

A woman in a flowing red cloak is the central figure, her back to the viewer as she gazes into a sun-dappled forest. In the distance, a wolf stands on a grassy clearing. The scene is filled with soft, golden light and floating particles, creating a magical atmosphere.

TEXAS EVER AFTER

CLOAKED
In
BEAUTY

KAREN
WITEMEYER

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To Peter and Katy.

I've watched your relationship grow from high-school sweethearts into a committed love that has persevered through long distances to flourish into something beautiful and lasting. I can't wait to see what the future holds for you as man and wife! With the Lord at the center of your relationship, your happily-ever-after will never fail. May your love for each other only grow stronger as each year passes.

I love you both!



Many are the afflictions of the righteous:
but the LORD delivereth him out of them all.

PSALM 34:19



Prologue

HOUSTON, TEXAS

1881

Nightmares were supposed to stop once little girls woke up, but when five-year-old Scarlett Radcliffe opened her eyes, things only got worse.

“Letty, we’ve got to get you up, sweetheart.” Mama yanked back the covers and leaned close. “Hurry now.”

Mama’s red hair fell over her shoulder as she helped Scarlett sit up. Scarlett’s tummy twisted like tangled shoelaces. Mama never walked around the house with her hair down. It wasn’t proper lady behavior.

The air stung Scarlett’s eyes, so she balled one hand and tried to rub away the prickle as Mama lifted her from the bed and into her arms.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

Scarlett grabbed hold of her mother’s neck as they hurried over to the chair where Daddy used to set her on his lap and read her stories. She missed Daddy. He went to heaven last winter. He hadn’t meant to leave, but the carriage accident left him too broken to stay. Mama said that as soon as Daddy got to heaven, God fixed all his broken places and made him good as new. Scarlett was glad he didn’t hurt anymore, but she wished he could come back to fight whatever monster had Mama so scared.

“We need to get out of the house, sweetie.” Mama slid Scarlett off her hip and set her in the soft story chair. Then she dropped to the rug and started stuffing Scarlett’s feet into socks and shoes.

“Mrs. Radcliffe! Mrs. Radcliffe!”

Mama didn’t look up from the shoes. “In the nursery.”

Never had Scarlett heard her mother boom her voice across the house. Ladies weren’t supposed to boom their voices. At least that’s what Scarlett’s nanny said. And Nanny Potts was an expert in all things ladyish.

Miss Emily, Mama’s maid, burst through the door, her mob-cap crooked and her chest heaving. “Mrs. Radcliffe,” she gasped. “The house . . .”

“I know. The day we feared is upon us. Thank God that most of the staff are away, enjoying their night off.” She finished buttoning Scarlett’s second boot and pushed to her feet. “Rouse Mr. Fellows and Mrs. Krouse. Fellows can summon the fire wagon, and Mrs. Krouse can alert the neighbors.”

Fire wagon? Scarlett sniffed the air and crinkled her nose. Smoke. Her gaze swung to her hearth, but it was dark behind the screen, just like it had been when she’d gone to sleep. Where was the smoky smell coming from?

Scarlett’s lower lip quivered. “Mama?”

Her mother didn’t answer. She was too busy instructing Miss Emily. “Take the pillowcase from Scarlett’s bed. Fill it with anything of value that can be easily carried. Just like we discussed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Miss Emily shook Scarlett’s pillow free of its casing, then hurried from the room.

Scarlett looked at the hearth again, then gave the air another sniff. Fires were only allowed in hearths and stoves. Nanny Potts said so. The knots in her tummy tightened, and she began to fidget in her chair. Dragons sometimes breathed fire in the stories Daddy used to tell her. Was that why everyone was so scared? Because there was a dragon in the house? Scarlett’s heart stuttered. “Mama?”

Mama must not have heard her, for she gave no answer. Instead, she ran to the wardrobe to fetch the sling bag Scarlett carried her toys in whenever she went on an outing with Nanny Potts. Her favorite storybook about the wolf and the girl in a hood waited inside, along with Mary Ellen, the doll Grandmother Flora had made her, using red and brown yarn for the hair so it would match hers.

Unable to stay in the chair by herself another minute when there might be a dragon prowling about, searching for a little girl to eat, Scarlett bounded from the story chair and ran to her mother and clutched her around the waist.

“I’m scared!”

Scarlett buried her face in Mama’s belly, grabbing hold of her skirt. What if the dragon got Mama? Would she go to heaven to be with Daddy and leave Scarlett all alone? A sob coughed out of her.

No, God, please, don’t take Mama away, too.

“Here now.” Mama tugged Scarlett away from her skirt and set her in front of her. Wiping her cheeks, she smiled down at her daughter as if nothing were amiss. “Everything’s going to be fine, Letty. I promise. I just need you to be brave for a few more minutes, all right?”

Mama slipped the cloth strap of the bag over Scarlett’s head, then reached for the hooded cloak hanging inside the wardrobe. The cloak Daddy had given her for when they played Little Red and the wolf. The cloak that tasted so bad, the wolf decided not to eat Little Red but became her friend instead. Maybe it worked on dragons, too.

As Mama tied the string beneath her chin, Scarlett’s tummy relaxed a little. And when Mama lifted the hood up to settle atop her head, Scarlett fisted her hands. No dragon was gonna gobble them up. Not tonight.

“There’s my brave girl.” Mama cupped her cheek and another knot loosened in Scarlett’s tummy. “Time to go.”

