

WILDFLOWER  
*Falls*

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A RIVERBEND ROMANCE

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DENISE HUNTER



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*A Novel Proposal*

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# One

**Charlotte Simpson had never stalked a man before.**

She freely admitted to the social media stalking of an ex-boyfriend or two. In high school she'd once sat outside her boyfriend's home to see if Mindy Miller really was only dropping off brownies for his sick mother. (She wasn't.)

But Charlotte had never stooped to peeping out a barn window, the rubber rings of the binoculars pressing into her eye sockets.

She turned the Focus knob. Gavin Robinson walked toward the leveled rectangle of land that would soon support her new stable. His jeans were faded and speckled with . . . She fine-tuned the focus. Paint? Drywall mud? Something construction-y? He squatted, inspecting one of the footers on the western edge of the space.

Rogue nickered from the pasture outside the window, wanting her attention. But she couldn't pull her gaze from the man a hundred yards away. She adjusted the eyepieces for a better fit.

Gavin had aged a little since she'd seen him last. But then, he hadn't had an easy life.

He'd been way ahead of her in school—eight years maybe? That would make him . . . thirty-fiveish. Charlotte was closer in age to his sister, Avery. She'd been a senior when Charlotte was a freshman. Their brother Cooper had also already graduated by then.

They'd never run in the same circles, but everyone knew the Robinsons. They had a good name in the community. They stuck together like paint on a barn and were always willing to lend a hand.

Avery ran Riverbend Gap's medical clinic, Cooper was the county sheriff, and Gavin owned the construction company she'd hired to build her stable. When she'd entered his office on Jell-O legs that warm April afternoon, she hoped to work with him personally. But his business partner and brother-in-law, Wes Garrett, was working the office that day, so he'd taken the project himself.

Thus, this was her first real glimpse of Gavin since the "Big News."

He stood, seemingly satisfied with the subcontractor's work, and did nothing more interesting than trek around the dirt rectangle. But since this was her first chance to observe him up close . . .

*Observe.* Yes, she liked that word much better.

As soon as she got up the nerve, she would go out there and chat with him about the project. Her heart palpitated in her chest like a foaling mare's. She would tell him the footers of the foundation looked good (as if she knew). She would ask

him what came next and what the schedule would be like, even though Wes had thoroughly covered that.

It was hard to tell in that big, open space with the mountains rising behind him, but Gavin was tall—at least six feet. He was tanned from hours in the sun and built like a man of his trade. His black hair was shorter than she remembered, though the top was long enough that the warm May breeze toyed with it.

She squinted as she homed in on his face, wishing she could remember his eye color as, even with the binoculars, she was too far away to tell. They were set deep beneath the dark slashes of his brows. A clean-shaven jawline revealed sharp turns.

He would be considered handsome by anyone's yardstick with his well-placed, rugged features and athletic physique. But she didn't care about all that. After all, it wasn't Gavin's good looks that had her studying him like a scientist with a microscope. It was his genetics.

THOMAS NELSON  
*Welcome to Riverbend Gap! Best little town on the Appalachian Trail!*  
Since 1798

Gunner Dawson roared past the welcome sign on his Harley-Davidson, then leaned into a curve. He followed the two-lane road that led him across a bridge spanning the French Broad River and immediately into the town proper.

He slowed his Harley to a crawl. Old storefronts lined Main Street: a hardware store, a coffee shop, the Beauty Barn, the Iron Skillet, the Grab 'n' Go Deli. The latter brought back a fond memory of fresh-toasted bread piled high with salami and melted cheese so thick it made his mouth water.

Locals meandered up and down sidewalks on the sunny Saturday afternoon, dined alfresco on sidewalk patios, and rested on shade-drenched benches. Hikers, obvious by their backpacks and sweat-stained T-shirts, entered Appalachian Outfitters, no doubt to grab supplies and restock their food packs.

In short, the town appeared exactly as it had last time he'd been here. A year ago he'd come off the trail seeking a home-cooked meal and a decent bed. Ideas he could get behind today after his four-hour trip turned into six due to extensive road construction on 75 and an accident on 40.

When he reached the other side of town, he accelerated, following the road that ran alongside the meandering river. He passed the campground and a few more businesses: a clinic, a mercantile, a flower shop, all housed in old homes. He continued, heading to the far side of town where the houses thinned and properties stretched out, low and hilly.®

He was a day early for his interview, but he couldn't resist another peek at the quaint horse ranch where he hoped to hire on. After being one of many trainers on a large operation, he was eager for the challenge of something new. Something smaller.

And this pretty little town, nestled in the Appalachian Mountains, fit the bill. The smell of pine and mowed grass teased his senses as his eyes feasted on the sweeping panorama of majestic blue-green mountains. Yep, he could settle here for a while.

