

# ABOUT THE BOOK

## *Amazing Grace: The Bailey Saga Book One*

American frontier, 1870s

After tragedy strikes her family, Grace Johnston knows she must step up to help weather the storm, but does that mean leaving everything she knows behind, all because of an advert for a bride, written by someone named Justin Bailey? He seems kind, but Grace has no idea what might be waiting for her.

Heading west will take courage and faith, and will test the strength of her heart, especially when the man she agreed to meet, with the intention of marriage, is not the man who captures her attention during a moment of danger. And when she sees him again, what can be done with her growing feelings?

“Amazing grace, How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.”  
—John Newton

This is a clean and wholesome romance, which means there are no swear words and no sex scenes, though there will be plenty of swoony kisses. Intimacy between married couples may be implied (never

described), and while my characters are often religious and try to live accordingly, they have thoughts, feelings and desires, just like any real person. I try to include lessons to be learned and good choices to be made regardless of situations.

# CHAPTER ONE

Grace leaned forward in her chair, gripping the armrests, her mouth hanging open in disbelief. She needed Mr. Geoffrey to repeat himself. Not because she hadn't heard him the first time, but because she couldn't quite convince herself his words had been true. Her voice, however, would make no noise. All she could do was stare, though her grip on the scrolled ends of the armrests tightened until her fingers ached.

"Could you repeat that?" Lucas said, his tone even.

Grace dragged her eyes from the portly man behind the desk, whose thick fingers fidgeted anxiously, to her brother, who had managed to utter the words she hadn't been able to. Bless him, he was most definitely the calmest of the two Johnston children when difficult situations arose; always had been. Grace was every bit as intelligent and capable, except when in the grasp of high emotions. That's when she tended to freeze. She supposed she got that trait from their mother. Grace cast a glance at the woman in question, who was white as a sheet, staring down at the handkerchief clutched her hands. She hadn't said a word since entering the solicitor's office ten minutes ago. It'd been perhaps the worst ten minutes of their lives, not counting the untimely death of the Johnston patriarch a week ago. Had Father been gone only that long? It seemed ages ago, and yet, at the same time, only moments. The pain was still sharp. And the shocking words Mr Geoffrey had just laid at their feet...

Grace knew she should be doing something to comfort her poor mother, but, just as she couldn't make herself speak, neither could she seem to move her limbs.

"Well," said Mr Geoffrey with a cough, garnering Grace's attention once again, "James, um, your father, had amassed a considerable debt before his passing and much of it remains. Two-thousand dollars. His creditors

have written and requested payment by the end of the month or..."—he cleared his throat with another deliberate cough—"they'll take legal action."

Legal action? Would that mean jail? But for whom? It made no sense to punish someone for the mistakes or choices of another. A spark of anger lit in the depths of Grace's chest, pushing aside the now familiar ache of loss. How could her father have done something so careless? How could he leave his family with such a burden? How could he leave his family at all? It didn't seem to matter that an accident had claimed him. He should have been more careful. Guilt at such uncaring thoughts made the fire inside Grace sink down to her stomach, making her nauseous.

"And how are we to pay it?" Lucas asked, his voice less calm now.

Mr. Geoffrey tilted his rotund head to one side, his brows furrowing. "Whatever money you have will need to be used. If that isn't enough, you'll have to start selling possessions, and maybe even your house."

Grace's mother released a soft whimper, bringing the strangled handkerchief to her face.

*Comfort her. Do something!* Grace berated herself. She needed to move. After another painful thud of her heart, she did move. She stood from her chair and quietly left the room. It wasn't what she meant to do, but her body didn't seem to know that. She simply needed to get away from the oppressiveness of the office.

She didn't have any idea where she was going. She stumbled a bit, finding herself in the foyer where she, Lucas, and Mother had waited before their appointment with the solicitor. No one was there now, thank goodness.

Grace picked a wall, leaned against it and sank to the floor, burying her face in her hands. She wanted to cry; to let great fat tears wash away the misery, but none came. The misery would not be washed away. It would increase. To pay James Johnston's debts, all because he'd died before settling them himself, they would have to lose everything.

She wasn't sure how much time passed from when she left the office to when she heard footsteps approaching her. A pair of strong hands grasped her under her arms and gently lifted her to her feet. She blinked. Lucas steered her to the door and out to the sunshine. She blinked again, dazzled by the brightness that didn't seem to belong. And the people walking to and fro around them; what were they doing? Was the world not shrinking around *them*? How unfair.

