

Chapter 1

Stranded in the Ghost Town

Emma could feel her head nodding to the rhythmic clopping of Cinnamon's hooves hitting the packed dirt. Whisps of strawberry blonde hair had escaped from underneath her hat, and she swatted at the strands listlessly. She was on day three of the journey and had barely slept. The combination of the overcast sky and her solitary journey was making her drowsy. She blinked rapidly a few times and rubbed her bright blue eyes. She would take a break at the next town she came to, which didn't seem to be approaching any time soon based on the sparseness of the land around her. The road was reduced to hard packed dirt, and the fields on either side of her were barren. The grass was dry and brown, all of it overgrown. To her left, what looked like an old field of corn stood standing, but the stalks were dry and crunchy-looking. If Emma had to guess, those stalks had been left standing a few seasons past their last harvest.

Emma rubbed her eyes and blinked rapidly again. She paused, hand frozen in place, as what sounded like a crack underneath the wagon of her stagecoach punctuated the air over the clopping of Cinnamon's hooves. She looked at Cinnamon, whose beautiful brown ears were perked up on her head. Cinnamon had definitely heard the noise as well. Emma told herself she just had to get to the next town, wherever that was.

"Keep it up, Cinnamon. Good girl," Emma cooed softly to the horse. Cinnamon shook her mane as if to say, "I got this" and kept trotting forward.

Cinnamon had carried the stagecoach not too much farther when Emma heard the same cracking noise underneath the wagon, this time closer to the front. Emma gritted her teeth and said a quick little prayer for safe arrival in the next town. Just on the horizon, Emma could make

out the outlines of a few buildings and what looked like a huge mansion on top of a hill, way off in the distance.

A faded sign on the side of the road, mostly hidden in the overgrown weeds, read “Onyx Falls One Mile.” Emma felt a weight lift from her shoulders, and she sat up straighter in her seat. The next town was only a mile away. Even if she did break down out here, worst case scenario she could unhitch Cinnamon and ride her into the town. Emma took another deep breath and shimmied backwards in her seat, which caused another cracking sound to emanate from underneath the wagon. Emma sat very still, holding the reigns and barely moving her head to glance at her surroundings.

When Cinnamon’s trots brought the wagon to the outskirts of town, Emma looked around in disbelief. This was not what she had asked for in her little prayer to get her to the next town safely. This could barely be called a town. The dirt road she had been traveling on had led her straight here, to the edge of the town. The road, packed hard with dirt, was threatened by an outcrop of weeds and flowers, or weeds that looked like flowers, for as far as Emma could see. From what she could tell, this road continued straight through the town and clean to the other side. Buildings loomed on either side of the street, the faded paint chipped and peeling. Windows had been busted out sporadically in some of the buildings here and there, and most of the windows had not been patched up or replaced.

“Easy, Cinnamon,” Emma said lowly, giving the reigns a light pull. Cinnamon slowed down and tossed her head from side to side as if she too could not believe this was the town where they would be stopping.

All the storefronts looked like they had at one point been lively and bustling, and the cracked, slanted sidewalks proved that people had once needed to get from place to place in this town. All of the windows and doors were covered in a layer of dirt and dust. The dressmaker's shop still had mannequins in the window, dressed in a style Emma recognized from several years ago. Emma looked around in amazement, her bright blue eyes taking in the sights of what had once had to have been a once beautiful town. The top of the general store had an ornate architectural design running across the roof. Several sections of this decorative piece were broken off, and the few shelves in the store that Emma could see had odds and ends of supplies-a few canned goods and what looked to be an opened sack of flour.

Emma was trying to peer into the dirty windows of the store to see if there was anything she could use when a curtain moved in the window adjacent to the store. Emma's breath caught in her throat and she felt her face flush red. She felt like she had been caught, but she reminded herself that technically there was no crime in looking in a store window, and certainly no crime in looking in the window of a store that was no longer in operation. The curtain twitched again, and Emma pulled on Cinnamon's reigns to make her stop.

Cinnamon halted, then stomped her foot and let out a huff of indignation.

"I know, I know," Emma said. "I don't think it's worth stopping here either."

Emma wasn't entirely sure she believed herself. She had just seen the curtain move, right? Surely that meant someone was here? Someone living in this ghost town was definitely better than the alternative option, which was ghosts and spirits living in these abandoned buildings. Emma stared at the faded red checked curtains, then let her eyes drift upwards. The

sign on the building read “Maverick’s Saloon.” Most of the letters in the name had faded, making the sign look at first glance like “Ma’s Saloon,” which made Emma smile to herself.

The curtain moved back and a face appeared in the window. Emma felt her cheeks redden again, this time with embarrassment that she had been caught grinning at the seemingly vacant building. The curtain fell back and the door next to the curtain opened immediately. Out stepped a tall man wearing cowboy boots, brown pants, and an apron. He was handsome in a rugged way, with dark shaggy hair and a five o’clock shadow of a beard on his face. He had a small scar on his left cheek, a half-moon that was barely visible. He nodded to Emma and took two steps to the front of the dilapidated porch, then stepped down to the ground.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing toward Cinnamon.

“Of course,” Emma said.

Emma watched the man hold his hand out toward Cinnamon, who sniffed him cautiously, then leaned her big brown head forward to nuzzle him.

“I’m Jack,” the man said, looking up toward Emma and giving a little wave.

“Emma,” she responded, nodding at him and touching the brim of her felt hat. She searched her mind frantically for something intelligent to say, but “what are you doing in that building” and “I thought this town was abandoned” didn’t sound very friendly.

“Just passing through?” Jack asked.