Up ahead the modest wooden sign came into view: *The Stables at Wildflower Falls*. When he came to the gravel drive, he turned. Wouldn't hurt to check in. Maybe he could even get the interview over with, and then he could start searching for a place

to rent. He wouldn't need much. A bed and a small kitchen. Plumbing would be a plus.

The driveway wound between fenced-in pastures toward a two-story farmhouse. A red barn sat behind the house, to the left. A bay mare watched him pass by while her foal wandered off toward a copse of trees.

A moment later he pulled up behind a beige Tahoe and turned off his motorcycle. His back muscles protested as he dismounted the bike and removed his helmet. He stretched. He wasn't twenty-five anymore. In fact, he'd passed that milestone almost a decade ago, though it hardly seemed possible.

A squirrel nattered in the sudden quiet. A breeze whispered through the treetops and cooled the back of his neck. He glanced down at his attire: gray tee, worn jeans, boots. A little grungy, but he'd be riding horses, not sitting behind a desk.

Two quick leaps had him up on the big front porch. He rapped on the screen door's wooden frame and waited. Nice house, if old. Someone had kept it up. The porch rails had a fresh coat of white paint and the chairs were clean and ready for occupants.

When a second knock proved ineffective, he headed back down the steps and turned toward the barn. A Denali sat way off in the distance, beyond the red barn. Ms. Simpson, whom he'd met the summer before and recently exchanged several emails with, was likely tending to her horses.

He followed the well-worn path, taking note of the hilly pasture behind the barn that ended at a steep-sloped mountain. A few horses grazed nearby: a chestnut, a palomino, and a bay, all sporting healthy, shiny coats. Ears forward, eyes soft, they turned his way as he neared.

Gunner slipped inside the open barn door and took a second for his eyes to adjust. Then he opened his mouth to call out, but the sight at the other end of the barn snatched the words from his tongue.

A petite woman stood at the edge of a window, peering through a pair of binoculars. “Come on . . . turn around.”

This was not the woman he’d met last summer. This one was much younger, for starters. Beyond the window a man inspected a raised piece of land that must be the new stable in the works. Not her husband, he assumed, as she’d surely have no reason to spy on him.

He cleared his throat.

The woman squeaked, bumped her head on the window frame, and whirled. The binoculars clunked to the ground. Wide green eyes fastened on him.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.” ®

She pressed a palm to her chest as a pretty blush crawled into her cheeks. “I was just . . . checking on the, uh . . .” She kicked the binoculars aside, mashing her lips together. “There was an, um—you know. Anyway, can I help you? Are you here about boarding a horse?”

He barely kept his lips from twitching. She was pretty cute, all flustered like that. Nobody blushed like a redhead. “Gunner Dawson. I have an appointment with Ms. Simpson tomorrow, but I got into town early. Thought I’d stop by and check out the place. Is Ms. Simpson in?” And then, because he couldn’t help himself, he glanced down at the binoculars. “Or is this a bad time?”

The pink in her cheeks deepened as she rubbed her neck. “Um, no, now is fine. I should’ve mentioned in my email that the



woman you met last summer, my mom, passed away last August. So your appointment is actually with me.”

All traces of humor drained away. “Sorry to hear that. She seemed like a nice lady.”

“She was.” The woman scooped up the binoculars and approached, extending a hand. “You can call me Charlotte. And I can give you the tour, such as it is.”

He shook her hand, noting the strength of her grip—and a barely perceptible cleft in her chin. “That’d be great if it’s not a bother.”

“Not at all.” Auburn waves fell just past her shoulders. Those green irises featured a charcoal outer ring, and her perfectly proportioned nose sported a smattering of freckles. She was dressed in work-appropriate attire: boots, jeans, and a sleeveless black top with little ruffles at the shoulders. His eyes caught on the spray of light freckles on her sun-kissed shoulders as she led him through the barn.

Her drawl was as sweet as southern iced tea on a hot summer day. He’d never had a boss younger than him, but as he listened to her explain her operation, it was clear he’d be in good hands. She asked relevant questions and found they agreed on horse-training philosophy. In the past he’d used traditional methods when requested by his employers, but he favored natural horsemanship, which relied on psychology, communication, and understanding.

As they talked she glanced over her shoulder a couple times toward the man in the distance. Employee? Lover? Stalking victim?

He nodded toward the patch of ground. “Your new stable?”  
“It’ll be finished in early July.”

“A good deal larger than what you’ve currently got, by the looks of it.”

“Almost twice the size. Concrete floors, twelve-by-twelve stalls. That’s the owner of the construction company out there.”

Another flush. Interesting.

A while later they ended the tour at the paddock ring where Gunner hitched a boot heel on the bottom fence rail as they continued their conversation. The ranch’s boarding business had been part-time work for twenty-two years, and she was planning to expand into horse training and trail rides, making it a full working ranch.