Mama took Scarlett's hand and led her out into the hall. A strange crackling noise echoed from somewhere downstairs, and snakelike shadows crawled on the walls. Scarlett held tightly to Mama's hand as they dashed past the main staircase. The smoke thickened, scratching Scarlett's throat and stinging her eyes. Flames waved at her from the floor below.

Could dragons climb stairs? The thought made Scarlett's legs pump faster.

Once inside her parents' bedroom, Mama dropped Scarlett's hand and ran to her dressing table. She snatched open drawer after drawer in her jewelry box and dumped out every necklace, bracelet, ring, and brooch she owned. She swept them into a satin bag and pulled the drawstring closed.

"Letty, there's a pillowcase hidden in the bottom drawer of my dresser under my nightgowns. There are pink flowers embroidered along the edge. Bring it to me."

Scarlett darted to the bureau and hunkered down in front of the drawer that held Mama's sleeping things. She pulled it open and dug around inside until she found the pillowcase with the flowers. She grabbed it, but it didn't want to come out. Something weighed it down. Standing up, Scarlett tugged with both hands. Finally, it popped free of the drawer and threw Scarlett off-balance. She plopped onto her backside and dropped the bag.

Still worried that the dragon downstairs might find a way to the second floor, Scarlett jumped up and fetched the bag as fast as she could. But something had spilled out.

Money. A thick stack of it tied with a piece of string. She shoved it back inside and found more stacks waiting for their friend's return. Why was Mama hiding money in her nightgown drawer?

Scarlett ran to where her mother stood on Daddy's side of the bed. She pulled a leather pouch from the side-table drawer, a pouch that looked like the one Daddy had kept his important papers in.

“Here, Mama.” Scarlett held out the money bag.

“Good girl.” Mama took the pillowcase from her and slid the leather pouch and the jewelry bag inside. Then she clasped Scarlett’s hand and led her toward the door. “Let’s go.”

The crackle noises sounded louder this time, and a low roar rumbled beneath them. The air hung thickly over Scarlett, making it hard to see. Coughs rattled her chest as she and Mama sped down the hall.

They stopped near the wide staircase that led downstairs, and Scarlett dug her heels into the carpet runner. They couldn’t go that way. Fire danced along the banisters. As if it saw her, it leapt, bursting toward her like the naughty boy who’d chased her in the park. Scarlett squealed and hid her face in Mama’s skirt.

“It’s all right, sweetie. We’re not going that way.”

Scarlett glanced up in time to see Mama push a small lever on the wall. A door swung inward, revealing a dark, narrow passage.

“We’re going to take the servants’ stairs.” Mama tugged her toward the opening. “See? No fire.”

But smoke poured out of the passage, making Scarlett’s chest hurt when she breathed.

“Here.” Mama took the edge of Scarlett’s cloak and draped it over her mouth and nose. “Hold your cape over your face. It will keep out some of the smoke.”

Mama didn’t have a cape, though. How would she fight the smoke?

She held the edge of the pillowcase up to her face at first, but it must have grown too heavy, for her arm dropped back to her side halfway down the stairs. Coughs shook her body, but she never let go of Scarlett’s hand.

When they reached the bottom, it took Mama a minute to find the door latch in the dark, but she soon got it opened, and the two of them spilled out into the downstairs hall between the front parlor and the dining room.

A loud pop made Scarlett jump. She swiveled to her right. Fire climbed the walls and slithered over the ceiling, closing in.

“Mama!” Tears clogged her throat almost as badly as the smoke.

“I’ve got you.” Mama picked Scarlett up in her arms and held her close.

She locked her legs around Mama’s waist and cried into her neck as Mama darted through the house.

“Mrs. Radcliffe! This way!”

Scarlett raised her head. Their butler, Mr. Fellows, stood in the parlor doorway, waving for them to come. Mama turned.

“The French doors,” he shouted.

Scarlett twisted her face to look. The two doors stood open, leading onto the terrace where she and Mama had tea parties.

Mama didn’t stop on the terrace, though. She kept running across the lawn until she reached the drive, where their housekeeper, Mrs. Krouse, waited next to Miss Emily.

Every time something snapped or crashed behind them, Scarlett flinched, scared that the dragon would tire of blowing his fiery breath over the house and come after them instead.

When Mr. Fellows caught up to the rest of the group, Mama pivoted to face him. “Is everyone out?”

He nodded, his eyes sad as he watched the house burn. “Yes, ma’am. You and the young miss were the last to leave.”

“Thank the Lord.”

“I don’t know how this could have happened, Mrs. Radcliffe.” The butler’s shoulders slumped. Scarlett hadn’t known they could do that. “I checked every sconce, lamp, and hearth before turning in. Nothing was amiss.”

“You are not to blame for tonight’s tragedy, Fellows. I know where the blame lies, and I plan to ensure nothing like this happens again.” Mama swiveled toward her maid. “Is the carriage ready?”

Miss Emily tipped her head toward the carriage house. “Carter’s hitching up the team now.”

“Good. She has to disappear tonight.”

Disappear? Scarlett’s forehead scrunched. Who had to disappear?

Miss Emily patted the pillowcase she held. It clanked like metal. Had she found some armor? It had to be small to fit in a pillowcase, but maybe it was magic and would grow when it came out. If it grew big enough, Carter or Mr. Fellows could wear it to battle the dragon and make it leave.