“Yes. I’m on my way to take a reporting job.”

“I figured as much. Onyx Falls isn’t really a destination stop anymore,” he said, grinning at her apologetically.

“Well. I, um, did wonder if it was abandoned,” Emma stammered. Emma, who was normally very composed and able to keep up with change in conversation, found herself not capable of forming a complete, intelligent sentence in front of this handsome stranger and his intense, piercing blue eyes.

Jack smiled. “A lot of people have moved on and the town has seen better days, but we do still have some great establishments left, like my very own Maverick’s Saloon,” he said, turning sideways and gesturing dramatically.

Emma glanced politely up at the building and smoothed her dress over her knees.

“And the Bennett Inn,” he added, pointing across the street to yet another dilapidated building that Emma had assumed to be vacant.

While the old buildings looked gorgeous, Emma was not sure this town was the place she wanted to stay for the evening. Did that old inn even have sheets that had been changed this year or floors that could be trusted to be walked across?

“I make the best steak this side of the Rockies,” Jack said, winking at her. “Why don’t you at least come in for a meal and give ol’ girl here a rest?”

Emma smiled down at him from her seat on the stagecoach.

Jack smiled back at her, a real smile this time, a smile that showed off his perfectly straight white teeth and reached all the way to his bright blue eyes. With Jack smiling at her, Emma briefly forgot about the job waiting for her and the long journey she would have to finish in order to get there.

“Well, I am a little hungry,” Emma said, smiling back at him.

“Perfect,” Jack said, offering his hand up to help her step down.

Emma placed her dainty hand in Jack’s and allowed him to help her down. As soon as she stepped foot on the ground, she heard the stagecoach creak, another problem she had momentarily forgotten in the wake of Jack and his infectious smile.

Jack looked back at the wagon, then at Cinnamon. “That doesn’t sound good,” he mused. Jack dropped Emma’s hand and crouched down under the wagon, then quickly scurried backwards. “The front axle is about to snap,” he said matter-of-factly. “It’s a good thing you stopped when you did. We need to get Cinnamon unhitched.”

Emma’s stomach dropped at the thought of anything happening to Cinnamon, and she quickly went to work undoing Cinnamon’s reigns and harness. When Cinnamon was free, Jack unhooked the singletree while Emma led Cinnamon forward. As soon as Jack let the singletree rest on the ground, all three creatures were startled by a cracking sound. The front axle of the stagecoach had split completely in half, the two parts falling inward and resting on the ground directly below where Emma had just been sitting.

Emma’s breath caught in her throat as she thought about what could have happened to her or Cinnamon if the axle had broken just a mile back in their journey.

“Oh, Cinnamon,” Emma murmured, rubbing Cinnamon’s nose with one hand and running her fingers through her mane with the other.

“It can be fixed, but unfortunately not for a few days,” Jack reassured her. “We don’t exactly get a lot of deliveries quickly.” Jack moved his hands in a sweeping motion in front of himself, as if to demonstrate the state of the town.

Emma nodded, still a little shaken up.

“In the meantime, I can fix Cinnamon up in my stable,” Jack jerked his thumb over his shoulder, gesturing to the saloon and what Emma assumed was the stable behind the saloon.

“Sure, that would be great,” Emma agreed, grateful for the chance to rest and a voice of reason to help her decide what her next steps should be.

“In the meantime, you can head into the saloon and make yourself at home.”

Emma smoothed down the front of her dress and nodded. “Thank you. That’s very generous of you.”

Emma ducked her head and headed towards the wooden porch of the saloon. She opened the door slowly, letting her eyes adjust to the dark surroundings. In true saloon fashion, there was a bar running along the length of one of the walls, with mismatched barstools waiting for patrons. Three wanted posters hung behind the bar, but it was too dark for Emma to make out the photos or the crimes for which these men were wanted. Several tables were scattered throughout the dining room area, all of which were missing a chair or had spindles missing from the chairs that were at the tables. Emma wasn’t sure where to sit. The tables were all in the shadows, and she wanted to be close to the door, so sitting at the bar might be the better option. But was the bar an appropriate place for a woman?

In the end, Emma chose the bar and had just dusted off a seat and sat down when Jack walked back in.

“A lady who sits at the bar. I like it,” he called, walking through the door that connected what Emma presumed was the kitchen to the bar.

Emma smiled at him and graciously accepted the glass of water he handed her.

“I got Cinnamon all set up in the stable with fresh hay and a full trough of water.”

“Thank you,” Emma said. “I really appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Jack said. “I also got a steak started for you.”

Emma smiled gratefully and took a long drink of water.

While they waited for the steak to cook, Emma and Jack made small talk. Emma told Jack about the newspaper reporting job she was taking in California and her parents and two older siblings. Jack told Emma about his parents, whom he had lost at a young age and his sister, who lived in the neighboring town. He told her about how the town was once busy and lively, and even though people had begun to leave at a rapid rate, he still held out hope that the town could be saved.

The hours flew by, and Emma suddenly straightened in her seat when she realized the already dark saloon had grown even darker. The sun had almost set and the street looked even more ominous than it had when her stagecoach rolled into town amidst the overcast sky. Emma did not know what to do. She obviously couldn't travel in a stagecoach with a broken axle, and there was no way Cinnamon could carry Emma and all her belongings she had packed in the stagecoach for her move halfway across the country.

As if Jack could read her mind, he said, “Let me call on Sarah over at the Bennett Inn. She can get you set up for the night until we can get the axle fixed.”

Emma felt a twang of reassurance at Jack's use of the word “we.”

“Thank you,” she said for what felt like the millionth time that day. “I would really appreciate that.”