“We need to turn this place into a moneymaker if we’re going to keep it—and we definitely are. The website’s almost up and running. A lot of people around here own horses, and we’ve already got a list of clients whose horses need training. Also some of our boarders have minor issues to work out. There’s good money in training, as I’m sure you know. And no one else in the valley offers trail rides, so I think that’ll be a hit. We get a lot of tourists here to hike and river raft and otherwise enjoy the great outdoors. Ranches in other tourist towns make a good living off trail rides.”

“Sounds like a feasible plan.”

Her hair glistened like burnished copper under the sun as she turned to him. “So, just to clarify, you basically travel the country training horses?”

“That’s the gist of it.”

“Your résumé is impressive and you come highly recommended. But I’m sure you’re aware this place runs at a slower pace than what you’re used to. And comes with a lot less money.”

“That’s true.” But the ranch was everything he’d hoped for.

Some operations didn't treat their horses humanely. The animals were just a means to an end. But Charlotte's concern for their health and happiness was obvious in the animals themselves. The horses were relaxed and bright eyed, their tails swinging loosely. They groomed each other in the field and nickered when Charlotte came around. All good signs.

"But not a problem for you?"

She had a detailed plan for this place's growth and the passion required to take it to the next level. This was a place he'd love to work and the kind of person he'd enjoy working for. "I've been employed by outfits of all sizes, and I don't need much to get by. I'm a simple man. Ready to take on a new challenge—and happy to ditch the uniform."

Her eyes twinkled. "Did I forget to mention the white polos?"

He turned as if to go. "Well, it was nice knowing you."

Her laughter stopped him in his tracks. Gripped him. She laughed with such abandon.

"But the shirts are so nice, with the logo and everything. And the tan riding breeches are really comfortable."

He couldn't help but return her smile. Heat sparked between them as the moment stretched out. Horse smart, cute as a button, and a sense of humor too. If that wasn't the perfect trifecta in a woman, he didn't know what was.

The attraction was unfortunate, as she would be his boss. But he could handle the temptation. He was a man of discipline. Anyway, she apparently had a thing for a certain construction worker.

She tilted her head, still studying him. "The owner of Four Winds called you their horse whisperer."

DENISE HUNTER

“Nah. I just pay attention. Horses have plenty to say if you watch and listen.” He glanced over her shoulder. Speaking of the construction guy . . . “Your contractor is heading this way. I should go now.”

“No!” She glanced over her shoulder and rubbed her lips together. “I mean . . . you might as well, you know, stick around a minute. Gavin will, uh, be around a lot this summer. You should meet him.”

“Sure.” Gunner gave her a speculative look. Did that mean he had the job?

He didn’t have time to ponder the subject as the man in question approached. He walked with the confident stride of someone who knew who he was. He wore a T-shirt with the company logo, a cordial expression—Gunner’s gaze slid down his arm—and a slim silver band on his ring finger.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## Two

**Blue. His eyes were worn-denim blue. Charlotte scanned** Gavin's face, searching for familiar features, and stopped at his lips. Aha! The upper one sported a defined Cupid's bow and the lower one was thick. The upper lip not so much.

*You're staring at his mouth.*

She snapped her gaze back to his eyes. Yep, he'd caught her staring. Her face went nuclear. Belatedly, she shoved the binoculars behind her back. Why was she still carrying these things around?

"Hi." She cleared the threadiness from her voice and tried again. "Um, hi."

Gavin offered a professional smile as they shook hands. "You're Charlotte, right? I'm not sure we've ever formally met. Gavin Robinson."

"Yes, uh, right. I think your little sister was a few years ahead of me in school."

"Sounds about right."

*Do not look at his mouth.* Her curious eyes ticked over to

his ears instead. Small and slightly pointed with detached lobes, just like—

“Gavin Robinson.” He held out a hand to Gunner.

“Gunner Dawson.”

“Sorry, I should’ve introduced you. Gavin is the owner of Robinson Construction, and Gunner is, uh . . . my new horse trainer, I guess? If he’s amenable to the idea, that is.” Wow, she was so smooth today.

Gunner’s brows darted upward as he met her gaze. “Very much so.”

“Congratulations are in order, then,” Gavin said. “You must be new around here. Where you from?”

“Louisville most recently.”

“He worked at a big horse farm there.”

Gunner gave a nod. “Came through Riverbend on the trail last summer and liked the looks of it.”

“You’re not the first. Welcome to town.” Gavin fished a business card from his pocket and handed it to Gunner. “You won’t be in need of construction, but if you need anything at all just give me a call. I know all the best restaurants.”

“That’s awfully nice. Thank you.”

“You’ll find most folks around here are helpful and welcoming.”

Charlotte found her voice. “He’s right. You won’t have any trouble fitting in and making friends.” He’d only be here six months—had some big job opportunity come November—but no reason he couldn’t settle in a bit.