Leaning close, Miss Emily lowered her voice. “I didn’t have time to dig through the sideboard for the dining silver, but I grabbed the sterling tea set and the few trays that sat on top. They should fetch a good price.”

Scarlett frowned. Armor would have been better. Mr. Fellows couldn’t battle a dragon with a teapot and tray.

“You did well, Emily. Thank you.”

“I can’t believe he did this.” Miss Emily’s eyes watered as she looked toward the flaming house. “To burn people in their beds for money. Especially a child! He’s a devil of a man.”

“That’s why we have to take drastic measures to keep her safe. Scarlett is all that matters now. I’ll sacrifice anything to protect her.”

Mama’s arms tightened around her, but Scarlett squirmed. What did they mean? Who was the devil man?

Before she could ask her questions, the carriage arrived. Carter hopped down from the driver’s perch and opened the door. He took her mother’s pillowcase and the one Miss Emily held and placed them on the floor of the carriage. Mama lifted Scarlett inside first, then climbed in beside her.

Scarlett leaned against her mother’s side, her worries too big to sit by herself. Mama’s worries must have been big, too, for she lifted Scarlett across her lap, tucked her head under her chin, and snuggled her against her chest. Mama’s heart thumped beneath Scarlett’s ear, the steady beat offering comfort.

Carter set the team in motion, and soon the gentle rocking

of the carriage began to lull Scarlett back to sleep. But when she closed her eyes, all she saw was fire, dragons, and a man waving his hand over them like the song leader at church. Her eyes popped open, and she gripped Mama's waist.

"Is the devil man gonna get me?"

Mama's arms tightened around Scarlett for a moment before she urged Scarlett to sit back enough to see her face. Scarlett's hood fell down to her shoulders, and Mama stroked her hair.

"No, sweetheart. You are completely safe. I promise." Tears shone in her eyes, but her voice held firm, as if no questions wobbled in her mind. "Grandmother Flora and I have a plan all worked out. She's going to help you hide so well that no one can find you." Mama smiled and bopped the end of Scarlett's nose. "No one is better at hiding than Grandmother Flora."

"Are you gonna hide with us?"

Mama's smile broke. "Oh, how I wish I could! You are my favorite person in the whole world, and there is *no one* I want to be with more than you." Her hand cupped Scarlett's cheek. Eyes glistening, she gave a little sniff that made Scarlett's heart tremble. "I have to stay here to make sure no one figures out where you are. And to watch over the Radcliffe employees for Daddy. Their jobs allow them to take care of their own little girls and boys. Since Daddy's not here, watching over them is my responsibility."

Scarlett wagged her head as new tears overflowed her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "No! I don't want to go without you." She'd already lost Daddy. She couldn't lose Mama, too.

Please, God. I don't want to leave!

Mama rubbed the tears off Scarlett's cheeks with her thumbs, then squished Scarlett against her chest and squeezed her tight.

"Oh, Letty, I don't want you to go without me, either. It breaks my heart. You are my dearest girl. The joy of my life." She loosened her hold and rubbed Scarlett's arm. "We both have to be brave. And smart. Doing what we want isn't always what is best. Doing what is best, even when it hurts, is what God calls us to do."

Scarlett closed her eyes as Mama's fingers ran up and down her back. The gentle touch soothed away the worst of the worry even though her heart still felt broken.

"Your grandmother loves you, and she'll take good care of you. It won't be so bad. You'll have adventures, just like the girls in your stories. I'll miss you every day, but I'll never stop thinking about you. I'll keep you close in my heart and write down everything I wish I could share with you. That way, when we finally see each other again, we can catch up on all we missed." Mama's voice cracked, and the sound of soft crying filled the carriage.

Sorrow tugged on Scarlett's heart. She'd only ever heard her mother cry once before. When Daddy died. Scarlett didn't want Mama to cry like that again. She could be brave and do what was best, even if it wasn't what she wanted. Maybe then Mama wouldn't hurt so much.

Scarlett pulled away and sat up straight in Mama's lap. She sniffed and rubbed her nose on her sleeping gown's sleeve, then she placed both hands on Mama's face and looked into her watery eyes.

"I'll be all right, Mama. I promise." She swallowed and jutted her chin. "I can be brave." Her voice wobbled, but Mama didn't seem to notice.

"You are the bravest girl I ever saw." She leaned forward and kissed Scarlett's forehead, the touch so soft and precious that Scarlett wanted to cover the place with her hand to keep the feeling from ever leaving her skin. "I love you, sweet girl, and my love will keep growing even while we're apart. Never forget that, all right?"

"I won't." She'd fold it up in her heart like a secret story that she'd take out and read every day. "I love you, too, Mama."

Even if I have to hide without you.

1



FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

The Pinkertons trained their detectives to use any and all available resources when it came to procuring information pertinent to their cases, but Philip Carmichael still felt a twinge of guilt about using his fellow agents. Somehow he doubted Wendell and Harper would appreciate his cunning once they realized he'd duped them.

"I never thought you'd be one to chase the great white whale, Carmichael."

Philip grinned as he propped a hip on the corner of Gregor Wendell's desk. "I doubt Miss Radcliffe would appreciate your choice of metaphor."

Wendell chuckled as he leaned back in his chair. "Prob'ly not, but since no one can find the slippery woman, her opinion's not terribly relevant."