Jack followed Emma out to the porch and locked the doors of the saloon behind them, which Emma found peculiar considering there didn’t seem to be any people in the town, much less any people who would try to enter the saloon with ill-intent. Jack gestured to the hotel across the street and the two walked to the hotel, still keeping up their easy conversation.

Once they stepped inside the inn, Emma looked around in awe at the ornate building and its antique adornments. The inviting interior was a complete contrast to the peeling paint and the run-down exterior. The polished hardwood floors of the lobby shined brightly under the soft overhead lights. The walls were painted a cream color, and plush armchairs sat aside a walnut parlor table. Heavy drapes lined all of the windows that overlooked the streets, which made Emma temporarily forget that just on the other side of those drapes was an empty, desolate looking street.

“Wow,” Emma breathed, taking in the room. “This is gorgeous.”

“I know,” Jack agreed, chuckling softly as he watched Emma take in her surroundings. “Not quite what you would expect based on what you see outside, huh? Sarah does a great job of keeping this place in tip top shape.”

Emma took a few paces forward, relishing the sound of the creaking floor beneath her. The sound reminded her of her childhood home. She rang the little bell that was sitting on the table, and at the merry tinkling sound, a woman appeared around the corner as if by magic. The woman seemed to fit right in with the welcoming atmosphere of the hotel. She was pleasantly plump in a grandmotherly sort of way and her graying hair was swept back into a bun. She wore

and apron over a long dress, as if Emma and Jack had just interrupted an evening cookie-baking session. Her eyes lit up when she saw Jack, and she immediately came from behind the counter to introduce herself to Emma.

She grasped Emma's outstretched hand with both of her own powdery-smooth hands and smiled brightly while Jack introduced the two women and recounted the last few hours' events to her.

"Oh my goodness," Sarah responded after Jack finished his tale. "Of course there is room for you here at Bennett Inn. Any friend of Jack's is certainly welcome here for as long as you need to stay."

"Thank you," Emma responded. She definitely needed to come up with a better repertoire of responses to express her gratitude for the way the residents of this town had treated her. She had a feeling she was going to be indebted to quite a few people here.

"Of course," Sarah said, reaching out to grasp Emma's arm. "I can set you up on the large master suite on the second floor. It is the best room of the inn."

"Thank you, Sarah," Jack said. He turned to Emma. "I will let you get settled in. Tomorrow we can take a look at that stagecoach axle. For now, Cinnamon is safe in the stables and you are in good hands with Sarah."

Jack nodded to each of the women and made his way out the door and into the night, to where, Emma had no idea. The saloon? The stable? From outward appearances, there seemed to be no functional buildings in this town, but as she learned from the saloon and the stable, appearances could be deceiving.

“You have had quite a day, young lady,” Sarah said, looking at Emma kindly. “Let’s get you set up. Follow me.”

Emma followed Sarah up the wide staircase and into the hallway on the second floor. Carpet lined the hallway from wall to wall, and flowered wallpaper decorated the walls, from floor to very tall ceiling. The dim lights cast long shadows on the walls, giving the otherwise welcoming hallway a creepier vibe. Sarah stopped at the door at the end of the hallway, then reached in her apron to pull out a ring of keys.

“This is the best room in the inn, in my opinion,” Sarah said, opening the door and allowing Emma to enter the room first.

Emma could see why Sarah thought that. The room was huge, with a large fluffy mattress and several quilts on the bed. There were tall windows on three walls of the room, and a bathroom with a large clawfoot tub and stacks of bath towels next to the tub. A lamp in the corner cast a soft glow over the room.

“It’s perfect,” Emma said.

“You can stay as long as you need to,” Sarah said, turning towards the door. “My room is on the third floor, but you are welcome to walk around the second floor and the common areas on the first floor. The first floor has a library and a dining room. Breakfast is at seven.”

Emma thanked her again and watched as Sarah shut the door behind her. Emma walked over to the bed and ran her hand along the edge of the mattress. It seemed so soft and cozy. She would lay down for just a little bit before actually getting ready to go to sleep. Emma sat on the edge of the bed and collapsed backwards.

Emma sat bolt upright and looked around in confusion. It took her a few seconds to process where she was. She had only intended to rest for a few minutes before getting ready for bed, but apparently, she had fallen asleep. She rubbed her eyes and listened for any movement in the building, but the place was eerily silent. Emma crossed the room to the bathroom and washed her face, then changed clothes and crawled into bed. She lay under the covers for an indefinite amount of time, tossing and turning. The grandfather clock in the corner showed three o'clock, then three thirty, then four. Sighing, Emma gingerly placed one foot on the hardwood floor, then the other. She was never going to be able to go back to sleep at this rate. Somehow the silence was actually making it harder to sleep than it should. She crept out of bed and tiptoed around the room. She pulled the drapes back and looked down at the abandoned street. A lone newspaper blew down the street in the breeze. Emma shuddered. Despite the friendliness of Sarah and Jack, the town still had a creepy, almost hauntingly sad atmosphere.

Against the wall adjacent to the bed stood a large wardrobe. Emma opened the doors to inspect the area where she would be able to hang her clothes tomorrow when she brought her belongings inside. She had a feeling she would be stuck here for longer than she originally expected. There was no way the axle could be fixed in time for her to make it to California by next week. She was only in Oklahoma. Sighing, Emma was about to close the door to the wardrobe when something shiny caught her eye. Emma bent down to inspect the object, which turned out to be a small book of some sort. She probably would have missed the book, except for the fact that the draperies had not fallen completely shut after she looked outside, and the light from the moon was casting a sliver of light through the open drapes and into the open doors of the wardrobe. Emma felt the soft cover of the book and frowned. A journal maybe? How would it have gotten here? Emma pulled the book out and brought it closer to the window. It was a

journal, a small book whose dark cover would make it easy to miss in the back of the dark wardrobe when someone was packing their belongings or coming in to clean the day after this guest left. Emma sat in a chair by the window and gingerly fanned the pages open. It was definitely a female's handwriting with loopy curling letters in a heavy-handed scrawl. Emma flipped to the back page and gasped, dropping the diary. The last two sentences read "He was never in love with me. If you find this, please he..." The last two letters of what Emma assumed would complete the word "help" were never formed by the writer.

