

BEYOND IVY WALLS

A NOVEL

RACHEL FORDHAM



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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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For my sisters: Anna, Stephanie, Leah, Heather, and Tia,

I treasure our time together, your advice, the nights we
stay up way too late talking, the memories we've shared,
and the ones we are yet to make.



I have for the first time found what I can truly love—I
have found *you*.

—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*



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Chapter I

Monticello, Iowa

SPRING 1903

Mama always said eavesdropping was the surest way to stir trouble and make enemies out of perfectly good neighbors. For the first twenty-three years of Sadie West's life, she'd adhered to her mother's counsel and turned away from any gossip within earshot. But when she left home and found employment at the Hoag feather duster factory as a sorter, the only way to pass the time was to lean closer to the chin-waggers and glean what she could from their conversations. Under the circumstances, she rationalized that even her pious mother would understand.

Her father's riding accident had forced her to leave the farm a month ago and come to the city for work. In that time Sadie had overheard conversations about courtships gone awry for scandalous reasons, bar fights that required police intervention, and upcoming socials that made her long for Marvin Bennett's company. The chatter kept her mind occupied as she tossed feathers into their designated bins. It was mindless work that left her

legs aching and her body covered in a fine layer of turkey dander. Hardly a romantic job.

But the bits and pieces of Monti gossip made the long days pass quicker, keeping her imagination fed and giving her titillating tidbits to work into her letters to her younger sisters, who remained at home doing what they could to plow the fields without the help of their bedridden pa. The thought of her family's situation made her shiver, but she shoved down the worries that threatened to surface. Circumstances were bleak, but things would become only more dire if she gave in to the heavy feelings.

"I thought Otis Taylor would have come back by now," Alta, a sorter stationed to Sadie's immediate right, said to Sylvia at the end of the line. Sadie's ears perked up at the mention of the elusive gentleman. His name and story intrigued her and had provided hours of entertainment as she took the fragments she knew about him and filled in the rest however she felt inclined. Otis Taylor, the handsome son of Monti elite, who'd left due to his musical genius a decade ago, was now expected to return. And the women of the town could not wait to bat their eyes and compete for his attention.

She looked at the mountain of feathers before her and buried a smile that crept to her lips. Someday she, too, would go back home and rush into the arms of her loved ones. She'd tell her sisters every detail of her time away and make it all sound thrilling. And someday, Lord willing, she would see Marvin strolling up her long walkway, back from school and finally ready to proclaim himself smitten. Gone would be his tentative smile; he'd grin at her and take her in his arms. She shook her head, chiding herself for allowing her musings to have too much rein.

"I heard he's too busy performing." Sylvia's lips stuck out in a pout as she continued her conversation with Alta. "It's not fair.

The rest of the world gets to hear Otis play, and we don't. It'd be so exciting if he came home. And he must—the house is his now.”

Sadie inched closer, preferring talk of Otis, who was as good as fictional to her, over the heavier thoughts that weighed on her mind. Old worries over her father's abysmally slow recovery and her family's desperate financial situation, as well as new worries about her room and board, were ever pressing. But she had a job, and although her sacrifice had not solved all her problems, she'd managed to keep the bank at bay for this long already—that was something to be proud of. She stood a little taller. She'd sort feathers forever if that was what her situation required.

The Hoag duster factory had once been a broom factory. But as the story went, or perhaps it was the truth, the senior Mr. Hoag was approached one day by a man with turkey feathers. He insisted on a broom made of the plumage, but their stiff, brittle nature was not conducive to broom making. Rather than abandon the idea entirely, Mr. Hoag removed the pith from the feathers and attached them to a shorter handle, creating a novel duster that was soon in high demand. Such high demand that when Sadie's father's horse lost its footing and fell on him, breaking bones in his back and legs that forced the never-idle man into bed with a dismal prognosis, she'd been able to easily find a job at the factory. She'd left home in a hurry, promising the predatory bank that she'd send money and that they had no reason to call in the family's debt. Her sisters had also rallied, promising to turn the soil over themselves and plant as many fields as they could. Though all their efforts may prove futile, they were fighters, and Sadie would keep fighting.

She grabbed a handful of feathers and began tossing them in with renewed gusto. Her sisters had often called her the General due to her tendency to take charge. As general, she'd perse-

vere, even if doing so meant long days of tedious work and, she cringed, even longer nights spent in squalor.

When the current owner of the duster factory, Mr. Elmer Hoag, asked Sylvia to go to a different station and help remove pith, the conversation that had kept Sadie's imagination engaged died, replaced by only the whir of the lathe turning handles. Sadie sucked in her bottom lip, debating striking up her own conversation with Alta.

She cleared her throat. "I've been meaning to ask, have you always lived in Monticello?"

Alta pursed her lips before answering. "I was born in Des Moines. I came to Monti when I was seven."