Stanley Harper stood at the window overlooking Prairie Avenue, idly stroking his thick, dark mustache as he watched passersby go in and out of the Lone Star Hotel across the street. The agency didn't have official offices in Houston, but Robert and William Pinkerton had arranged for a small space to be available for agents working cases in the area. Wasn't much to it. Just a narrow second-floor room with two desks and a small filing cabinet in the corner. Bare floors. Bare walls. Nothing to induce

a man to linger. Yet it provided a discreet meeting place to discuss Pinkerton business without worrying who might overhear.

“I didn’t think Radcliffe was hiring Pinks this time around.” Harper turned from the window and pinned Philip with a suspicious look. “Something ’bout being fed up with us not getting the job done the last four times. As if he expected us to pull the girl outta thin air with nothing but a name and an outdated description to go on.”

“I’m not fool enough to think I can do any better than what you and Wendell did.” Philip raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture, hoping to mollify Harper’s bruised ego. “The two of you are local legends for tracking down the woman who found that photograph of the missing heiress in her luggage. That move gave us our first break in the case. Thanks to you, we know the girl is somewhere between here and Little Rock, Arkansas. Or at least she was as of three years ago.”

Harper blew out a disgusted breath. “I traveled that rail line and stopped in every stinkin’ town along the way. Questioned every porter I could get my hands on. Took me near to a month, and I still came up empty. Radcliffe was so upset, he refused to reimburse my train fare. Said I could waste my own money on a fruitless endeavor, but he’d not have me wastin’ his. Cheap louse.”

Now they were getting somewhere.

“A man that wealthy cheating his employees out of their due?” Philip wagged his head. “Seems bad for business.”

Wendell scratched at a beard that was starting to gray a bit at his chin. “I ain’t sure the man is as wealthy as he lets on. He’s got all the trappings—fancy house, expensive suits, memberships at all the right clubs—but I’ve heard rumors that it’s his brother’s side of the company that’s keeping Radcliffe Shipping afloat.”

Philip had heard the same rumors. From what he’d been able to gather, Drake and Lowell Radcliffe had started Radcliffe Shipping together some thirty years ago. The two had capitalized on the cotton trade at first, investing in riverboats to travel the

Brazos, Colorado, and Trinity Rivers to bring the product to market before shipping it back east out of Galveston. The War between the States brought hard times, but the Radcliffe brothers found a way to continue turning a profit. They were some of the first to invest in local Houston railroads, and by the mid-1870s, Radcliffe Shipping had become one of the richest companies in Texas.

At the height of their success, however, the two brothers had a falling-out and decided to go their separate ways. They divided their individual holdings and investments while each retained half ownership of the parent company. Until Lowell died in 1880. Lowell's daughter inherited his shares, but since she was a minor, her shares were placed in a trust with her uncle as trustee, giving Drake sole control of Radcliffe Shipping.

Lowell's wife inherited control of her husband's subsidiary businesses. Fifty percent of those profits fed into Radcliffe Shipping's coffers, and those funds were keeping Drake Radcliffe from declaring bankruptcy after a string of failed personal investments had pauperized the man.

Philip leaned forward slightly. "Do you think Drake's search for his niece has more to do with money than familial obligation?"

Wendell shrugged. "Radcliffe professes to be devastated by the loss of his niece. Talks about how he owes it to his dead brother to keep searching until she is found and her kidnapper brought to justice. Hires a new round of detectives every few years. But I've been in the man's house. Never spotted a single photograph of the girl. None of his brother, either. Has a big portrait of himself over the mantel in the parlor, though."

Harper strode away from the window, his dark gaze peering at Philip as if he were trying to mine his motives. Philip forced himself to maintain his casual position—hip propped against the desk corner, hands relaxed, breathing even. It was natural for a detective to be suspicious. One wouldn't be very good at solving cases if he took everything he encountered at face value.

Still, a little deflection might aid the cause. So before Harper started throwing questions at him, Philip threw one of his own.

“What do *you* think motivates Radcliffe, Harper?”

“Money.” Harper drew to a halt a few steps away from Philip. “He’s gotta have something to gain by her return. My guess is it’s something pretty substantial. It would have to be to offset the thousand-dollar reward he suddenly decided to offer for her return.” Harper tilted his head. “Is that why you decided to take this case, Carmichael? For the reward?”

Philip grinned even as his gut tightened. “I don’t know about you fellas, but I don’t plan to be a Pinkerton forever. A thousand dollars would buy a real pretty piece of land somewhere. Maybe I could finally settle down. Start a family.”

Ever since he’d been hired by the Pinkertons, he’d done his best not to break the ninth commandment. A man of faith shouldn’t follow the path of the Father of Lies, after all. Yet a man didn’t have to lie in order to deceive. Philip had gotten quite adept at weaving vague truths into a camouflage designed to mislead and, therefore, hide his actual intent. He used to take pride in his semantic subterfuge, but he’d grown weary of the constant word-watching and the bruises it left on his conscience.

“I wouldn’t go property shopping just yet,” Harper warned with a scowl. “Radcliffe will likely find an excuse not to pay out, even if you do manage to track the girl down.”

“Appreciate the tip.” And the insight into a man with murky motives.

Wendell slapped his palms on his thighs, then pushed up from his chair, Philip’s cue that the meeting had reached its conclusion. He rose from the corner of the desk.

“I appreciate you taking the time to bring me up to speed. Reading case notes isn’t the same as talking to the agents who worked the assignment.” Philip extended a hand to Harper first, then to Wendell.