Chapter Two

Uncovering Clues

Emma stared at the diary for what seemed like minutes, but in reality, was only several seconds. In the fall from her hand to the floor, the diary had closed and landed on its back cover. The word "diary" scrawled across the front in gold gilt letters, atop a dark brown leather cover. Emma reached down hesitantly and picked the diary up off the floor, fanning the pages again. Emma looked around her room. What else could be hidden here? She opened the drawers in the chest of drawers and swept her hand over the floor of the wardrobe again, just to make sure she hadn't missed anything else. There was nothing. Emma sat on the edge of the bed, still clutching the diary.

Emma opened the front cover of the diary and saw a woman's name written in the same loopy scrawl that could be found inside the diary. The name read Isabel Monroe. Emma frowned and flipped through the diary again. The name didn't mean anything to her, but then again, she was a stranger in this town and until last night, had not known anyone here until she happened

upon Jack and the saloon, and as a result, Sarah and the inn. Emma laid the diary on the bed next to her and crossed the room to the bathroom. There was no way she could go back to sleep now. As she washed her face and combed her hair, she found her mind wandering to Jack. How could he stay here in this town? Yes, he owned the saloon, but he was young, about her age or a little older, and surely he had plans to get married and have a family? She smiled to herself as she thought of him smiling at her yesterday when she agreed to let him cook her a steak. Emma was about to head downstairs when, on second thought, she rouged her cheeks and sprayed a hint of perfume on her neck, just in case she ran into Jack today.

Just a few minutes before seven, Emma took her seat at the long table in the dining room. The scent of maple syrup wafted out from the kitchen, and Emma sat flipping through the diary, trying to ascertain some clues about this Isabel woman. From what she could tell, Isabel seemed to be about Emma's age, in her mid-twenties, and seemed to have a lot of money. The first part of the diary talked about a lavish trip to Europe and some new expensive dresses she was having shipped. Emma had just gotten to an entry that talked about how Isabel was afraid someone was stalking her when Sarah came out of the kitchen holding two plates heaped full of pancakes, eggs, and sausage. She set one plate down in front of Emma and sat the other plate on the table across from Emma.

"Good morning," Sarah half sang, half spoke to Emma. "I hope you don't mind if I join you for breakfast since you are my only tenant."

Emma smiled. "Of course I don't mind. I would love for you to join me."

Sarah let out a huff as she sat in the chair across from Emma. She arranged her food on her plate and poured syrup from an antique porcelain carafe onto the pile of pancakes on her

plate. She took one bite and closed her eyes, savoring the taste, and then looked over at Emma, as if she forgot she was technically the host.

“What are you reading?”

Emma’s hand flew protectively to the cover of the diary. She had looked forward to showing this to Sarah and Jack since she had read the last line, but now for some reason, she was having second thoughts. Emma glanced up at Sarah, who had paused, fork poised in the air, looking directly at her. Sarah’s round, pleasant face showed nothing but patience, and her kind eyes crinkled in the corner when she smiled at Emma. Emma took a deep breath.

“Ummm, I actually found this in the bottom of the wardrobe this morning. It seems to be an old diary.” Emma held up the diary to show Sarah.

“Oh wow. I’ll be,” Sarah mused. “I bet someone is missing that. Is there a name? Maybe we can get it back to its rightful owner somehow.”

“Well, that’s the thing,” Emma started. She looked over at Sarah again, whose face still only showed kindness. Emma tilted her head and Sarah scooped a bite of pancakes into her mouth, chewing quietly. Emma flipped to the final page and started to tell Sarah what she had found. “The last entry is really spooky. It looks like the person was asking for help but never actually got to finish the rest of her sentence.”

Sarah put her fork down and looked at Emma. “What? Are you sure?”

Emma held the diary up for Sarah to see. Sarah squinted and pulled the diary closer to her face. Her eyes widened when she read the last line.

Emma studied Sarah's shocked face for a few seconds, then continued. "Apparently this diary belongs to some lady named Isabel. Does that ring a bell?"

Sarah's fork clattered to her plate and she let out an audible gasp. "Isabel? As in Isabel Monroe?" Sarah's hand flew to her neck where a heart pendant hung on a chain. She began to play with the necklace, moving the heart back and forth across the chain with one hand.

"Um, I think that was the name that was written in the front?" Emma posed this as a question, even though she was sure that was the name she had read. She flipped to the front of the diary to confirm, and then looked up and nodded her head at Sarah. Emma had no idea who this mysterious Isabel Monroe person was. How did Sarah instantly know who the diary belonged to? And why was she so visibly nervous? Emma frowned and studied Sarah carefully across the table. Sarah's eyes were still wide, staring at Emma from across the table. She looked like she had seen a ghost.

Sarah reached her hand across the table towards the diary. "May I?"

Emma handed Sarah the diary, and Sarah flipped to the first page. "Oh my gosh. This definitely belongs to her."