"Must be nice knowing everyone," she muttered. The pinched expression on Alta's face had her regretting that she'd said anything. Alta didn't want to be her friend—that much was obvious. She'd been short with Sadie from the start, always sharing sideways glances with the other sorters and making snide comments about Sadie's clothes being out of fashion.

Alta's hands stilled. She turned and faced Sadie, a too-sweet smile on her face. "I know you're new here, and I can tell you really want to fit in—"

"I wasn't trying—"

"No need to explain yourself. I'll give you some advice. In the city people bathe often. We pride ourselves on our appearance. Your frame isn't so bad; you're dainty and you've a long neck." Sadie tried not to shy away from Alta's appraisal. "Cleaned up, you wouldn't be stunning, but you'd be tolerable. If you want to be noticed here, you've really got to try harder. The turkey dander is an inch thick on you. It's appalling. And it makes you look terribly out of place."

Sadie ducked her head and focused on the banded feathers in

her hands. Did Cinderella ever want to cry out that it wasn't her fault she was covered in soot? Sadie certainly wanted to lash out at Alta and tell her how she'd been kicked out of Mrs. Smith's house because a new boarder could pay more than she'd been able to offer. She wanted to scream and tell her that if she went to the boardinghouse, she would not have enough money to make the monthly payment to the bank, and her family could lose everything. Nor was going home an option—they needed her meager wages.

Angry words rose in her throat, but she swallowed them in one uncomfortable gulp. No one could know that she'd taken up residence in an abandoned building. If her family found out, they would worry and call her home, but then they'd be in worse straits and could all end up without a place to live. Only harm would come from telling, and so she offered no defense.

"You're right," Sadie said, managing to keep her voice steady. "I've been preoccupied. Thank you for the advice."

She made no further attempts at conversation with Alta. With only the voice in her own head for company, the hands on the clock moved slowly. At last, the bell rang, and she was able to slink away from the bustling feather duster factory, back to the ruins she currently called home.



Dear Sisters,

She wrote huddled against the wall in the dusty, abandoned factory, her thin coat pulled tightly around her shoulders in a weak attempt to ward off the evening chill. Molly, Violette, and

Flora expected her to write, and normally she treasured the opportunity to share her news and offer what encouragement she could. It helped her feel close to them despite the physical distance. Today she felt less inclined to write, but their neighbor and friend, Peter Tippins, who delivered goods between the rural community and the city, would be waiting tomorrow for her letter. If she didn't write, her family would worry. If she wrote the truth about her circumstances, they would also worry.

She tilted her head to the side and looked out the broken window at the hazy sky that was just beginning to shift from day to night. Dallying would not do. When the sunlight faded, all would be dark.

I'm now residing in a room much larger than I need.
It's not grand, but it is big and when the rain pours, I
am dry. It's a good place to sit and think and dream of
what life will be like when all of this is over.

She'd written regularly for years, happy stories with beautiful endings, and stopped only when Marvin went off to college, leaving her with nothing but a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. The urge to write hadn't come back, not even when she convinced herself that Marvin did care and that he'd simply wanted to wait to make his feelings known until they could act on their love. She would have to be creative now, because the truth of her circumstances was more than her sisters could bear. A little fiction, a little embellishment, and one could almost believe this hovel was a castle and the future was full of promise.

Movement in the corner of the abandoned factory caught her eye. A fat rat scurried across the floor. She pulled her legs in close to her chest and forced herself to think only of the words on the

page.

Sadie wrote until the night sky grew too dark to see by, telling her sisters what she could while leaving out the truth about the draft, the broken glass, and her heavy heart. These she would bear alone.

Dust and spiders filled her new home, causing her to sneeze, and during the darkest hours of the night, she often heard the woot of the owls or the yap of a distant coyote. In the far corner, where the draft was less noticeable, she curled on her side. With her eyes closed, the strange sounds were louder. The wind whirred and whistled.

Once when she was a child, Pa had taken her roller-skating. He'd seen the desire in her eyes, and though they never had extra money, he paid to rent skates and smiled as she toddled around on unsteady legs. Ever since, she'd longed to go back and feel the excitement of the crowd. The whir of the wind brought the memory back, and soon she felt her breathing come softer and easier. She had lived many beautiful days, and with the memory fresh in her heart, she could believe there were more to come.



A sliver of moon, with a smattering of clouds dancing in front of it, offered a bit of light to the otherwise murky night. Otis glared. A moonless sky would have been better. He'd planned his late-night return with care, but he had no way of dimming the moon's light.

His long and tiresome journey ended in front of the mansion of his boyhood. There it was, looming before him, as large as he remembered. Stiff and gabled, with tall chimneys, sculptures, and fountains. A masterpiece, declaring to the world: "The Tay-

lors live here!" Or at least they had. He was the last Taylor left, and he did *not* intend to live here. He was merely coming back so he could sell the place and be done with it forever. His father was dead. His brother was dead. He was free to rid himself of it all.

"Shall I put your luggage inside?" the driver asked.