"Maxwell," Grace muttered, turning to her brother. "Maxwell will help us."

Lucas' mouth twisted in a way that was not reassuring, but he said, "Of course he will. He's my best friend and your fiancé. I'll call on him just as soon as I get you and Mother home."

Grace wanted to protest. She could accompany him. But she caught another glance at their mother and knew she had to make up for her inaction from before. Sarah Johnston needed both of her children to be strong. Grace did not feel strong, but she had no choice but to pretend she had all the strength in the world.



Just as Grace predicted, Lucas came back an hour or so later with news that Maxwell would look into the so-called debt. The notion lifted her spirits. Maxwell Williams, heir to the prestigious seafood king of Boston, would uncover the truth and prove Mr Geoffrey's words to be a terrible mistake. They would grieve their father, as they should, and then go on with their lives with pleasant memories to fill their thoughts and bolster them in the years to come. He'd been a good father, after all, and a good husband to

their mother. The community had rallied around them when he passed, sending flowers and cards of condolences and assurances that the family of James Johnston, maker of the most beautiful and luxurious furniture in Boston, would ever be well thought of. Everything would be all right.

Grace kept these thoughts in her mind for the next few days, all while waiting to hear from her fiancé. She and Maxwell had known each other since they were children. It all started when he and Lucas were schoolmates and the great class debate that had pitted them against each other, showcasing Lucas' calm nature and Maxwell's resolve to get what he wanted. After the class, the two boys had sat with each other at lunch, trading sandwiches, propelling their relationship from brief opponents into a solid friendship, lasting for the next twelve years.

As for Grace, she hadn't really considered Maxwell to be anything more than a dear friend until two years ago when he asked to court her. She liked him, of course, but was still waiting for the butterflies of romantic attraction to flutter around in her belly. She had to assume it was because they already knew each other so well. Even if she didn't quite love him the way she thought a woman should love her intended, she was content. They fit well together. Love would surely come as they grew closer.

Another matter keeping her thoughts occupied was the summer soirée taking place that evening at the home of the Brittons, one of the wealthiest and most influential families in Massachusetts. Though their mourning period had just begun, Grace and Lucas would attend for a short while, but decline to dance or participate in any of the planned activities. Not that she minded. She'd never been one to bask in the noise and crowd of a party. She preferred smaller, quieter gatherings. For tonight, all she was interested in was speaking to Maxwell. Surely he would have news by now.

The evening arrived, the air cool with a touch of fog. Grace, dressed in a modest dark plum satin gown, embellished with lace and embroidered

roses, alighted from the carriage when it stopped in front of the grand mansion lit up like a beacon. Lucas smiled at her as he helped her down.

“I hope you’re able to enjoy yourself,” he said.

“Of course,” she said, knowing his concern was not just about her lack of enthusiasm for large parties. “And you as well. I know Mama would want us to.”

Though their mother had also been invited, she had claimed a headache and asked them to convey her apologies. They did so as they were greeted by their hosts, who once again offered their condolences on the passing of their father. Mrs. Britten smiled graciously, though there was a strange gleam in her eyes, as if she was holding back another comment. The moment passed before Grace could think on it too deeply.

“How about we meet back here in an hour?” Lucas said near her ear as they entered the ballroom.

Music rang through the enormous space, which was filled to capacity with revelers dressed in their finest. Grace nodded to her brother as she scanned the faces surrounding her, trying without success to locate her fiancé. She had no choice but to meander through the crush. Her chest tightened with a familiar feeling of being overwhelmed. She forced herself to remember her goal. Find Maxwell, be reassured that all was well, and then leave soon after. It wouldn’t hurt to pause here and there to greet friends and acquaintances during her search.

To her surprise, she didn’t get a chance to greet much of anyone, or rather, when she saw a familiar face from afar, they seemed to conveniently occupy themselves with others around them when she drew closer, either dancing or clustering around a group of people she couldn’t identify. Were they snubbing her on purpose, or was it a misunderstanding? She knew the answer as soon as she heard peels of derisive laughter, and even caught a few words of gossip that turned her blood cold.