As if the diary was poisoned, she hurriedly shoved the diary back across the table at Emma. Emma stared at her quizzically, still clueless as to who Isabel Monroe actually was, other than someone who Sarah clearly knew and who apparently needed help of some kind.

"Isabel inherited a huge fortune from a family who had ties to some Native American wealth. Shortly after she inherited the money, she disappeared. Jack and I suspected something awful had happened to her, but others thought she had simply taken the money and left. But that just wasn't like her. She was from here. This had been her lifelong home."

Emma couldn't imagine that someone from this deserted town had actually had the kind of money that would attract kidnappers, but then again, she also hadn't expected this hotel to be operable, so she had a feeling there were a lot of things she didn't know about this town and its inhabitants.

"Wow," Emma said. "So, what do *you* think happened to her?"

Sarah continued to play with the locket around her neck. She glanced around, even though she and Emma were the only two in the dining room. "I always said she would have never just disappeared. She had recently started dating a man in town. She would never have just left that man. She was head over heels for him. I never understood it because he was old enough to be her father, but he had a hold on her."

Emma leaned forward in her seat. Sarah had her full attention now. "Do you think she is alive still?"

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know. She has been missing for about three months now. She just vanished, seemingly overnight. But she loved that man and her family played a huge part in founding this town.

"Wait a minute," Emma said, flipping the diary back to the last page again. "I think she mentions him on this page here." Emma showed Sarah the line she had read when she first found the diary: He was never in love with me.

All the color drained from Sarah's face. "Oh my gosh," she whispered softly. "That poor girl."

Emma pursed her lips and nodded in agreement. She had no idea where to go from here. Would this diary really hold the clues to what had happened to this missing woman, or would all the entries be about Isabel's love affair with this mysterious older man?

The two women sat in stunned silence for a few seconds. Emma looked at the clock in the corner. It was after eight o'clock already. She was going to have to figure out how to fix the axle on her stagecoach, and she wanted to check on Cinnamon this morning.

Just then, Emma heard the jingle of the little bell in the lobby, followed by a voice calling out, "It's just me!"

She recognized that voice as Jack's, and her hands flew to her hair to pat everything into place. She blushed when she caught Sarah looking at her with a knowing smile.

"We are in the dining room!" Sarah called out.

Jack came through the doorway of the dining room and smiled directly at Emma.

"Good morning, ladies," he said as he pulled out a chair at the table. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Sarah glanced over at Emma, giving her a surreptitious wink.

"Why Jack, what a nice surprise. I haven't had the pleasure of your company at breakfast for quite some time."

Jack ran his hands through his dark hair and avoided looking at either Sarah or Emma as he busied himself with unrolling his napkin and arranging his silverware.

“I thought I might need a hearty breakfast so I can get this wagon axle fixed.”

“Mmmm hmm,” Sarah nodded knowingly, standing up from the table. “I will get you a plate fixed. In the meantime, Emma has some news for you.”

“Oh?” Jack asked, raising his eyebrows and turning towards Emma. “Is that so?”

Emma blushed as Jack turned his full attention toward her, then busied herself finding the last page in the diary. She showed him the last page, then flipped to the front to the page that showed the diary belonged to Isabel.

Jack let out a low whistle. “Where did you get this?”

Emma recounted finding the diary in the wardrobe and searching for any other left-behind items but finding nothing.

Jack stared at her in stunned silence for what seemed like forever, his blue eyes boring into hers.

“Do you think she’s still alive?” Emma asked softly.

Jack pursed his lips and opened his mouth as if to answer but let a look of relief wash over him when Sarah returned from the kitchen carrying a plate of pancakes and a mug of coffee. She set the items on the table and then returned to her seat, looking back and forth between Emma and Jack.

“Should we notify Sheriff Campbell?” Sarah asked.

Jack sighed. Emma thought notifying a figure of authority seemed like the logical thing to do, but she noticed Jack seemed hesitant.

“I think we should talk to Ezekial before we do anything,” Jack responded slowly.

Sarah nodded. “Zeke would probably know more of the back story.”

Emma looked from Jack to Sarah and back to Jack.

“Who is Ezekial?” she asked.

“Ezekial is our unofficial town detective,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Old Zeke has been here longer than any of us, and he knows every detail about every family. Think gossipy old lady but in male form.”

Emma smiled. “Sounds like we should start with him.”

“Zeke usually comes in for lunch. Let’s go out to the stable and look at this wagon axle while we wait for him,” Jack said.

Emma sipped her coffee and fell into easy conversation with Jack. She didn’t notice Sarah watching them with a knowing look as they said their goodbyes to her and walked out the front door of the inn towards the stable.

Once they got to the stable, Emma went straight to Cinnamon’s stall and nuzzled the horse. “What have we gotten ourselves into, Cinnamon?” she whispered. Cinnamon burrowed her head into Emma’s shoulder. Emma was brushing Cinnamon’s mane when Jack came back in with the two pieces of the stagecoach’s axle. He set them on the ground and frowned.

“This might take a little more work than I thought,” he said.

Emma went over to the center aisle and stood next to Jack. He pointed to a metal piece that connected the wagon wheel to the axle. The metal piece was bent haphazardly.

“This piece will have to be ordered and shipped, so it might take a few days.”

Emma nodded, then looked over at Cinnamon, who stood in her stall. If she had to break down, she couldn't have asked for a better place for it to happen, she supposed. But what had she gotten herself into with this diary and the missing woman? She had only wanted to stop and stretch her legs and get a meal and then be on her merry way to start her new job.

“Well, I guess now I have something to do for the next few days until the axle can be fixed,” Emma said, waving the diary in the air.

Jack raised his eyebrows. “We might need your investigative journalism skills here.”