“Good to know.” Gunner eased away and confirmed with Charlotte that he’d be there in the morning.

And then she was alone with Gavin. She shifted awkwardly.

“I stopped by to inspect the footers. I’ll be checking in regularly and doing the framing along with Wes. We’re pretty hands-on with the business.”

“That’s what he said. That’s great.” Could he hear the slight quiver in her voice?

“I didn’t get into this business because I liked sitting behind a desk.”

“Of course. I feel the same.” There were so many things she wanted to ask him—things that had nothing to do with construction—but they all jumbled up in her throat. She couldn’t ask them anyway.

“Makes sense. It’s a great property. Your new stable will be a real asset.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

“I don’t think I ever extended my condolences on the loss of your mother. I didn’t really know her, but she was well liked in town. And known for taking great care of her horses.”

It had been nine months, but the mention of her mother still awakened that vacant spot inside her. “Thank you. She loved them like they were her babies, and I intend to do the same.”

“You’re off to a good start.” He glanced back at the stable. “That’ll be the Taj Mahal of barns.”

Her last effort to save this ranch. “Go big or go home.”

His eyes twinkled. “I like the way you think. Wes and I will be around most of next week and the one after, framing. You’ll be surprised how fast it goes up. The rest will require patience. As I’m sure he mentioned, we do our best to stay on schedule, but sometimes weather interrupts our plans or there are material delays. But we’ll have her up by first of July.”

“He explained all that. We’re good. You guys have a good name around here.”

“We’ll try to live up to it then. If you don’t have any questions for me, I’ve got another job to check on.”

She wished she could come up with an intelligent query because she didn’t want him to leave just yet. But she didn’t know a footer from a fan belt. “Nope, I think I’m good.”

“All right then. We’ll see you bright and early Monday.”

“Sounds good.”

He began walking away.

Maybe she could’ve said “good” one more time. And he’d caught her staring at his lips! *Great impression, Charlotte.* She covered her eyes.

He probably wanted to run screaming from her property. He’d probably go home and tell his wife about the awkward little horse rancher who had a big, fat crush on him.

She shuddered. Because he couldn’t be more wrong. If she was curious to the point of stalking and staring, it was only because she was too afraid to come out and tell him the truth. That at the age of twenty-six, her only blood relative deceased, Charlotte had just discovered she had three biological siblings—and one of them was Gavin Robinson.

“Who was the hottie on the motorcycle?” Charlotte’s younger sister barged into the house a minute behind Charlotte and headed for the fridge. At twenty-one Emerson had long since lost the innocent waiflike appearance she’d had when she and her dad had come into Charlotte’s life. Now she was two inches taller than Charlotte’s five-feet-two and sported a trim, athletic build.



With her blue eyes and thick blonde hair that hung to the small of her back, she put Charlotte in mind of a Disney princess.

“Hello to you too. That was our new horse trainer, Gunner. I just gave him an impromptu interview, and he passed with flying colors.” From her spot at the sink, Charlotte gave Emerson a pointed look. “And he’s way too old for you.”

Emmie waggled her brows. “But not for you.”

“Ranch employees are off-limits.”

“That’s never been a policy.”

“We’ve never had a ranch employee before.” Charlotte finished washing her hands and grabbed the towel. Based on Gunner’s emails, she’d pictured him older somehow. In his forties at least, with a receding hairline and a saggy little paunch shadowing his belt buckle. Instead he was lean and muscular with a full head of dark hair and green eyes that seemed to see right through her somehow.

Emerson’s eyes twinkled. “You realize every female horse owner in a fifty-mile radius will suddenly have a problem horse.”

“Great, we could use the business.”

“What are these doing out?” Emerson nodded toward the binoculars Charlotte had dropped on the island.

“Um . . . I was keeping an eye on the construction. Of the, uh, stable.”

“That’s a little weird. You know that, right?”

“I never claimed to be normal.” So Charlotte hadn’t exactly mentioned her recent discovery about her biological dad and siblings. Even though Emerson was her sister in every way that mattered, they weren’t related by blood, and Charlotte didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She’d have to tell her soon though.

Certainly before she ever revealed the truth to the Robinsons—if she ever got up the nerve.

Emerson finished the glass of water. “I’m going to visit April for a few days.”

Charlotte’s shoulders sank. She had her hands full with the new trail horses, the new trainer, the stable, the upcoming open house, and her job at the Trailhead Bar and Grill. “Can’t you put it off for a bit? There’s so much to do around here.”

“She needs help with her computer—she’s trying to get her jewelry business off the ground—and it’s been forever since I’ve gotten away.”

Charlotte couldn’t remember the last time *she’d* had so much as a day off. But they’d always spoiled Emerson a little. Charlotte was as guilty as her parents. “I hear you, but I rely on your help with the horses, especially since we bought the new ones.”

Emerson cut her a glare. “You mean since *you* bought them.”