"On the veranda will do." He wanted the man gone so he could face the memories alone, free from spectating eyes. Feelings long suppressed were already fighting inside, pressing against his chest, determined to surface after so many years dormant. He patted his dog, Wolf, pretending to comfort the animal when in fact he was the one seeking reassurance. "It's late. I'm sure you have places to be."

"I am eager to get home and to my wife." In a hurried voice, the man added, "But I won't be telling her you are returned."

"See to it you don't." Otis had paid the man a sizeable sum to keep his return quiet.

"I ain't no flap jaw."

"Good." Otis tugged at his hat, lowering it farther on his head. He didn't like the prospect of becoming the subject of gossip, and he certainly didn't want callers. "I have matters to settle and wish to do so in private."

"You told me." The man looked skeptical but didn't argue. He picked up Otis's luggage and carried it to the veranda. Otis's belongings were sparse. It took little time to unload everything.

"Do you need anything else, sir?"

Otis shook his head. "No, go on home—you've been paid."

"Good night to you, Mr. Taylor."

Otis flinched. The title was his father's, not his. His hands tingled as he waited for the snap of the reins, the creak of the carriage, and the sound of wheels growing faint in the distance to confirm he was alone. Just him and Wolf and the walls of ivy.

Alone.

He stood as stiff as the statues in the yard, free to face the house and its ill-begotten memories. He'd been a boy here—there had even been a time when he had been happy in this mansion. Days of racing his brother, Reginald, across the yard, playing marbles, and dreaming of a future in this very town. It had all been short-lived. Those blissful memories now buried beneath the thick and heavy happenings that followed.

He sighed. Reginald was gone. As were his parents. And now he was here, no longer a boy but a man. How strange a twist it was, to be returned, but only because he was the last.

Chapter 2

Sadie crept away from her makeshift bed early in the morning, determined to bathe in the creek before going to work. Her hair would be wet, but at least it would be free of its oily sheen. She needed to hurry so she would have time to wash her extra clothes and lay them out to dry. Staying clean while living in filth had proved difficult, but she was resolute. Alta's words stung more than she wanted to acknowledge, and from now on she would go to whatever lengths necessary to maintain at least a moderate level of cleanliness. Not for Alta, of course, but because her own pride demanded it.

The sun was not yet up, and fading stars still twinkled in the sky as she pulled herself through the broken window, soap and soiled clothes in hand. The abandoned factory sat near the road. Behind it was a magnificent house, taller and finer than any other in Monticello, and past that was a creek.

With a gentle step she began her procession toward the creek, mindful of twigs that might snap from her weight. Hanging laundry and chimney smoke had told her someone lived in the magnificent house, but from her careful watching she knew the schedule they kept. No one would be up now. She was safe to

bathe and wash her clothes so long as she didn't dally.

The soft babbling of the water met her ears, alerting her that she'd made it past the house. Its pleasant sound was a welcome change from the scratching feet she heard at night. The rustle of the leaves in the wind, the water, and the dew-laden grasses elicited a sigh. She savored the calm of it all.

One more glance in every direction assured her that she was alone. Covered by darkness, she undressed down to her undergarments and slid into the knee-high, frigid water of the creek. Bending lower, she splashed water on her arms and onto her shoulders. The duster factory—with its feathers and dander floating in the air, mixed with sawdust from the lathe that spun the hubs and handles—was not an easy place to keep clean in. Her brow often grew sweaty in the hot room and every particle that floated in the air raced for her damp flesh, sticking to her with vengeance.

She worked the soap against her skin, scrubbing until at last her arms were clean and the freckles that sprinkled her skin were visible once again. She was about to begin her face and hair when she heard steps coming closer. An animal? Though she looked up and saw nothing, she sank deeper into the water, holding herself still despite the cold.

Everything went quiet except her breath, which seemed to come louder with each passing second.

After a few more moments passed, she lifted one foot through the water, then another. Like a silent catfish she moved closer to the shore, praying that whatever caused the noise was gone. If being caught squatting was bad, being caught bathing in the creek in thin, wet underthings was surely worse.

A rustle in the brush near the bank caused her to flinch. Fleeing to the far side of the water was tempting, but her clothes were

waiting for her on the factory side. Her numb and tingling legs begged her to decide quickly. Flee, hide, or fight. She had to do something.

She could curse herself for caring so much about her appearance. Never again would vanity get the better of her. Let Alta mock her—let them all mock her.

When she heard another noise, she chose to act. She crept closer, ready to glance over the bank, hoping to see a deer, racoon, or opossum. The beady night eyes of any animal were sure to make her skin crawl, but she would face them. If necessary, she'd fight the creature off. With no weapon, she prepared herself to appear large and intimidating. One more deep breath, one more silent prayer, and then she poked her head up just high enough to see beyond the bank.

Coming face-to-face with the wet nose of a panting dog, she relaxed—only to tense again when she saw it pick up one of her shoes.