Emma and Jack made their way back into the saloon, where Emma could hear the sounds of plates clattering in the kitchen.

“Nancy!” Jack called. “It’s just me!”

Emma felt a little jealous pang at the mention of this Nancy person, then quickly reminded herself that it didn't matter who Nancy was because she was leaving in a few days to a completely different state to start her new job.

A strawberry-blonde haired woman flounced out of the kitchen, dish towel in hand.

“Hi, Jack!” she sang out. She stopped short. “Hi there! I’m Nancy!”

Emma introduced herself and Jack recounted the story for the second time of how Emma wound up in their town.

“Oh my gosh,” gushed Nancy. “You have had a busy twenty-four hours.”

Emma smiled. “You could say that.”

“Well have a seat. I am preparing lunch for the locals. By now I’m sure Ezekial has somehow learned you are here and he will be in,” Nancy joked.

Emma’s smile grew wider. She could tell already that she was going to like Nancy. Right on cue, the door opened and a tall man shuffled through the doorway. He was holding a folder under one arm and was walking in a stooped manner, as if he was constantly waiting for this folder of papers to slip out of his grasp. He looked disheveled, with wrinkled clothing and a graying, unkempt beard, but his eyes were kind as he looked at Emma.

“Well, hello there,” he said, offering his hand out to her. “I’m Zeke. You must be Emma.”

Nancy swatted at Zeke with the towel she was holding and let out a lighthearted, girly laugh. “You just made my little joke a reality, Zeke.”

Zeke smiled. “I happened to see Sarah out on the front porch on my way over. I saw the stagecoach parked here last night on my late-night walk and could only assume that its driver would have stayed at the inn.”

“Well, you know we are happy to see you. Lunch is almost ready,” Nancy said, heading back to the kitchen.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ezekial said, smiling as he pulled out a chair and sat down at one of the tables.

With the new introductions, Emma had almost forgotten about the diary she was holding in her hand. Her hand was mostly concealed by the folds of her skirt, and apparently no one else had noticed what she was holding either. She held the diary up and looked at Jack questioningly. Jack nodded and pulled out a chair next to Ezekial.

“Zeke, Emma has something to show you,” he said, nodding at Emma to sit down at the table. “We have reason to believe Isabel is still alive.”

Ezekial raised his eyebrows and looked at Jack. “That’s great news! What makes you say that? It seemed like we reached a dead end.”

Jack looked over at Emma, waiting for her to continue the story. Emma brought out the diary, and for the third time that day, flipped to the last page and then back to the name in the front of the diary. Ezekial squinted at the diary, then pulled his wire-frame glasses out of his suit pocket. Emma sat perched on the edge of her seat as she watched him unfold the glasses, rest the glasses on his nose, then readjust the glasses and finally read the lines in the book. He flipped back and forth between the last entry in the book and the front page a few times. Emma looked over at Jack, who looked at Ezekial, back to Emma, then grinned. Emma smiled as she realized that Jack thought Ezekial was being dramatic. Finally, Ezekial spoke.

“I never liked Thomas. Even when we were kids, he was just so mean.”

“The man Isabel is talking about in the diary is Thomas Blackwood,” Jack explained. “Thomas and Zeke here grew up together.”

“And Thomas was waaay too old for her,” Nancy interjected, plunking a plate of fried chicken down in the middle of the table. “She could have done better than him.”

“Yes,” grumbled Ezekial. “And she has money, so she doesn’t need him. That relationship makes no sense. What does the diary say?”

“I just found it this morning,” Emma said. “I haven’t really gotten a chance to read anything yet.”

Emma opened the diary to the first entry, and Ezekial, Jack, and Nancy crowded around her as she read out loud.

“January first. Thomas called on me today. I always viewed him as one of Daddy’s boring business partners, but he came to check on me since he knew I was here by myself during the blizzard. He made sure I had food and water and also brought the most beautiful poinsettia.”

“Stop right there!” Ezekial said. “What was the date of that entry again?”

“January first,” Emma said.

“Mmm hmm,” Ezekial muttered. “Go on.”

Emma looked at Jack and Nancy, who were also staring at Ezekial quizzically.

“This has been the longest winter, so it was nice to have some company and to be thought of. He said he would check back in on me next week. I told him how much I appreciated him checking on me because ever since last summer, I have been so terribly lonely.”

Emma paused her reading. “She sounds so sad. What happened to her?”

“She was engaged to a man who was part Indian. His name was Dakota,” Nancy said. “He died in a tragic accident. In fact, the accident was really weird. He fell into an abandoned mine and his neck was broken. No one knows how. It was Isabel who actually found him.”

Emma sat the diary on the table, but Ezekial spoke up before she could say anything.

“Yes, an ‘accident.’” His voice inflection changed at the word “accident.”

“Now, we don’t know that there was any foul play,” Nancy admonished him.

“But we don’t know that there wasn’t, either,” Ezekial said, one finger pointing in the air to emphasize his point.

Emma picked up the diary again. “I can’t wait to see him next week.”

“Oh, bullocks,” Ezekial grumbled. He stood and collected his folder of papers. “Nancy, the food was delicious as always. Emma, it was nice to meet you. I’m heading back to the office for a bit. I’m going to see what I can dig up about Thomas.”

Jack, Emma, and Nancy watched Ezekial walk out the front door and into the dusty street. A few stray leaves and an old newspaper floated by in the breeze as if they were chasing after Ezekial. When he was finally out of sight, Nancy was the first to break the silence.

“Don’t pay him no mind,” she advised Emma. “Zeke is hell-bent on proving that Thomas is corrupt. He is worse than a gossip old lady, but we love him,” she laughed.