Wendell grinned as he shook Philip’s hand. “Don’t suppose

you're looking for a partner, are you? I might be convinced to give finding the Radcliffe heiress another go. Especially if it means splittin' that reward."

"The lone wolf take a partner?" Harper scoffed, then shot Philip a sardonic glare. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Philip chuckled good-naturedly as he extricated his hand from Wendell's grip. "You know how it is, boys. Old habits, and all that."

He'd established a reputation at the agency for discretion. He always worked alone and was willing to take on the less sensational cases. Glory, power, recognition. He didn't care about those things. A fact that made him attractive to a certain clientele. One desperate to keep their secrets out of the press. He didn't particularly enjoy spying on cheating husbands or digging up dirt on potential investment partners, but the work was steady enough to keep him occupied so he didn't have to hire out for the more questionable duties associated with the labor unions. That work was rife with corruption, and Philip wanted no part of it.

"I'd wish you luck," Wendell said as he led the way to the door, "but it's gonna take a lot more than luck to find Scarlett Radcliffe. That trail is as cold as they get."

"Kinda makes me wonder why he's wastin' his time." Harper raised a brow. "You uncover some new information, Carmichael? Or are you workin' an angle?"

"No angle, I swear. I just want to bring Miss Radcliffe home."
But not to her uncle.

Philip bid his two colleagues good-bye and collected his horse from the hitching post outside the building. In case his departure was being monitored, he guided his gray north on Main, then east on Congress, as if heading in the direction of the grand houses of Quality Hill. He wound through the area that housed Houston's elite before turning south. Large oaks shaded the thoroughfares. Sculpted hedges and flowers formed decorative gardens, and

women dressed in high-fashion gowns strolled along the walkways or drove about in open carriages, impressing their fellow socialites with their style and knowledge of the latest gossip.

A shudder twitched along Philip's spine. He couldn't imagine living a life where a person's worth was judged by one's finances, social connections, and fashion sense. Could anything be more superficial? These people had no substance, no purpose beyond themselves to give their lives meaning.

He rode Steele a full block before enough tension drained from his shoulders for him to relax back into his saddle. Rich people made him itch. Ironic since they also made up the bulk of his clientele. Maybe the itch had developed because he'd worked for so many, giving him the opportunity to witness their greed and selfishness up close.

Not *all* wealthy people possessed low moral standards and inflated egos, though. He'd met godly men and women of means who sponsored philanthropic endeavors such as building hospitals and schools, funding mission work, and establishing orphanages. But they seemed to be in the minority. Drake Radcliffe and his ilk were far more prevalent.

Which was why Philip wasn't working for *that* Radcliffe.

Philip drew his mount to a halt outside a modest home on Jefferson Avenue. A handful of kids played in a yard down the street. A woman swept her porch next door, not giving him more than a cursory glance. An old man sat in a rocking chair smoking a pipe across the way. He raised a hand in greeting. Philip waved in return as he casually glanced down the road the way he'd come. No evidence that he'd been followed. The neighborhood seemed normal. Nothing out of place. Still, he walked his horse around to the back, finding a chicken coop and a shed that offered a bucket he could fill at the pump. Once Steele was situated and out of sight from curious onlookers, Philip strolled back to the front of the house and knocked on the door.

A stately man, likely in his sixties, opened the door. "Yes?"

“Philip Carmichael from the Pinkerton agency. I believe I’m expected.”

A smile creased the formality of the man’s bearing, and a hint of what Philip could only call excitement lit his eyes. “Come in. Mrs. Radcliffe awaits you in the sitting room.”

Philip stepped inside and pulled his hat from his head. He rubbed a hand over his short blond hair as he handed the hat to the butler. “I hope she hasn’t been waiting long.”

The man’s gaze drifted past Philip to an open doorway a few feet past the entryway. “About fifteen years, sir.”

2



Philip followed the butler down the hall to a small sitting room that faced the west of the house. Sunlight seeped through sheer curtains, bathing the room in a warm glow. He couldn't see much else with the butler blocking his view, but his first impression registered a feminine room with pale-blue carpets and draperies offset by cream-colored wallpaper textured with some kind of leafy pattern.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Radcliffe." The butler ventured over the threshold.

"Yes, Fellows?" The genteel voice carried a slight Southern lilt.

"Mr. Carmichael is here to see you, ma'am. From the Pinkerton agency."

"Send him in."

Fellows bowed, then stepped aside to allow Philip to enter the room. A woman rose from a blue settee, putting aside a small box from her lap as she moved to greet him. A smile graced her lips, shaving a few years from the age he'd been in the process of estimating. Upper forties perhaps? Shallow lines appeared at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth, but they did nothing to detract from her beauty. Red hair, faded only slightly with age, gave her a vibrancy that the soft gray of her dress could not dim. Her blue eyes lit with welcome as she moved to greet him, yet they assessed as well. Philip wasn't the only one collecting first impressions.

“Mr. Carmichael. Thank you for coming. I’ve heard good things about you.” She tilted her chin up a notch as she peered into his face. “You’ve been described by your superiors as honorable, discreet, and dependable. Would you say that’s an accurate depiction of your character?”

The woman didn’t beat around the bush. He appreciated forthrightness in a client. Philip inclined his head. “I’d say it’s an accurate description of the man I strive to be.”

Her smile returned. “It seems you strive for humility as well. An admirable virtue.”

Philip grinned. “Yet one impossible to claim.”