“Give me my shoe,” she said in a firm whisper. “Come on.”

Obediently, it dropped her shoe. She smiled, proud of her commanding voice. But her moment of smugness was instantly dashed when the dog arched its back, lifted its head toward the sky, and howled.

There was no time to think. She flew from the water, wet and still dirty except for her clean arms. In one swift motion she grabbed her sparse, filthy belongings and raced past the ornate home, bound for the old factory. Giving no thought to modesty, she flew across the yard as she made her escape. She didn't look left, or right—she kept her eye on the broken window, running for it like a mouse fleeing a cat, only it was a dog at her heels.

Only once she was inside did she stop to catch her breath. The dog continued to howl, bellowing over and over, a hunter an-

nouncing to the world that it had treed an old ringtail.

She wasn't about to be caught dripping wet, shaking from cold and fear. Quick as she could she pulled her dry skirt and shirt-waist over her wet underthings, brushed and braided her still-grimy hair, and then peered out the window, ready to make her second escape, this time to the Hoag factory.

The dog let a final howl ring through the air before quieting. It paced back and forth in front of her window entrance. She looked over her shoulder, trying to think of a way to get past it. Every couple of days, she bought a loaf of bread and rationed it as long as she could. Her loaf was down to a dry crust. She wrapped it in a handkerchief and peered out the window. Her stomach rumbled as she looked again at her crust, but she could forgo a meal if it meant escape.

Where had this dog come from? She could now see that the dog wore a collar, which—drat—made it far less likely the animal was a stray. Someone owned it and took it for walks. Perhaps it was lost and its owner was searching all of Monticello for it. That would be the best scenario. Once it was found, she could go back to her quiet existence, sneaking in and out unnoticed.

The possibly lost dog continued its nearby marching, and she could wait no longer for it to go away. She had to meet Peter and then get to work. Losing her job would make this entire endeavor for naught, which was an outcome she could not accept.

“Hello there,” she said in a soft voice as she crept out the window. She'd been raised with animals. Surely this dog only wanted attention. “What's your name?”

It cocked its head to the right and then to the left, its dark ears flopping over with each tilt. Its coat was mottled and spotted, appeared almost blue, and its expression was friendly. Sadie stepped closer, held her hand out, and continued speaking softly. “Don't

bark. I'm leaving. You can have the run of the place."

For one moment, she believed her crisis averted. Then it leaned back on its haunches and tilted its head to the sky. Obstinate, stubborn animal!

"Here!" She meant to throw the bread only, but her handkerchief went with it. No time to fret that loss, she ran for the Hoag factory while the dog went for its prize.



Otis's heart pounded against his chest in the most uncomfortable way as he surveyed the parlor of his childhood home. He'd tried sleeping when he arrived but had found rest unattainable. When Wolf cried, begging to go out before the sun had even risen, he obliged. Wolf, crazy old coon dog, ran for the creek as soon as the door was open. Otis shrugged. Wolf might be excited about Monticello, but that didn't mean *he* had to be.

So he stood in the parlor, waiting for his dog to come back, all the while fighting the memories he saw when he looked around the room. Years of trying to forget proved ineffective as the flood of remembrances crashed against him with storm-like force. With gritted teeth he crossed the carpeted floor to the corner seat where his mother had preferred to sit in the dim evenings. He let his hand run across the tall wingback chair and tried to remember her face, but a mere outline was all he could invoke.

His father had often sat on the other side of the room. When Otis's gaze went there, he instantly saw the man he'd once looked up to, the man who let him down, hurting both his body and soul. His father had been narrow-shouldered and wiry, a driven man always reaching higher, never satisfied. Otis shook his head, trying to get the image to fade, but it lingered like a foul odor.

Wolf bawled like he always did when he caught the scent of a coon or even a squirrel. Fool dog wasn't overly particular about what he chased.

Otis went to the window, moved the drapes back, and peered out, spying a flash of white. A person?

When he lost sight of the figure, he went to the door and opened it, trying for a better look. But whatever he thought he'd seen was gone. He shook his head. Being back at the Taylor mansion was already affecting his mind. Returning was foolhardy—he never should have agreed to come. Someone else should have managed the sale and he should have stayed hidden away.

Why had he come back? He'd asked himself many times. And every time he rationalized, convincing himself that his return would make the sale of the property easier. But in the pit of his stomach, he knew there was more to it than that. For years he'd waited to be beckoned home, and it had never happened. If he was being honest, he would admit that he'd returned so he could step into the house of his childhood and attempt to settle the tumult of the past. If he faced it, would he find peace?

Foolish. Here he was staring at his father's chair, feeling no liberation. Only the tightening of chains.

"Otis?" Leon Dawson's voice echoed through the hall. The man and his wife, Mildred, had faithfully worked for the Taylor family since Otis was a lad. It was Leon who had sent word calling Otis back to Monticello after his brother's death. Six letters later, he'd finally agreed to return.