“By this time tomorrow he will have a whole theory mapped out and will have everyone’s family tree on paper,” Jack added.

“He could be on to something though,” Emma offered. “Why would Thomas suddenly take an interest in her? He sounds like he was just a boring old man who her father did business with.”

“I think that’s originally what he intended to be when he went to call on her-just an old associate of her father’s who went to check in on her. I think when he got there, he saw this lonely, beautiful woman who was no longer a small child and that’s when he fell for her,” Nancy said. “Or he found an easy target, if you listen to Ezekial.”

Both women looked at Jack. “Let’s keep reading,” he suggested.

Just then the saloon door burst open and a large man loomed in the doorway. With the sun shining behind him, all Emma could see was his shadow. He stood in the doorway for longer than necessary, surveying his surroundings. Jack grabbed the diary from Emma and placed it on his lap, slowly scooted his chair closer to the table, and pretended to resume eating. The man sauntered over to the table, seeming to revel in the fact that everyone was watching him as his boots clicked against the hardwood floor. Not wasting time with pleasantries, he addressed Jack as soon as he got to the table.

“Hello there, Jack. I see you found yourself a new customer today.”

“Thomas, this is Emma. Emma will be staying at the inn for a few days until her stagecoach can get repaired.”

Emma reached out her hand, and Thomas took Emma’s dainty hand in his large one. His grip was firm in an unfriendly way, and Emma felt a chill run through her when Thomas smiled at her. She quickly retracted her hand and placed her hands in her lap.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said to Thomas, but his attention was already focused elsewhere.

“Jack,” Thomas said, turning his full attention towards Jack and ignoring the two women. “I have been speaking with Ezekial. You know he keeps meticulous records of everything that has happened in this town since its founding.”

Emma looked at Jack, who seemed to be just as puzzled as she was.

“Oh, come on, Thomas. We all know Zeke keeps these records,” Nancy laughed nervously. “He just left here with a folder under his arm. You’re going to have to try harder than that to bring us some new news.”

Thomas didn’t smile. “I have gone over the records dating back to when the town was first founded. Your grandfather didn’t pay taxes on this saloon the first year it was opened. Therefore myself and Blackwood Enterprises can own this building by the end of the month if we pay the back taxes, which I am fully prepared to do.”

Chapter Three

Haunted Past

Emma was standing on the edge of the lake, looking at her new yellow dress in the reflection of the lake. The lake was peaceful and serene, but Emma could sense its danger in the pit of her stomach. Clouds were building up overhead and thunder was rumbling in the distance. The leaves on the trees had flipped over, showing their silver undersides. Emma was studying her reflection in the water for what seemed like the hundredth time that week. Jemma, her best friend, should have been standing next to her. Jemma’s reflection should have also been visible in the lake too, right next to Emma’s. Emma and Jemma, who had been inseparable since their parents had moved next door to each other, did everything together. They walked to school together, they bought penny candy at Christmas together, they played dolls by the lake together. Where was Jemma?

“Emma! Emma!” Emma’s mother’s frantic voice pierced the humid air.

Emma bolted upright in the bed and looked around frantically. She tried to slow her breathing as the items in the room came into focus and she realized where she was. The porcelain water pitcher sat on the walnut table in the corner. The embroidered tapestry on the wall and the wardrobe let her know she was safe in her room at Bennett Inn. The dream had seemed so real. These dreams were always exactly how the events had happened in real life, right down to the leaves on the trees and the thunder in the distance. Emma got up slowly and went into the bathroom to splash water on her face. Looking at the clock, she saw it was almost dinner time. She must have napped longer than she realized.

After lunch Emma headed back to her room. The morning had left her troubled. The talk of the missing woman and the Thomas Blackwood man who had just shown up out of nowhere had put Emma's nerves on edge. This seemingly abandoned ghost town had people lurking in every corner.

She was likely going to be here for a few more days at least. After lunch Jack had sent word to the blacksmith to request a new connector piece and had also sent word to a planing mill a few miles away. Both places said their respective parts would take at least four days to arrive, then there was the business of actually using the parts to fix the stagecoach. Emma had come back to her room to rest for a bit and write a letter to her parents to let them know where she was, but she must have been more tired than she realized.

Emma made her way downstairs and into the parlor and settled herself into an overly stuffed floral-patterned armchair that sat directly in a ray of late afternoon sunshine. Emma pulled out the diary and began to read the next entry.

January 7th

As promised, Thomas has come back to check on me. He is so sweet and thoughtful, and it is so nice to have someone to talk to again. I have been here all week by myself, with only the cat for company. I started a quilt, and Thomas even expressed interest in my quilt design. He brought me a tin of chocolates and since the snow finally melted, we were able to take a long walk through the garden.

Emma sat the diary on her lap and stared out the window. The picture that Isabel was painting in her diary of this Thomas Blackwood was vastly different from the Thomas Blackwood that Emma had met earlier that afternoon. In the saloon, Thomas had seemed arrogant and brash and calculating. He had threatened to take over the saloon. Emma tried to imagine this same man bringing chocolates to a woman and walking through a garden. She couldn't picture it. Emma opened the diary up again and continued reading.

January 9th

Thomas came to call on me again today, and we went on a carriage ride through the countryside. When he brought me back home, he kissed me! I admit I didn't feel the fireworks I felt when Dakota kissed me, but it sure was nice to have a safe companion. Thomas said he would call on me again this weekend.