“Since the *ranch* bought them, and you are half owner. You really shouldn’t be taking off like this when there’s so much to do for the expansion. I was hoping to brainstorm with you about our big open house.” At least she hoped it would be big. They had to get this place in the black.

Emerson crossed her arms. “That’s why I wanted to sell it. Think what we could’ve done with the money.”

“I can’t be the one to lose the ranch that’s been in our family for three generations.” Expansion was the only way to turn the ranch into a full-time operation. “I promised Mom.” How many times had they had this same conversation?

“That’s right. *You* promised her and you shouldn’t have! It’s as much mine as yours, and you gave me no say.”

“I thought we’d settled this.”

“No, you settled it because I can’t sell my half without yours. So fine, have it your way. But I won’t be tied down to this stupid ranch for the rest of my life. I have things I want to do, too, you know.”

As if Emerson had shown so much initiative. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like start a coffee shop or bakery or go to college or travel.”

Charlotte gave her head a shake. “This town already has a bakery, you hated school, and you don’t have the money to travel.”

“Well, I would’ve if we’d sold the ranch. I love to bake and make food. Maybe I could go to culinary school.”

Charlotte blinked. This seemed to come out of left field. Then again, in middle school Emmie wanted to be a ballerina and in high school a forensic artist, an astronaut, and a professional basketball player.

“You’re a great cook. We can certainly talk about that. But can we focus on the ranch for now? It’s too much work for one person.”

“I don’t want to work with four-legged animals all the live-long day. You can’t even earn a decent living on this place. Mom never made it work.”

It was true that their dad’s truck-driving salary had been all that kept the place running. And after the divorce, Mom struggled to make ends meet. Dad moved to Asheville. Since Emerson had just started high school and Dad was often off driving his routes, she’d stayed here.

“We’ll make it work,” Charlotte said. “Why do you think we’re doing all this—the stable, the open house, the expansion?”

Emerson let out a wry laugh. “Yes, let’s talk about the

stable—and the eighty thousand dollars from Mom’s pension you’re using to build it. We could’ve used that to pay down the loan or just put the property up for—”

“I had no idea you felt so strongly about—”

“Because you wouldn’t let me get a word in edgewise. Just because you’re older doesn’t mean you know everything.”

“I asked what you thought about it. In the living room that night after we got the pension check.”

“Yes, you did. And I told you I didn’t see myself at the ranch long term.”

“I thought you meant in, like, ten years or something. Why didn’t you speak up sooner?”

Emerson rolled her eyes. “Because you would’ve just steam-rolled right over me like you always do.”

“I don’t do that.”

“You’re doing it right now!”

“That’s not fair. The expansion is already well under way. It’s too late to stop it. It’s gonna bring in more money, you’ll see. Once you receive half the profits, you won’t be complaining anymore.”

Emerson speared her with a flinty look. “I have to go.” She headed for the stairs.

“Emerson, don’t leave like this.”

She turned with a huff. “We’re fine, Charlotte. I’m gonna pack a bag and head to April’s. I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Charlotte gritted her teeth. “Could you at least clean out the water tank before you go? I have to be at work at four.”

“Sorry, no can do. I just stopped by to grab my things.” She rushed from the room and up the creaky stairs.

Charlotte grabbed Emerson's empty glass and set it in the dishwasher. She couldn't believe her sister was just leaving at a moment's notice. But then, she didn't bear the burden of the ranch and its horses. Not that it was a burden. Charlotte loved it more than anything.

It went all the way back to the stories her grandmother had told her about the ranch's origins. The sacrifices her grandparents made, eking out a living during the ranch's early days, how he had used his inheritance to start a breeding farm. They loved the ranch life so much, they hung on until it started making real money. Charlotte's young, adventurous heart relished the tales.

But by the time her mom took over, the economy had slackened and the breeding business struggled. She made the difficult decision to switch to boarding instead and worked a full-time job at the bank to maintain it. Her efforts had kept the ranch alive, but it was no longer self-sustaining.

Perhaps her mom had felt the ranch slipping away when she'd extracted that promise from Charlotte two weeks before she passed.

Mom was in the makeshift office in the stable doing the bills when Charlotte popped in.

"I have to run over to the feedstore. Do we need anything besides glucosamine?"

"I don't think so." Mom didn't look up from her work. Her brows knitted and lines creased her forehead.

Charlotte set down the shovel and entered the room. "Something wrong?"

Mom leaned back in the chair, her gaze skating over the bills scattered on the desktop. She released a sigh. "I made a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

She shook her head. “I never should’ve switched to boarding horses. The breeding business was good—it was just going through a bad spell because of the economy. If I’d waited it out . . .”

“You can’t know what might’ve happened. The business could’ve gone under entirely.”

“I’m worried about its future.”

“We’ll be okay, Mom.”