*Father.*

*Debt.*

*Losing everything.*

Grace's knees felt weak. It was tempting to pretend they were talking about someone else, but she knew better. Were any of these people, the ones she'd known and associated with her whole life, truly her friends? She turned away from their pitying glances and whispered comments, desperate to find Maxwell. When she finally spotted him, she rushed forward, apologizing to those she brushed past. He was conversing animatedly with a couple of young men and a lady, who was standing rather close to him, but Grace hardly noticed her. All she felt was relief.

"Maxwell," she said, gaining his attention as she moved closer. "I've been looking for you. I was hoping we could..." The words trailed away as she witnessed something odd, much like the strange look Mrs. Britten had given her. Maxwell's eyes had widened at the sight of her, and then shifted away. For a moment, it was as if he hadn't recognized her; or perhaps pretended not to. Grace stumbled to a halt. Her gaze moved from her fiancé to the other two gentlemen, neither of whom she knew, and then to the young lady. Grace blinked at her a few times. She was Fiona Britten, daughter of the host. With a smile, Fiona slipped her arm through Maxwell's.

"Hello, Grace," she said sweetly. "I'm surprised to see you here."

Grace's voice did one of its disappearing acts. She swallowed, trying to coax her throat to awaken. All it did was make her cough. Maxwell's features tightened, as if he might be concerned for her, but when he spoke, his tone was flat.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I was going to tell you tomorrow."

"Tell me what?" she managed to croak.

"What I discovered about your father," he went on, his face flushing. "And about Fiona."



Her father. And Fiona. It didn't take a genius to comprehend his meaning on both accounts. He didn't need to say another word. It was clear, and yet so very muddled. The sounds around her seemed to drift away, drowned out by the pounding in her head. Were the lights around her fading? She wasn't sure why the room suddenly seemed so dark.



The weeks that passed hardly seemed real. Though Grace was present for most of the happenings—selling furniture, dishes, silverware, extra clothing and bedding, her precious flute, and eventually the house—she felt removed from it all, like she was watching it happen to someone else. Someone to be pitied. Someone who, just a month or two ago, had not mingled with the elite of Boston. Someone who must have done something wrong to deserve such a fate.

But, no.

Bad things happened to good people all the time. What made her more special than the next poor family hit with circumstances beyond their control? She was not special in the least, evidenced by the fact that her former friends, not to mention Maxwell Williams, had made themselves scarce.

The morning after the fateful party, Lucas had volunteered to return her engagement ring to Maxwell, and when he returned, the knuckles on his right hand were reddened, having connected to Maxwell's face as a parting farewell. Grace appreciated the gesture, but was more saddened about her brother losing his best friend than she was about losing her fiancé. She

supposed she should have been more upset. Perhaps she would've been if she'd been in love with him. Apparently, becoming poor and homeless was enough of a shock to the system that Grace hardly noticed anything around her. She was numb to the world, but had no choice but to find her way out of the darkness. She and her family needed a way to survive.

The three Johnstons eventually found a small apartment in a very different part of town, one she'd never had cause to venture to during her former life. The barely affordable rent paid thanks to the hard-work of her dear brother. Lucas took on the role as provider as best as he could, landing a clerking job with non-other than Mr. Geoffrey. Grace was grateful, but couldn't bring herself to like the man who had brought them such terrible news. Even if it was in no way his fault.

Lucas' job at the solicitor's office, as it turned out, was not sufficient for their needs. He assured Grace and their mother he would get a second job, but Grace could see his usual calm was floundering. She and her mother found occasional sewing and laundry jobs to take on—both women were quite domestic despite their family's supposed wealth—and while the additional income helped, the work was not consistent. Something more drastic needed to happen. Grace began looking for positions as a maid or shop worker, and even glanced at the nearby factories where drones of pale, sickly people moved in and out of each day. She was loath to join them, but knew she might not have a choice.

As she stepped inside a quaint café to inquire about any job openings, she noticed a newspaper on one of the vacant tables. Well, it wasn't the newspaper itself she noticed, but the bold type spanning the top.

*The Matrimonial Times.*

She stared at the words as if they were foreign to her. They weren't, of course, because she'd heard about young ladies responding to the advertisements within, leaving their homes and families to marry a man out west. A shiver went through her, yet she found herself transfixed. What

possessed a young lady to do such a thing? Adventure? Poverty? A means of escape? Grace could understand the latter two of those reasons. She was not well acquainted with adventure. And what about the men? Were they seeking love or just an unpaid housekeeper who would be legally bound to him? How was a young lady to know if the man she corresponded with was decent or hardworking, and not vulgar or abusive? Surely the risk wasn't worth it.