Mrs. Radcliffe chuckled, the sound as light and airy as the room in which they stood. “Indeed. The fact that you are clever enough to recognize that truth speaks well of you, too.” She turned and gestured to the seating area behind her. “Please, join me. We have much to discuss.”

Philip followed her to the grouping of chairs arranged in front of a small hearth. He waited for her to resume her position on the settee, then planted himself in the armchair to her right, the one that also offered a view of the doorway. A man in his line of work couldn’t afford to take safety for granted. Danger could lurk anywhere, and his chances for survival increased if he saw it coming.

Philip leaned back in his chair and waited patiently for Mrs. Radcliffe to gather her thoughts and the box she’d set aside earlier.

Pulling a photograph from the box, she ran a finger lightly over the image, her expression softening into a strange mix of tenderness and heartbreak. Her vulnerability lasted only a moment before her posture straightened and she handed the photograph to Philip.

“My daughter, Scarlett.”

Philip gazed at the image of a girl in her late teens. Eyes bright. Hair in braids. Full lips tilted just enough to give the impression of a smile. Her right hand was lifted in a wave, though he recognized

the true purpose of the pose. Her sleeve had been pushed up to expose the underside of her wrist and the small strawberry-shaped birthmark that confirmed her identity. In her other hand she held a copy of *Peterson's Magazine*. The September 1893 issue. Three years ago. The girl would be a young woman now.

"She's lovely." It seemed the expected thing to say. Not that the girl wasn't lovely. She'd obviously inherited her mother's delicate features, though the freckles smattering her nose and cheeks hinted at a life lived more in sunshine than drawing rooms.

Philip flipped the photograph over, searching for a watermark or anything that might give a clue to the photographer who'd developed the image. As expected, he found nothing. Except a handwritten inscription. *Scarlett—age 17.*

"Is this the most recent photograph you have of her?"

Mrs. Radcliffe nodded. "Yes. The plan was to have one sent every year, but the delivery system is somewhat . . . unreliable. I've received eight over the last fifteen years." She pulled other photographs from the box and spread them out from youngest to oldest across the tea table between them. "It's torture for a mother not to be able to watch her only child grow to womanhood. So many milestones missed. But I'd rather suffer the pain of temporary separation than lose her permanently, like I did her father."

Philip added the photograph to the tea table and studied his hostess's face. "And you believe her to be in danger."

Her mouth pinched. "I *know* it. My brother-in-law will stop at nothing to claim her shares in Radcliffe Shipping and the fortune my husband left her. Since he stands to inherit, the easiest way to accomplish those things is for Scarlett to die before her twenty-first birthday."

"And that date would be . . . ?"

"October 23."

Philip leaned back in his chair. Five weeks. That didn't leave him much time to find her.

“Why are you convinced Drake Radcliffe intends to harm your daughter?”

The man definitely needed the money, but would he stoop to murder? Philip had seen coldhearted crimes before, but taking the life of one's own niece in order to gain her inheritance was a level of darkness that went beyond the callous shooting of innocent bystanders in a robbery or gunning down a man out of revenge. How depraved did one have to be to want to kill a child?

“He killed his own brother. A niece he barely knows stands little chance of faring any better.”

Thoughts of theoretical crimes evaporated beneath the accusation of a real one. Philip frowned. “I thought Lowell Radcliffe died in a carriage accident.”

“A carriage owned by Drake. One in which my brother-in-law was also supposed to be riding until an ‘unexpected’ business matter arose to detain him.”

Facts worthy of suspicion, certainly, but just as easily explained by happenstance.

Mrs. Radcliffe's eyes narrowed, and she held up a hand to forestall the questions forming on his tongue. “Before you give me the circumstantial evidence speech or, worse, the one about overwrought women seeing causality where all that truly exists is unfortunate coincidence, answer me this. If the carriage carrying my husband toppled over the edge of a ravine, rolling down a hundred-foot embankment until it came to rest as a pile of splintered kindling in a shallow creek bed, why were no horses injured?” She raised a brow in challenge. “The driver could have jumped to safety when the carriage first slid over the edge, but the horses? The only way for them to escape unscathed would be if they'd been cut free in advance.”

Philip leaned forward. “Did you see the cut traces?”

She made a shooing motion with her hand. “Of course I didn't see the traces. The carriage was at the bottom of a ravine. What I *did* see was the very same team of horses at the funeral the

following week, pulling my brother-in-law's buggy. The moment I saw those bays, I knew that my husband's death had not been an accident."

"Did you explain this to the authorities?"

"I did. They patted me on the hand and told me how common it was for people in the throes of grief to search for explanations and meaning in random events. Lowell's accident was a tragedy, but casting blame and outlandish accusations wouldn't bring him back. I'd do well to turn my attention to more productive matters, like tending to my daughter." Mrs. Radcliffe's gaze fell back to the photographs. "I took their advice to heart. Scarlett needed me. Not only to walk beside her in our grief but to protect her from her uncle. If he would kill his own brother to gain control of Radcliffe Shipping, what was to stop him from eliminating the last barrier that stood between him and the power he craved?"

Philip rubbed his hand against the denim that pulled tight over his thigh. Everything he'd learned about Leah Radcliffe painted a picture of a thoughtful, clever businesswoman. Not a histrionic female prone to dramatic accusations. The employees he'd interviewed from the companies she'd inherited from her husband sang her praises. She'd continued the work her husband had started, eliminating child labor and ensuring safe working conditions in both the Radcliffe Oil Mill and the adjoining Radcliffe Cotton Compress. Recognizing that her gender would put her at a disadvantage, she hired her brother, Stefan, to manage her holdings, but every employee Philip had spoken to had credited *her* for the running of the company. Stefan Anderson might be her voice, but no one doubted who made the actual decisions.