“We need to make some changes, but that costs money we don’t have. I’m getting older, and I don’t want to leave you girls in this situation—if I don’t run it into the ground altogether. Your grandparents worked so hard to build this ranch.”

Charlotte put her hand over her mom’s. “We won’t let that happen, Mom. Let’s give it some thought.”

“I’ve been doing that for months. I’m at my wits’ end.”

“Well, I’ll come up with something.” She squeezed Mom’s hand. “It’s going to be okay, I promise. I won’t let this place go under.”

She’d meant every word, but since her mom’s death Charlotte had been struggling just to make ends meet. She didn’t make the income her mom had made at the bank. The expansion was a last-ditch effort to make this ranch a full-time operation once again. Otherwise, Charlotte didn’t see how she could keep up this pace.

Her sister bounded down the steps. “See you later, probably Wednesday.”

“*Wednesday?*”

Emerson glowered.

Charlotte sighed. “Fine. Drive carefully. Tell April I said hi,” she called just before the screen door slapped shut.

She wished they'd had a chance to talk things out, but Charlotte wasn't feeling so amenable right now. It was entirely possible she might've said things she couldn't take back.

They hadn't argued like that since they were teenagers. Emerson used to complain that Charlotte bossed her around, and Charlotte insisted Emerson got away with murder—which she had. All the rules that had been written in stone for Charlotte were up for negotiation where Emerson was concerned.

Days like this she wished her mom were still alive. Or her dad, for that matter. Emerson had been adrift since they'd passed. She didn't go to church anymore, never visited the gravesites, and seemed to have no direction in her life.

Charlotte missed both her parents terribly. She'd always known Patrick Simpson was not her biological father. But she barely remembered her life before he entered it when she was seven, bringing a toddler with him. Emmie, having been recently abandoned by her mother, latched onto Charlotte like a leech to a host. Charlotte was happy to accept the big-sister role.

And having a dad around was a novelty she embraced. During the summers he sometimes took her on his truck-driving routes. She loved riding in his big rig and listening to him talk over the CB radio. Sometimes he let her talk too. She learned all the slang, and Dad laughed with pride as she conversed like a pro with the other drivers. She was mesmerized by this secret language. But what she loved most was that, even in the wee hours of the night, she could reach out into the void and someone would always answer back. It was comforting somehow.

She only had a few memories prior to her parents' marriage. One of them was in the stable after her mom's beloved horse Luna foaled.

“Where’s the baby’s daddy?” Charlotte had asked her mother while watching Luna clean her spindly-legged baby, the familiar smells of straw and horseflesh filling her nose.

Mama squatted down next to her. “Filly, honey, remember? A girl foal is a filly.”

“Where’s the filly’s daddy? Is she like me?”

Mama’s green eyes fixed on her. “What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t she have a daddy?”

Her mom was quiet so long, Charlotte thought she didn’t hear. “Mama, doesn’t she—?”

“She has a daddy. It’s Rogue, the stallion who visited awhile last fall, remember?”

The black thoroughbred stallion was one of the most beautiful horses Charlotte had ever seen with his shiny coat and thick mane. He was tall and powerful, and Charlotte hadn’t been allowed near him.

Mama turned Charlotte toward her and stroked her cheek. “You have a daddy, too, honey. But he can’t be with us.”

Charlotte thought about the big strong horse. “Like Rogue?”

Her mom’s eyes went sparkly and she nodded. “Yeah, honey. Like Rogue.”

Somewhere she had a strong, powerful daddy who couldn’t be with her. That was enough for Charlotte. Maybe her real daddy was a superhero.

She later brought up the subject of her father during her elementary years. But her mom was always vague and quickly changed the subject. But by the time she reached fifth grade, she was old enough to know superheroes weren’t real. But maybe he was an FBI agent or an astronaut or a Navy SEAL. They had



secret missions too. His work was important and he couldn't have a normal family life like other dads.

Then in the sixth grade, the morning after her daddy-daughter dance, she caught her mother alone in the kitchen. They exchanged good mornings and talked about the dance as Charlotte poured herself a bowl of Apple Jacks. She'd had so much fun with Dad last night. But in the afterglow of the evening, the question she'd submerged for years burst to the surface.

She settled across the table from her mother and drew a breath of courage. "Mom . . . who's my real dad?"

Her mother's spoon stopped halfway to its destination. She blinked. "Patrick is your father, Charlotte. The only one who matters."

But she was old enough to be curious about where she'd come from. And old enough to wonder why he couldn't be with her. Her class had done a family tree last semester and half of it felt fake. "You know what I mean. Don't I have the right to know who my real father is?"

Just then Dad appeared in the doorway. He stopped short. His eyes turned down at the corners. His lips loosened. He seemed ten years older than he had last night when he was laughing and spinning her around the dance floor.

Heat crawled up Charlotte's neck. Shame bloomed inside, making her feel all squishy and awful.