"I'm in here." He tugged at his vest as though clothing free of wrinkles would somehow make him less of an oddity. There was no hiding the uneasy feeling that had overtaken him since the carriage rolled into Monticello. "I didn't mean to wake you. Wolf wanted out."

“Mildred heard you. She shoved me and told me to come and see if you were in need of anything.”

“No . . . N-nothing.” Otis stumbled over his words. He’d lived isolated so long, and conversed so rarely, that his tongue caught in his mouth. “I thought . . . I thought I saw Wolf chasing after . . . something.”

“We’ve coons out there.”

At the risk of sounding out of his head, he said, “I thought it was a person. A woman, perhaps, but not in a dress.” Heat raced to his face. “She was clothed, but—”

The dog bawled again. Otis sprang to the door, throwing it open. He saw nothing but Wolf.

“Come here, boy.” Otis whistled several times until at last Wolf came running, carrying something in his mouth. “What have you got there?”

Wolf dropped his treasure for Otis to scoop up. “A handkerchief. It’s got stitching on it.”

Leon stepped closer. “I don’t know where he found that. Must be something that was lying around awhile.”

“It’s got breadcrumbs in it, and”—he brought it closer to his nose—“It smells like birds.”

“Birds?”

“Yes, how peculiar.” Otis pointed to the hearth where the dog’s favorite blanket lay. “Go on. You’ve been up long enough, as have I.”

Wolf looked back toward the door before lying down.

“Is the old dog run still in working order? If he’s going to find things to steal, I might not be able to let him roam.”

“It’s not had dogs in it since your brother died.” Leon rubbed his wrinkled forehead. “I haven’t inspected it for some time. I believe the winter storms did damage, but we could work on mak-

ing repairs.”

“I should have come sooner. Then all this would have been sold and done with long before any storms.” Or maybe he should not have come at all, but he kept that thought to himself. Leon couldn’t understand, at least not fully, the many memories that haunted him.

“I did write you as soon as your brother died.” Leon sat, looking nearly as comfortable in the house as Wolf.

“I wasn’t sure . . .” Otis’s mouth went dry, so he let his words trail off. He’d not come with the first letter because he hadn’t wanted to accept his brother’s death. And he’d not come after the other letters because this was not how he wanted his homecoming to go.

“You’re here now and we can talk about the sell. Or I can wait until you are settled in more—”

“Settle in? I’ve come to sell the place and be off. I’ll linger a month, maybe two, while it’s settled, then I’ll go.” Otis looked around the dark room that had once been home. There was no warmth, no swelling in his chest, no feelings of homecoming. He wasn’t going to spend his life hiding in Monticello, tormented by the past.

“Very well. We still need to discuss the financial situation your brother left you with and decide how you want to go about the sell.”

“Go about it? I want to find a buyer and exchange all this for money. How difficult can that be?”

“Do you want to try to sell all of it together or separately? Do you wish to keep any of it? Do you want to sell the furniture, your brother’s rifles, your mother’s dishes—”

“Dishes . . .” His mother had special ordered them. They’d arrived packed in crates with straw tucked carefully around each

dish. Flowers, small and hand-painted, along each edge. Material things meant little to him, so why did he suddenly have the urge to find the long-forgotten dishes? “I don’t know what I’d do with them.” He looked away, alarmed by the lump that so quickly formed in his throat. “As for the businesses, my father never included me in his financial affairs. I’ll take most any reasonable offer.” The room was full of portraits, chairs, trinkets. “What am I to do with it all? Pack it into the woods?”

“The woods?”

“Or wherever I go next.”

He’d inherited the house, the businesses, and every worldly possession his family had left behind, and he felt no inkling of interest in making it his own. The thought of his mother stirred a fondness, yes, but the rest could all go. It could burn to nothing more than hot coal and he would not care. “If you called me back to try to convince me to keep it all running, yours is a fool’s errand. Monticello will never be home. I won’t stay here. I don’t know why I even came.”

“It doesn’t have to be home. I know . . . I am sure it is difficult.” Leon’s face filled with a sadness so intense that Otis had to look away. “I suggest we put off the sell.”

“Put it off? Don’t play games with me. I told you—this is not my home. I don’t want it.”

“I did not mean to suggest putting it off forever, only until we have thoroughly gone through the estate’s books and talked to the bank. You may not want these properties, but there is money in them, and you don’t want to sell them off cheaply and then discover your brother left you with a gambling debt you overlooked. We’ve had several letters from debtors saying that Reginald owed them. Thus far we’ve been able to stave them off by telling them that Reginald’s finances are still being settled.”

“Hardly seems fair that the cast-off son has to come home and settle the dealings of his reckless brother,” Otis mumbled, crossing his arms.

“Life is rarely fair.” Leon smiled sadly. “I’m not sure what the word even means.”

Otis had no comment. He’d wrestled with the notion for years, never satisfied with the answers he found. In this moment, sleep-deprived and assaulted by the memories he’d fought so hard to tuck away, he felt utterly incapable of grappling with questions that would never have answers.