She'd continued to grow and expand the pair of companies her husband started in the late 1870s and, according to city records, now employed nearly five hundred workers between the two—a miniature cotton dynasty. Not only was she invested in one of the local gins, but she had access to exporting through both rails and sea thanks to her ties to Radcliffe Shipping. The compress

allowed her to ship flattened cotton bales that took up a fraction of the space of their noncompressed counterparts, but it was her oil mill that brought in the largest profits. The Radcliffe mill produced nearly a million gallons of crude cottonseed oil a year, not to mention ten thousand tons of oil cake and cottonseed meal.

Yet she didn't hoard her profits. After paying into the family shipping business and making the occasional investment in local organizations, she contributed large amounts to philanthropic causes, such as St. Joseph's Infirmary. She also sponsored scholarship programs for the children of her employees who wished to pursue higher education.

Philip studied her as she caressed the face in the top photograph. How painful must it be to be separated from one's only child? He couldn't imagine it. He was close to his parents, hadn't left home until he turned twenty-two, five years ago. Even with his married sister settling near the family farm, his mother still pleaded with him to visit more often. She insisted that a mother needed to see her child regularly, to wrap her arms around him and kiss his cheek, no matter how old he'd grown.

Mrs. Radcliffe must have truly feared for her daughter's life to send her away.

Philip gentled his voice as he broke the silence that had temporarily drifted over them while they ruminated in private thoughts. "What convinced you that Scarlett's life was in danger?"

Mrs. Radcliffe glanced up from the photographs, tension etched in fine lines around her mouth. "I didn't want to believe Drake would hurt her. She was just a child. His niece. Lowell and Drake had grown apart, but they were still family. That's why Lowell named him trustee. Radcliffe Shipping needed a man at the helm. As much as my husband respected my opinions, he and I both knew that naming me as trustee would erode the company's standing in the community. The realm of business belongs to men. Women, while tolerated when necessary, are never welcomed into their midst as equals. Lowell had intended

to hand down his shares of the company to either a son, should we have one, or to Scarlett's future husband. His retirement was decades away, though. We never imagined his will would come into play so soon."

She gave her head a little shake as if trying to rid herself of the melancholy thought, then lifted her chin and continued. "Drake contested the will. He insisted that he be given charge of all the funds in Scarlett's trust, not the small monthly stipend the will allowed. My husband knew of his brother's tendency to invest in wild schemes to try to make quick money. Drake didn't possess the patience to curry long-term investments, and Lowell didn't want Scarlett's inheritance to be gambled away, so he'd made provisions. When the judge upheld the will, Drake tried to wrest away the oil mill and compress Lowell had left to me. He argued that they were subsidiaries of Radcliffe Shipping and fell under his control. Thankfully, my brother is a lawyer and was able to document Lowell's sole proprietorship and my right to inherit.

"After several months of legal battles, Drake finally realized that he'd not be able to gain control of my husband's fortune through legitimate means. I was naïve enough to believe that would be the end of the matter until a man approached Scarlett in the park one day and tried to make off with her. Thank God the dog Scarlett had been playing with attacked the stranger, biting the man's leg and causing a scene that brought her nanny running. I had no proof that Drake was behind the kidnapping attempt, so I could merely report the incident and share my suspicions with the authorities. But I confronted Drake in his home. He played the wounded victim, aghast that I could possibly think him capable of harming his niece, yet his eyes gleamed with the knowledge that I had no weapon with which to strike him. So I changed tactics. I wept and apologized, making an excuse about being overwrought from grief, playing into his perceptions of feminine instability. Then I went home and began to plan.

“When the fire came two weeks later, confirming my suspicion that Drake would not cease trying to get his hands on my daughter’s inheritance, we were ready.”

Philip had taken out a tablet and jotted down a few notes, but he stopped writing and shot a questioning look at his hostess. “We?”

Mrs. Radcliffe nodded. “My mother and I.”

“Flora Anderson, correct?”

Drake Radcliffe had suspected her involvement. He’d been unable to offer any of the Pinkertons he’d hired a photograph of the woman, and since he’d only seen her at his brother’s wedding, his vague memory offered few helpful details regarding her appearance.

Mrs. Radcliffe smiled. “Yes, but she’s not gone by that name since the day she escaped with Scarlett.”

“What name is she using now?” Chasing down a woman who’d evaded detectives for years would be nearly impossible. But if he had a name, description, and location, this operation could be relatively simple. He poised his pencil above the page, ready to take down all the important details.

“I have no idea.”

Philip blinked. “What?”

“Mother and I agreed that the best way to ensure that Drake never discovered Scarlett’s location was to keep me in the dark as well. If I didn’t know, I couldn’t be forced to tell. I also wouldn’t be tempted to send a letter or attempt a visit. When Mother left with Scarlett after the fire, I lost all connection to my daughter. The only thing I received were the photographs and drawings that arrived sporadically.”

Philip bit back a groan. How was he supposed to find the missing Radcliffe heiress if the very woman who sent her into hiding didn’t know where she was?

“I don’t remember seeing anything in the Pinkerton case files about drawings.”