Mom changed the subject again, but Charlotte couldn't forget the hurt look on Dad's face. Not for weeks. And she didn't know how to make it right. He never brought it up again, so neither did she.

Things soon returned to normal, and though Charlotte was

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still curious about her biological father, she would never risk hurting her dad that way again.



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## Three

The robust aroma of java hit Charlotte as she entered Milly's Mug and Bean. She knew her friend would be working this morning because she'd begged Charlotte to take her nursery class at church for the late service.

Charlotte checked her watch. She only had twenty minutes to enjoy her morning brew. She took her spot in line and minutes later she was at the front.

"Good morning, sunshine," Brianna said.

"Morning."

"Your usual?"

"Yes, please."

Brianna wore her black spiral curls slicked back into a ponytail. Her bronzed skin and sculpted cheekbones weren't compliments of Maybelline and artistry. If she ever got tired of managing the coffee shop, Brianna could definitely model. But she didn't have time for makeup, much less a modeling career.

The woman finished out the transaction, prompting Charlotte to say, "Oh no you don't. I insist on paying this time."

“Not a chance.”

“Why did you give me that gift card for my birthday if you’re gonna comp all my drinks?”

“You know, you really shouldn’t complain about free lattes.”

Brianna had a point. Charlotte’s argument died on her tongue. “Thank you.”

The bell over the door jangled. Charlotte glanced over her shoulder. She stiffened as Jeff Robinson entered with his son Cooper. The younger man wore his sheriff’s uniform this morning.

She hadn’t seen either of them since she’d found that manila envelope in Mom’s safety-deposit box back in March. It was labeled *Charlotte’s family* and contained articles about the Robinson kids, an old blurry photo of her mom with a man, and a war medal of some kind.

Boisterous laughter drew her attention to Cooper. The last time she’d seen him was last year when he pulled her over for speeding. Not her finest moment. Her face warmed at the memory.

Charlotte shot her head straight forward, latching onto Brianna’s gaze.

Everything in her longed to turn back and stare, to find something familiar in each of their faces. But she had to play it cool.

Brianna was the queen of cool. “Breathe. You go sit down. I’ll bring your drink and take a break.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte scuttled off before the pair approached and chose the only available two-top in the busy shop. She took the seat that allowed her to observe the father and son.

Jeff Robinson, who appeared to be near sixty, was handsome for his age, tall, and fit looking. He wore a blue button-down shirt with khakis. He was just the sort of man she'd always envisioned as her father, minus the superhero cape. Except since Charlotte was the youngest sibling, that meant he'd been married to Lisa when he'd conceived her. That scandalous detail flew in the face of Charlotte's childhood hopes and Jeff's stellar reputation in the community. But it also explained why he might have abandoned his fatherly duties to Charlotte—and why her mom might not have wanted Charlotte to know about him.

The affair definitely complicated matters, then and now.

The father and son chatted as they waited for their order. They seemed to share an easy relationship. She didn't detect any tension between them.

The bell jingled and Lisa Robinson entered. She looked a bit younger than her husband. Her blonde hair was swept up in a messy bun, revealing kind eyes and a dimple that hollowed as she hugged her son. The three stood talking, Jeff's arm wrapping around his wife's waist as they chatted.

Charlotte watched them, feeling more like an outsider than she'd ever felt in her life. They seemed so at ease together. The perfect family. How could she ever approach Jeff and tell him who she was?

Her heart shrank two sizes at the thought she'd tried to stuff down each time it emerged. He'd never even spoken to her that she remembered. She might've seen him a dozen or so times in her life. She didn't have any reason to go into his hiking supply store, and he'd never had reason to visit the ranch. They didn't attend the same church. Though his children frequented the

Trailhead Bar and Grill, she rarely saw him or Lisa there. Or maybe Charlotte just hadn't noticed them. Why would she?

"Get that look off your face." Brianna appeared in the seat across from her and slid her latte across the table. "It's killing me."

"They seem like such a close-knit family."

"He deserves to know he has a child."

"What if he already knows? I mean, how couldn't he? If he and my mom, you know. And she turned up with a pregnant belly a few months later."

"If he's denied you all these years, then he's not the man everyone thinks he is."

"I still can't believe she had an affair with a married man. It was so unlike her."

"People make mistakes, even good people. Besides, that was a long time ago. I'm sure she grew a lot as a person over the years. She probably deeply regretted her actions—but she never would've wished it away since the affair gave her you."

"Maybe I should just try to forget all this. I don't want to cause trouble. That woman might be devastated."

"You didn't do this—he and your mom did. And even if Jeff knows, it's obvious his kids don't. They deserve to know they have a sister, and you deserve to know your family."

