The idea that things would ever change felt old and broken. With so many years continuing along the same path, this life surrounded her in a haze of repetition. It had become more like a cage, a loveless, empty cage.

 By four o’clock, she’d gone into the house to wash, leaving what remained of the gardening for another afternoon, only stopping to throw some grain for the chickens. With two hours before the sun’s heat would finally release the day from its exhausting grasp, she stepped inside.

 The air was cool and still, the light sting from the skin on her face giving thanks for being free from the blistering outdoors. The room was large, a fireplace with two comfortable seats before it, the kitchen, stove, table and chairs. She walked past all of it and into the bedroom.

 Marie moved to her washbasin, which rested on a small vanity against the north wall beside their bed. She unbuttoned her top three buttons and cuffs, then poured some cold water from the pitcher into the bowl. Setting the half-empty pitcher down on the table-top, she placed her hands into the water, watching as the dirt pulled away from her palms and fingers. The water gained a dark tint, losing its crisp, clean view to the base of the bowl.

 When her hands ran clean, she reached for one of the two washcloths, which hung across a bar at the back of the vanity, one blue and one rust. She grabbed the blue one, watching as the cloth slowly fell into the water, before lifting to the mirror and onto the tired and dirty face within it.

 She could see the lines becoming more worn upon her skin and worried the fair glow of her cheeks would disappear within the next few years.  Turning back down to the bowl, she reached into the water and pulled out the blue cloth and rung out the excess water, listening to the gentle droplets fall into their collective.

The cloth felt refreshing against her skin, as the dirt and sweat pulled from her face. She pondered on how she’d felt the same about it every time, as though she could wipe away her sadness and maybe clean away enough to find something bright inside. Lowering her hands, she slid the cloth back into the water and again out into the air, where she rang it out. She brought the cool material to the back of her neck, sweeping along her hairline and down her spine.

 Her eyes went back to the mirror, and she peered over herself. Turning her head, she checked over her hair and saw the back-right side needed some attention, noticing more than a few curls that had come loose from her braid and bun. Finished with her washcloth, she set it back upon the rod on the vanity. Both hands moved to the back of her head and into her hair. Finding a few pins and quickly removing them, her bun began to loosen, releasing the tight pull of her hair.

A large, thick, red braid fell against her back, swaying slightly, to and fro, before her left hand came back and swept it forward over her shoulder.  There was an orange ribbon tied at the end, holding her braid together and, as she pulled at its end, she could see the curls trapped within its hold bounce-free and become twice as thick. She would braid it again and place it back in a bun, knowing that was how Lewis liked it.

 It was just before sunset when Lewis came home. Hearing Jackson’s hooves pounding against the ground as they approached- picturing his black mane and tail flowing along behind him as he ran. Soon Jackson’s hoofbeats slowed. They had reached the stable, and Lewis would only be a few more minutes with Jackson before coming inside. Her body was about the kitchen, waiting for the door to open and see her husband walk in. Still, before she heard his feet come up the porch, she distinguished another set of hooves approaching.

 Turning away from the stove, she lifted her eyes out the kitchen window. Lewis came walking out of the stables, waiting for their guest to come into view of the window, certain it would be one of their neighbours. Around here, that’s how the town survived, with any big news coming straight by horseback and word of mouth.

 Leaning in and getting a better view, Marie saw Mr. Stealer ride up and stop just near the stable by her husband, standing just beyond the doors. Looking out the window, she watched as Raymond spoke with Lewis, patiently waiting to see if Lewis would give any sign as to what Ray’s visit was about. Good or bad.

 Lewis’s face showed no sign of emotion, even when responding to Mr. Stealer. He nodded his head, letting his ratty cowboy hat flap weakly as he did.  She watched a few seconds longer and shifted to the right of the window to watch as Mr. Stealer rode away.

 She turned back to her work and away from her husband, who didn’t move for a long spell, finally facing back into the stable to finish up with Jackson. He would be a few minutes yet, giving her time to double-check all that was cooking, ensuring it would be ready once Lewis came in.

 He burst through the door, Marie only hearing his footsteps hitting the porch a second before he’d done so. Stepping inside, he kicked off his boots, not bothering to watch where they landed. She kept her back to him, listening as each boot hit the floor in different locations. She wanted to sigh but forcing herself to hold it in. They would stay that way until she changed it. Placing them neatly before the door for him every morning, something she had done ever since they’d been living in their house.

 He tore off his worn hat, placing it on a hook on the back of the door as his left hand closed it, locked with a click the moment it latched. Walking over to the table, Lewis sat down at its head, using one of the two chairs, which sat patiently at either end. She finished up his plate, making sure everything was left hot until the last second.

 Marie placed the last piece of breaded chicken onto his plate. She decided to take the opportunity of his appetite to ask about Mr. Stealer’s visit. As she turned around to him, holding his plate in hand, her words came freely, coming along his left side.

 “What did Mr. Stealer have to say?” Standing next to him, she set his plate down and brought her hands together in front of her waist, waiting.  She didn’t move, not yet, not until making sure he was satisfied with his meal before going to retrieve her own. Besides, the more time passed, the better her chance for an answer between his many mouthfuls.

               “Raymond…” Trailing off with only one word, she turned, moved to the stove to make her plate, hoping it would give him enough time to swallow and add to his plethora of words.  Coming back to the table and taking her seat at the opposite end, she waited, turning from her food to look at him.

 His fork dove into his mashed potatoes, sweeping a large scoop up and into his open mouth. His eyes lifted and looked across to his wife, then back down to his meal, taking another second to enjoy his meal and the silence. His fork went back to the plate for the chicken before choosing to speak. “Dick Roland passed away.”