Emma frowned and closed the diary again. The general consensus was that Isabel had really been in love with this man, but the diary painted a different picture. She seemed lonely and in search of a companion, especially after Dakota was tragically taken from her. Emma closed her eyes. The pain of losing someone unexpectedly is a pain that never fully went away, just dulled with time. Emma thought of the dream she had earlier and got a chill. She too had lost

someone unexpectedly, although it was a much different relationship than what Isabel and Dakota had.

The door to the parlor swung open and Emma looked up to see Sarah bustling through, carrying a tray of cookies and two glasses of milk.

“Hello,” Sarah sang out in her soothing voice. “I thought you might want a snack. Dinner will be ready soon. Have you found anything else out?”

Emma felt her eyes fill with tears, and she swiped her hand across her face. When Sarah pulled a handkerchief out of her dress pocket and passed it over to Emma, she could not stop the tears from falling.

“There, there. My goodness,” Sarah said soothingly. She placed a hand on Emma’s shoulder and waited until Emma could compose herself. “What has brought all this on?”

Emma sniffled and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head.

“Don’t be sorry. Something is clearly upsetting you.” Sarah sat down in the armchair next to Emma and waited patiently for Emma to speak.

Emma sniffled and sat up straighter in her chair. “When I was little, about six or seven, I had a friend named Jemma.”

Emma smiled at the memory, and Sarah nodded her head in encouragement.

“Well, we had been friends before this, but we were about six or seven when this happened,” Emma continued. “We used to walk to and from school together. We would stop at the lake on the way home and feed the ducks our scraps from lunch. One day I stayed home from school because I was sick. I begged my mom to let me go to school, but she wouldn’t let me

because I had a fever. That day Jemma never came home from school. Authorities searched everywhere. The lake, our houses, the whole town. She was never found.”

Emma stared at her hands in her lap, lost in thought. Finally, Sarah broke the silence.

“Oh, honey,” she said.

Emma looked up to see Sarah toying with the locket on her necklace.

“Yeah,” Emma said. “Right before I came downstairs, I woke up from a dream. It was so real-just like the events that really happened. I was standing at the lake and I could hear my mother calling my name to come home. Then I woke up.”

“Our minds can do some crazy things,” Sarah said. She continued moving the locket back and forth across its chain.

“I think about her a lot. What would she be doing now? Would she be married? Would she have kids? And how could she just have disappeared? I think that’s a huge reason for me going into investigative journalism. I wanted to do something to help. Jemma was never found, but maybe I can be of assistance somehow for other families.”

Sarah smiled. “I think that’s a wonderful reason to choose your career. I can see you being a source of comfort to families in times like that.”

“I guess this diary and stuff has really brought a lot of that back up. Jemma’s family didn’t have anyone to help them, other than the authorities. And the detectives certainly weren’t very friendly at the time.”

“I know you are only here for a short time,” Sarah began, somewhat hesitantly. “But maybe while you are here, you could help us solve the mystery of Isabel. This diary gives me hope that she might be out there somewhere still.”

Emma smiled. “I would like that. I will do whatever I can to help while I am here.”

Sarah stood up from her chair, and likewise, so did Emma. Sarah extended her plump arms in a motherly hug, and Emma accepted, grateful for the mother-like comfort Sarah could give her.

“Let’s go eat!” Sarah called out gaily.

Emma slept fitfully that night, tossing and turning, so when it was time to wake up, she realized she had almost slept through breakfast. She hurriedly got up and applied the bare minimum of makeup, then flipped through her dresses, settling on the blue dress that accented her eyes.

When she got to the dining room, she was surprised to see not only Jack and Sarah in the dining room, but Nancy and Ezekial too. She took her place at the table and gratefully accepted the cup of coffee Sarah poured for her.

“We have all been talking about the diary,” Nancy said by way of good morning. “We really want to find Isabel.”

Emma nodded. “I will be here for a few days, and I would love to help you all.”

The table began to toss out various theories as to who could have been behind the kidnapping and why. Emma felt herself staring into space, the feelings of fear and confusion she

felt as a small child echoed in the words of those at her table. She was sitting in the parlor with her mother, both of them on the couch, with the investigators sitting across from them in two armchairs. The investigators, both stern men in their mid-thirties wearing dark suits and serious expressions, asked Emma the same questions over and over again: What route did you always take home from school? Where would she have detoured if you were not there? When is the last time you actually saw her?

“Emma! Earth to Emma!” Jack called to her across the table.

Blushing, Emma shook her head and brought herself back to the present. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking about something.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sarah watching her. She knew Sarah was thinking about their conversation from yesterday.

“I can tell,” Jack said, not unkindly. “We were talking about how we need to read through the diary to see if we can find any other clues. How could the diary have even gotten here in the first place? Sarah said Isabel never stayed here at the inn.”

Emma looked over at Sarah, who was nodding her head in agreement.

“Wait!” Nancy called out. “Didn’t someone associated with Thomas Blackwood stay here for a night?” Nancy looked around at the rest of the table. “Remember? He was traveling through on a business deal or something. We all thought it was fishy that he would stay here, only one town over from where he lives. I think we all just avoided him when he was here.”

“Yes, but wasn’t that before Isabel went missing?” Ezekial asked.

The table speculated for a bit on whether or not the mystery man had stayed at the hotel before or after Isabel disappeared.

“Come on, Zeke,” Nancy joked. “Check your archives. You know you have this written down somewhere.”

Sarah let out a chuckle. “You have a more accurate log of who has stayed here than my own hotel registry.”

Zeke smiled, a twinkle in his eye. “See? My meticulousness will finally pay off.”

Emma looked around the table at Jack, Nancy, Sarah, Ezekial. She might not have been able to help Jemma, but she could use her time and energy while she was here to help this unlikely crew of people to find the person *they* knew and loved.