Emerson meant the world to her, but their parents' deaths had left a huge void in her life. She was lonely in a way she'd never experienced before. She glanced at Jeff. "He has half my DNA. How can I not be curious about where I came from? And I can't bear to have family out there and not do anything about it. I have to get to know them. I can't help it."

"Have you talked to Gavin at all?"

“Briefly when he came out to check on the footers yesterday.” When she’d gawked at him. She closed her eyes at the memory. “He caught me staring at his lips.”

Brianna sputtered her cold brew. “Why the heck were you staring at his lips?”

She touched her upper lip. “He has that defined Cupid’s bow, like me.”

Brianna just shook her head. “Girl.”

“I know. But I think it went okay other than that.”

“Other than your brother thinking you were ogling him?”

“Well, when you put it like that.”

“So how long are you gonna carry on before you tell the guy?”

“I think I should confront Jeff first. He should have the chance to tell his family.” Charlotte glanced over as the couple hugged their son goodbye and left the coffee shop. Cooper settled at a vacant table with his coffee and a newspaper. “There should be some kind of guide for this.”

*“How to Introduce Yourself to the Birth Family You Never Knew You Had?”* Maybe you can write it when this is all said and done.”

“If I live through it. My nerves are shot.” Between losing her mother, the ranch’s uncertain future, and this unexpected discovery, she was up to her ears in stress.

“You’re strong. You can do this.” Brianna squeezed her hand. “You know, Avery is an amiable person. She’s Granny’s primary physician. Maybe you should try to get to know her a bit.” Brianna’s grandma was in the advanced stages of multiple sclerosis.

“And how do you suggest I do that?”

“I don’t know. Go see her at the clinic.”

“For what?”

Brianna lifted a shoulder. “Fake something.”

“I can’t afford a real doctor’s appointment, much less a fake one.”

“Just do it. What could it hurt?”

Charlotte thought a minute. “Well, I am overdue for a tetanus shot.”

“There you go. Plus, you’d be killing two birds with one stone.”

“I guess that’s true. I’ll give it some thought.”

Brianna sipped her cold brew. “Hey, aren’t you interviewing that potential trainer later today?”

“Actually he stopped by yesterday and I hired him already. So that’s one thing off my list of things to worry about.”

“That was fast.”

“He has an incredible résumé. I can’t imagine why he’d want to work at our dinky little ranch, but I’m not complaining.”

“You sure he isn’t a felon or something?”

“His references gave glowing reviews. They all said they’d rehire him in a heartbeat.”

“It’s only temporary, though?”

“Through the end of October. He agreed to get the program up and running and help train the next person. I’ll take what I can get at this point. It’s not like there’s a line of skilled applicants outside my door. Certainly none with his qualifications.” Charlotte glanced at Cooper. “Do you think we look alike? No, don’t turn around—you turned around!”

“He’s too busy reading the paper to notice. I think he might have your nose.”



Charlotte touched her nose. “Really?”

“No, not really—he’s thirty feet away.”

Charlotte scowled at her friend.

“I have to say this makes me really glad I voted for him. I mean, he’s doing a good job and everything, but especially since he’s your brother.”

Heat seeped into Charlotte’s cheeks. She took a swig of her latte. Watched as Cooper leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“You didn’t vote for him. You didn’t vote for your own brother.”

Charlotte lowered her voice. “I didn’t know he was my brother! And I didn’t vote against him either . . . I just didn’t vote at all.”

“You did not just say that. You gotta vote; it’s your civic duty.”

“All right, all right, I’ll never miss Election Day again.”

Cooper sipped his coffee. How did he take it? Was he dairy sensitive like her? There were so many things she’d always wondered about. Her athletic ability, her allergies to penicillin, her cleft chin. Would she find the answers in her dad’s side of the family?

Brianna leaned forward. “Um, don’t look now, but there’s a hottie at two o’clock who keeps checking you out. Black fitted tee and a pair of very nice shoulders. Oh, mama.”

Charlotte tore her attention from Cooper to find Gunner staring at her, a knowing glint in his eyes. Because, of course, he’d seen her gawking at Cooper.

He gave a nod.

She pulled her lips into a semblance of a smile, then jerked

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her gaze back to Brianna. Her internal temperature had risen at least ten degrees. “That’s my new horse trainer. And, naturally, he just caught me staring at Cooper.”

“So?”

“So yesterday he caught me gawking at Gavin.”

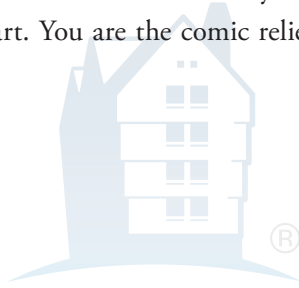
Brianna shrugged.

“With *binoculars*.”

Brianna’s features froze. Then she let out that exuberant laugh she was known for.

Charlotte scowled. “It’s not that funny.”

“Oh, sweetheart. You are the comic relief I so need in my life.”



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