“It’s good to have you back, even if it’s only a temporary arrangement,” Leon said, changing the subject. “Though I do wish it were under different circumstances.”

“Yes, well . . .” Otis looked around, his gaze landing on his dog. “Wolf seems to like it. We’ll work together to settle matters, then I’ll be off.”

The bluetick coonhound who rarely held still lay contently by the fireplace, his head across his paws. Otis envied him. With no memories of this place, Wolf was free to see the grandeur of the mansion, hear the singing of the creek, and stretch his legs on the grounds. Otis let out a shaky laugh. What an odd recluse he had become, believing his dog’s life more appealing than his own.

“It wasn’t right of your brother to take over your father’s businesses without consulting you.”

Otis nodded. He’d not wanted the bicycle business or his father’s investments, but when he’d received no word from his brother after his father’s passing, the sting of rejection pierced him again. Where once they’d dreamed of lives interwoven, in the end, they had shared little.

“But your brother . . . he lost his way. I wish the two of you . . . well, it’s done now. No use dwelling on what can never be. The

town never knew of your brother's shortcomings, and they don't know about your condition. They hold the Taylor family in high regard, believing the facade they've been presented with."

"Why have you been so loyal through it all? You knew the Taylor family's secrets. You could have left."

Leon paused before speaking. His features softened. "Your mother loved both her boys. Your father . . . he did care. But—"

"He loved his business and reputation and money." Otis didn't want to be patronized. He could still remember the look on his father's face when he'd sent him away.

"Perhaps he did, but he still worried over you."

"He had an odd way of showing me his concern. An occasional letter tucked between tonics. And all his cures . . . you know what they did to me."

Leon ran his hand over the arm of the chair, and once again Otis was taken back. It was in this room that his father had told Otis that he'd be sent away. The events of so long ago should not cause such a visceral reaction, yet they did. He rubbed at his forehead, trying to keep his strong feelings at bay, but holding back a stampede would have been easier.

"Your mother asked Mildred and I to look out for you and your brother. We had no power to bring you home as long as your father was alive, and your brother . . . I believe he wanted you home but didn't know how to ask you back. He may have hoped to reform himself first, but"—his voice grew quieter—"You know how that ended."

Otis shifted his weight from his right foot to his left and back again. This conversation—all conversation—felt awkward. He could blame his father for his reclusive nature, which had been practically forced on him when he was sent to live in the woods of Massachusetts with only an aged pianist for company and

guidance. It was his turn to talk; he knew that, but no words would form on his tongue.

“It’s all yours to do with as you like,” Leon said. “I asked you back so you could be here and choose for yourself how it was handled. But there is more . . .”

With an audible huff, Otis sank into the chair his father had once occupied and readied himself to hear whatever it was Leon was trying so hard not to say. Instinctively, he ran a hand over his wide-brimmed hat, a habit he’d acquired a decade ago.

“Tell me. I don’t have all day,” Otis said, then let out a cynical laugh at his own words. How ridiculous. He had no other demands on his time, nowhere to be, nowhere to go, and certainly no one to see. There was no reason he couldn’t listen to Leon for hours on end, other than the fact that he did not want to. “Tell me what other mischief my brother has left in his wake. Pandora’s box is open. I may as well face it all.”

“Your mother loved Greek mythology. I remember her reading to you in this very room. Pandora, Zeus, Hades . . .”

Otis stopped short at the wave of warmth that rushed over him. He had been happy when he’d been by her side. As quickly as the feeling came, it left again, and in its place came a cold emptiness and the reminder that he’d not been truly happy in a long time. “Well,” he said, fighting to keep his voice level. “If there’s something that needs saying, say it.”

“Very well. I believe your brother left behind a . . . a mistress.”

Chapter 3

A mistress?” Otis stood, unable to remain still with such news ringing in his ears like a bugle announcing a change in course. “My brother had a kept woman.” He ran his hand over the brim of his hat. “I never would have suspected—but, what does that have to do with me?”

Father’s letters had been brief, simple descriptions of Monticello happenings and excuses for why Otis couldn’t come back. Not once was there mention of his brother courting or . . . or cavorting about like a cad.

“When you didn’t rush home right away,” Leon said, “I took the liberty of looking through the account books to learn how crucial it was for you to settle the finances here. I wanted to protect your assets the best I could. That’s when I discovered your brother’s affinity for gambling, as well as how disorderly his books were and . . .” The older man paused, his face reddening. “And that your brother was spending money on other tarnished pursuits.”

“Wasteful,” Otis muttered.

“Most alarming are the monthly entries marked *Elisabeth*. I thought perhaps she was doing some domestic service, but Mil-

dred handles the house affairs. I can think of no other explanation than that your brother was paying a woman an allowance for her . . . services.”

“The matter is disturbing, but whoever this Elisabeth is, she must know he is dead. I don’t owe her anything.”