Mrs. Radcliffe reached into her box. “That’s because Drake didn’t know about them.” She pulled out eight sheets of paper, each bearing a sketch of increasing skill. “Drake tried several times to have Scarlett declared legally dead so that he could claim her inheritance. Thanks to my brother, we anticipated this move and arranged for dated photographs to be delivered anonymously to serve as evidence of Scarlett being alive and well. We brought them forward at each of the hearings. Drake was furious. He defamed me in the press as a coldhearted ice queen who refused to lift a finger to find her missing child and insisted that detectives be hired to find his beloved niece. He demanded access to any photographs I might receive so that he could search for Scarlett himself, and the judge granted his petition. Thankfully, Mother always sent two copies.”

Philip looked through the sketches as Mrs. Radcliffe continued her explanation. The artist obviously enjoyed the outdoors, filling her landscapes with tall trees and various woodland animals. Birds, rabbits, something that could have been a squirrel, and on the last page, a wolf. Or maybe a coyote. The amateur drawing made it difficult to identify, but Philip knew the difference between a domesticated dog and a wild animal from his days on the farm. This was no family hound. This was a wild animal. One who apparently didn’t mind standing still while his portrait was being sketched.

“We had a close call when this last photograph was delivered, however.” Mrs. Radcliffe’s comment drew Philip back to the conversation. “Each time Mother sends a packet, someone she trusts hides it inside a train passenger’s trunk stowed in the luggage car. Usually a trunk belonging to a woman. Someone likely to be sympathetic to the plight of another woman and her child. That time, though, the person selected apparently had some ties to Drake’s company. Because instead of delivering the packet to the mill office as the instructions directed, the courier took it to Radcliffe Shipping. Thankfully, Drake was out when it

arrived, making it possible for the secretary on duty to redirect it to my home without any interference. Unfortunately, word got out about the delivery, enabling my brother-in-law to track down the courier and question her about how she came to find the packet. I worried the Pinkertons he hired might trace it back to its origin, but God proved merciful and kept Scarlett hidden.”

Much to Harper’s dismay. Though, if what Mrs. Radcliffe suspected was true, Philip had to be grateful for Harper and Wendell’s failure. A young woman’s life might have been forfeit had they located her.

“Yet I believe God allowed that scare so I could take precautions to ensure such a thing doesn’t jeopardize my daughter’s return. My mother and I intended to keep Scarlett hidden until after her twenty-first birthday. Then, instead of sending a photograph packet, Mother would send a letter with clues to their location. I was to decipher the clues and hire a man to see to their protection on their journey home. She has no idea how close she came to being discovered three years ago. If the same mistake was to happen again and her letter fell into Drake’s hands, I’d have no way to protect them. My only recourse is to send you to them before they send that letter. I waited as close to her birthday as I dared, knowing it would take time to find her, but I can wait no longer.”

Mrs. Radcliffe’s gaze sharpened and pinned Philip to his seat. “Scarlett’s in more danger now than ever, Mr. Carmichael. That’s why I’m hiring you, not just to find her but to ensure her safety. A job that will require both cunning and courage. Are you up to the task?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Philip met her stare without a single blink. “No harm will come to your daughter while she’s in my custody. But how can you ensure her safety once I return her to you?”

She studied him a long time. Taking his measure. He hid nothing from her, letting her look her fill. He knew the difference between knowing a man on paper and meeting him in the flesh.

Paper provided facts, but facts could be skewed. Philip never took a job without meeting the client face-to-face. One had to look into a person's eyes to confirm his character. When Mrs. Radcliffe's shoulders relaxed, Philip figured he had passed the gut test. Or maybe with women it was intuition. Either way, she'd decided to trust him, and he'd not take the honor lightly.

"Once Scarlett turns twenty-one, she will gain full control of her trust. My brother will help her draft a will that removes any benefit to Drake. The money will be out of his reach, and he'll no longer have any reason to see her dead."

Philip nodded. "So back to finding her. Are you sure there's nothing you can tell me that can narrow my search?"

"All I know is that when my mother left, her intention was to remain in Texas. Someplace secluded where she could keep Scarlett away from prying eyes." She retrieved a hinged case from the box and opened it to reveal a daguerreotype of a young man and woman dressed in wedding finery. "This is my mother," she said, handing the frame to Philip. "When she left, her hair was starting to gray and she'd lost the slim waist she'd been known for in her youth, but this might help you find her."

She collected the other photographs and handed them to him as well. "As for my daughter, she used to play a game with my husband based on the 'Little Red Riding Hood' children's story. She felt safe whenever she donned her hooded cape. She wore it the night of the fire. I think she wears it still. Well, a larger one, of course." A fond smile touched her lips as she pointed to Scarlett's neckline in the top photograph. "You have to look carefully, but there are hints of a cape in every photograph."

Sure enough, once he knew what to look for, Philip recognized evidence of gathered fabric draping behind her shoulders.

Mrs. Radcliffe grabbed hold of his forearm and held tight. "Find my daughter and bring her home to me, Mr. Carmichael."

With nothing to go on but an outdated likeness of the girl's guardian, a train route, some roughly sketched landscapes, and

a cape, the task would be outrageously difficult, yet the challenge of it beckoned, fueling his determination and purpose. He didn't know how he was going to find the Radcliffe heiress, but if God wanted him on this case, he wasn't about to argue.

“You have my word, ma'am. I won't come back without her.”