Grace shook her head. Turning away from the paper, she continued further into the café, seeking the owner.

The visit was brief, but long enough for Grace to know she never wanted to be near the establishment again. The owner, a gruff, balding man with leering eyes, set off warnings in Grace's head. She hurried away from him, pausing just long enough to grab the newspaper she'd dismissed earlier, fold it tightly under her arm, and head home.

She kept the newspaper hidden the rest of the day while she mended a pair of trousers belonging to one of their neighbors, and into the evening when Lucas came home looking worn. His second job had started that very day, taking him throughout the city to make deliveries for a florist. He slumped in a chair at the narrow dining table. Their mother set a bowl of thin stew in front of him; she and Grace had already eaten.

"Thanks, Mama," he said with a smile, despite his obvious exhaustion. After saying a silent prayer over the food, he ate quickly and then went straight to bed.

Soon after, their mother retired to the room she and Grace shared, while Grace tended to the dishes and tidied the rest of the kitchen, her mind going back and forth indecisively. She should throw the silly newspaper away. There was nothing for her in there. So why was she itching to look through it? Was her situation that desperate? The only thing that kept her from dismissing the whole notion was one simple question: if she were to

head west as a mail-order bride, would Lucas and their mother be able to live more securely?

If the answer was yes, she had a duty to read the advertisements with genuine intention, even if the whole prospect still felt overwhelmingly beyond her abilities. Her family was all that mattered, and it was time she did something to prove it.

Steeling herself, Grace extracted the paper from its hiding spot and sat with it at the dining table lit by a stubby candle, smoothing out the creases. She read one advertisement after another. Some were so poorly written, she felt bad for the writer. Others were alarming in their harsh demands for a subservient woman who had better do as she was told; at least they were honest about what they expected. A few were interesting enough to warrant a second glance later on, though she was hoping for one to draw her in, to make her feel something other than resigned futility. There had to be at least one, right?

And then she found him.

*Stud farmer looking for love: My name is Justin Bailey, age 24. Along with my brother, sister, and mother, I run our family's successful stud farm, where we breed the finest horses in Texas. I'm a faithful Christian man looking for a woman of fine character and enough of an adventurous spirit to make the bold trek to a place of wild beauty, hot summers, friendly townsfolk, and, hopefully, a happily ever after. If interested in corresponding, please write to me in New Haven, Texas.*

Grace read through it three times, her mind conjuring what this place, and this seemingly charming man, might look like. Her knowledge and experience with horses was limited. She'd learned to ride when she was younger, but there hadn't been a need to continue the practice with the abundance of carriages and buggies in the main districts of Boston, usable

to the public; at least for those who could pay the fares. She used to be one of those people.

Shifting her thoughts back to the advert, she wondered what Mr Bailey—Justin—did with the young horses after they were born. How did he ensure the quality he proclaimed? Would she be allowed to ride any of the horses? A strange, though not unpleasant, humming seemed to echo inside her. Eagerness. Excitement. And something she'd never experienced before. A need to experience adventure. An adventure in Texas, with a man named Justin Bailey.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was more difficult than she imagined. Perhaps even harder than losing her father and then losing their home. Saying goodbye to her mother and brother nearly had her second guessing her decision.

Three months had passed since Grace first read Justin's advertisement. After replying to him, they had written back and forth consistently, getting to know one another as best as they could without seeing each other in person. They'd shared nearly everything—likes, dislikes, hopes for the future, hardships from the past, including the many ways her life had changed over the past few months. But that was all about to change.

In his last letter, Justin had invited her to come out to New Haven to meet him and, if they found it agreeable, get married. He'd included a voucher for her train fare—for a private first class cabin, no less—and a bit more cash for sundry expenses along the way.

Grace stood beside the locomotive and its great belches of white steam, hugging her mother and Lucas one last time, promising to write, and maybe even bring them out for a visit someday.

Both of them had been shocked when Grace first told them about her correspondence with Justin Bailey from Texas, claiming it wasn't necessary for her to make such a drastic sacrifice, but she assured them, as well as herself, she was ready to take a new step in her life. It just happened to be a rather distant step from everything she'd ever known. She'd sent a telegram to Justin the day before, at his request, to let him know when she was scheduled to arrive in New Haven. He would be waiting for her at the train station there.