“That is what logic tells me as well.” Leon opened his mouth and quickly closed it again.

“But?”

Leon’s chair creaked as he shifted uneasily. “But what if my assumptions are wrong and Elisabeth is someone else? What if she is someone who depends on the monthly income? Reginald’s books are a horrid—I’ve never seen such a mess. The only consistent entry is the ‘Elisabeth’ entry. Which leads me to believe she meant something to him.”

“Perhaps Elisabeth is a favorite horse that he bet on monthly or the name of a widow he cared for.” This game of guessing was a waste of time. If they had Elisabeth’s scent, Wolf might be able to track her down, but as it was, she was simply a name. Another piece of his family’s past that he would never understand.

“Well, I don’t know of any racehorses named Elisabeth, and I never saw your brother keep company with widows.” Leon’s brow furrowed into deep rows, like a field ready for planting. “You’re right, it could be anyone. I simply wanted to voice my concern so you could do with it what you wanted. Perhaps when we look over the books together, something will turn up. There are stacks of unopened correspondence, unpaid bills. We’ll do what we can with what we have, and if we learn nothing about Elisabeth, then we may assume that whoever she is, she is well. Now, tell me, does anyone know you’ve returned?”

“I paid the driver to keep my return to himself. He seemed honest, but only time will tell if he is the nefarious sort.”

“How long do you plan to keep your return a secret?” Leon asked slowly.

“I’ll spend the entirety of my time here unannounced, if possible. Father loved a big show—he was always getting attention for everything he did. I don’t want that. The citizens of Monticello can go on believing that I left home for career pursuits for all I care. They don’t deserve an explanation, and I don’t need an audience.”

“Ahh, a humble Taylor man is an oddity, but in a good way.”

“I am an oddity, but I’m not humble.” Otis shook his head, uncomfortable with the praise. “I am private, a hermit, if you will.”

Leon rubbed at his large nose, scratching an invisible itch. “I respect your desire for discretion, though I fear it may prove difficult. You may have to make yourself known when you handle the finances with the banks and the property sells.”

Otis covered a yawn. The night of no sleep was catching up to him. Though, in actuality, he’d had many nights of little sleep, tossing and turning as he anticipated his return to Monticello. Banking, property transfers, a mistress . . . his tired brain struggled to make sense of it.

His own finances had been simple. When Otis was a youth, his father had paid his teacher for his care and vow of secrecy. As an adult, he’d composed music while living in an old gardener’s house on the very property he’d been exiled to. His old teacher handled the music requests, he wrote the compositions, and then he was paid. He had food delivered, and on occasion he’d order a new suit, but other than paying for necessities, he had little need for money. And all transactions had been handled quietly, giving him little experience with large expenditures or complicated bookkeeping. His name was lauded and known among his pianist peers, but fame had not been enough to pull him from the

shadows.

Leon stood and patted him on the shoulder. "All of that can wait. Go and rest."

Otis nodded, tempted to say something more, to tell the old man that—though he hated being back in Monticello—he was glad to see a friendly face. Instead he nodded again. His uneasiness served as a reminder that it was best to keep to himself. If he couldn't talk easily with a welcoming old man, he would be an abysmal failure if he were to attempt a social endeavor.

"It's good having you home," Leon said. "Mildred will send you up a meal when you're rested. She's been looking forward to your return ever since you sent word you were coming. She's so eager to see you that she's ready to kill the fatted calf."

Otis turned away, surprised by the tears that stung his eyes. He cleared his throat. "Tell her that I am grateful for her kindness."

Otis returned to the guest room he'd declared his refuge for now, refusing to step foot in the room he'd slept in as a boy. He was too afraid to find it the same and equally afraid to find it altered. This room was smaller, but he didn't care. It met his needs and was furnished with pieces he had no memories of. There were no family portraits, no family heirlooms, and no belongings he'd left behind when he was a boy. It was a safe room, or so he thought.

He lay down and closed his eyes, expecting the heaviness of sleep to win at last. Instead, he saw his father the night he shared that Otis was to leave.

"I've made arrangements," his father said all those years ago. "A family outside Boston takes in music students. The man is very old and has decided to stop boarding and tutoring. I've reached out to him and, for a fee, he has agreed to take you on as his only student. Their home is far out in the country, away from gawking

eyes. You can play your music and enjoy peace while you recover. No one will ever know about your condition.”

His father smiled as though he were making a great sacrifice by sending Otis away. Pleased with himself, he'd even sat back and begun lighting his pipe.

“I don't understand. When will I return?” Otis's still-changing voice cracked. He'd argued with his father many times, insisting that his life go on as before, but this time, he was too shaken to fight. “Will I come back for Christmas?”

His father refused to meet his gaze. He looked at his feet, at the drawn drapes, at the pipe in his hands . . . anywhere but at Otis. It was then Otis knew for certain that his father's *gift* of music was only given to ease his own conscience and rid himself of his disappointing son. “When you're recovered you can come back, and things in Monticello will be as before. Until then it is best for you to focus on your music and continue with the tonics and the plasters.”

Two weeks later, Otis left with no return date and without so much as a goodbye to his friends. Tears filled his eyes as he was driven away from the only home he'd ever known. For years he waited, clinging to hope that one day he would be beckoned home, that old relationships could be rekindled. But he was never summoned. There had been no reconciliation. There was never another carefree day spent with his chums—Dan, Wilbur, and Andrew grew up without him. There was no sitting beside his father's bedside when he passed, no fatherly advice, and certainly no rekindling of familial feelings. Like a shoe that rubbed the wrong way, he was cast off.

“Why?” he whispered into the early morning light.

Wolf walked over and sat beside the bed. He propped his jaw up beside Otis's face and whimpered. From the start, Otis had

been convinced Wolf understood more than he could say.

Otis put his hand on the dog's head. "It's all right. Just bad memories. We'll get out of this place quick as we can."



Sadie was more cautious than ever as she snuck back across the road to the old factory at the end of her workday. She had a new loaf of bread, a knapsack full of feathers, and a stick in hand. Every dog she'd ever owned knew how to fetch a stick. Half the canines that had walked the West land had been unable to control their excitement at the thought of chasing a flying object. She could only hope this blue dog found as much sport in it.

The dark sky made it difficult to pick her path as stealthily as she wished, but she'd been too fearful to come earlier. She looked past the factory to the mansion. A sliver of light shone between the drapes—someone was there. Other nights she'd seen light, too, only now she feared whoever lived inside the ominous house had recently acquired a dog.

She hefted herself through the factory window and, quick as she could, went to her corner and sat near a window that faced the moon. The light was dim, but it would have to do. At work she'd asked Mr. Hoag if she could have feathers from the discard bin. He'd given her a curious look, but agreed.

Now back in her makeshift home, she sat on the floor with her knapsack full of mangled feathers and set to work stitching a ragged curtain into a pillow. She laughed softly to herself. What would Marvin think of her, sitting on the floor, legs crossed in an unladylike fashion, sewing rags together so she could lay her dirty head upon it as she shivered through the night? Rag pillows, running from the creek in her underclothes—what an un-

expected life she was leading.

She picked up one of the small feathers and brushed it across her palm.

A dog bawled. She threw the feather to the ground and listened. It howled, like a sick wolf, yelling up at the moon. The sound grew louder . . . closer. Sadie sprang from her spot and rushed to the corner, ready to hide in the darkest of shadows, before changing course and heading to the window.

“Stop that,” she commanded. To this, the animal only tilted his head back and readied to bawl again. “No, no, no.”

She climbed out of the window and patted the crate she used for a stool. There was no one in sight, but still she worried. “Quiet down and you can come inside. Climb up.”

The dog’s head came down. For a moment, its perpetual frown seemed to be replaced with a smirk. Sadie rolled her eyes. Outsmarted by a dog. She could add that to her list of indignities. He climbed up, turned, and looked at her. She patted his head and paused her worrying long enough to get a good look at the animal. He was a male, medium-sized. The floppy-eared rascal.

“Where have you come from?” she asked after they were settled beside each other in her bedroom corner. “You have a collar with no name on it. You ought to tell your owner that a collar is for more than walking a dog. Your stomach appears more rounded than mine, so I am sure that you do have an owner. Where is he?”

The dog lifted a leg and scratched at the collar around his neck. How quickly he’d made himself at home.

“Do you mind if I give you a name?” She stroked his head, feeling less alone thanks to the dog’s company. “I suppose you already have one, but I don’t know it . . .”

She studied him a moment before yawning. “I’m too tired,” she said and then yawned again. “I’ll call you Blue. You can stay

if you like, but I don't have much to feed you. And I smell awful. And I can't promise to be good company."

He sat beside her and rested his head on her lap, unaffected by her decree of poverty. For no reason at all a powerful urge to cry swept over her, but she fought off the tears. He was a dog. Of course he cared nothing for her financial status or the state of her attire. Still, she felt comforted, grateful for his large, accepting eyes.

"My mama never let the dogs sleep with us. But it's cold. You can stay, if you want."

Blue, her new friend, her only friend in Monticello, didn't leave her the entire night.



... I've made a friend and feel far less lonely now. ...

About the Author

RACHEL FORDHAM is the author of *Where the Road Bends*, *A Lady in Attendance*, *A Life Once Dreamed*, *The Hope of Azure Springs*, and *Yours Truly, Thomas*. Fans expect stories with heart and she delivers, diving deep into the human experience and tugging at reader emotions. She loves connecting with people, traveling to new places, and daydreaming about future projects that will have sigh-worthy endings and memorable characters. She is a busy mom, raising both biological and foster children (a cause she feels passionate about). She lives with her husband and children on an island in the state of Washington.



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