When the conductor called for all passengers to board, Grace gathered her two traveling bags, her ticket tucked into one of them, and stepped on to the train, waving to her family as tears stung her eyes.

The train lurched forward as Grace was directed to her cabin by a helpful porter. She sat upon the cushioned bench, utterly exhausted from the emotional morning. Four days of travel awaited her. She was glad for the solitude, and apparent comfort of her accommodations. Justin hadn't mentioned being wealthy, per se, but if he could afford to give her such luxury, his stud farm must be more than just successful. The expense on her behalf seemed unwarranted, but surely it was silly to be ungrateful when the secluded, comfortable space was there for her use.

She whiled away her time during the first two days mostly in her cabin, either reading, gazing out the window to the vast world passing by, or trying to sleep—usually unsuccessfully—though she ventured out to the dining car for meals, which was included in the price of her ticket. Her time there gave her a chance to meet a few interesting people, including a husband and wife on their way to Arizona to visit their son and his family. Only once did she leave the train when it stopped in a city in Oklahoma, but didn't venture far from the station for fear of being left behind.

The hours blended together and Grace was more than ready to be done with the journey. With one day remaining, Grace began to feel familiar pangs of nervousness, daunting and oppressive. What if she and Justin didn't get along? Or what if she wasn't cut out for this sort of adventure, or any sort, after all? Would he send her back? Could he truly be as pleasant as his letters made him seem? There were too many questions that would not have answers until she got to New Haven and met him face to face. A prospect both exciting and utterly nerve-wracking, with the latter keeping her stomach in a near constant state of unease.

The train gave a sudden heave on the tracks, tossing people and possessions to one side or another. Grace, who was just finishing lunch in the dining car, braced herself in time to stop from falling over. She could feel the train's momentum slowing to a crawl, then stopping altogether.

Voices of concern began buzzing around the tables. Grace's own concern was mounting. Could it be bandits?

The door of the dining car slide open behind her. Biting her lip, she turned in time to see a porter heading down the aisle, giving out instructions, though not much information.

"Emergency stop," he said, his voice business like, as if things like this happened all the time, "no need to panic. We're just outside Grantsville, which is our next stop regardless. Everyone will need to gather your personal items from your seats or cabins and disembark. Make your way to one of the hotels or boardinghouses for the night. We'll send word to upcoming stations about the delay."

He continued onward before anyone could ask for further clarification. Grace resolutely made her way back to her cabin, wondering why she couldn't just stay there. Others seemed to have similar thoughts and voiced them out loud, though nobody within earshot had an answer. With no opportunity to question the porter's pronouncement, Grace gathered her things, securing her reticule to her wrist, and headed for the nearest steps to disembark.

The moment she was on the ground, her attention was drawn to the black smoke issuing profusely from somewhere near the front of the train. She supposed that was the reason for their need to leave the train and make arrangements for other accommodations. Hopefully the fire wouldn't spread to the rest of the train, but it seemed the risk made it necessary to send all passengers away until it could be contained.

Turning, she followed the growing line of people walking toward the buildings of what she assumed was Grantsville, Texas. It seemed to be a large city, though not comparable to Boston, Philadelphia, or Chicago. Yet from the quantity and size of the buildings, it was by no means lacking in prosperity. She couldn't help but wonder how it compared to New Haven.



The heat of the late afternoon quickly became cumbersome, and soon Grace was sweating more than she ever had before. When she reached the outskirts of town, she found a bench in the shade of a barbershop and sat down, setting her bags beside her. She fanned herself with her hand, getting little relief, but it gave her a chance to look around. A spacious hotel stood proudly not much farther down the main road. It was not ornate in design, but seemed pleasant nevertheless. She hoped to procure a bath and something cool to drink, not caring in which order they came. Thank goodness for the extra money Justin had given her.

With such delights in mind, she got to her feet and reached for her belongings. As she did, someone bumped into her, knocking her to her hands and knees. Looking up, she stared wide-eyed at a young boy who merely shrugged and trotted off. Her left wrist hurt. The skin of her palms was raw, the scrapes covered in dirt and tiny sharp rocks. Brushing the debris away, wincing in the process, she stood with a slight wobble. Checking her wrist again, she frowned.

Her reticule was gone.

Panicking, she looked all around, moving her bags and checking beneath the bench. With an audible moan, she realized it, along with the rest of her funds, must have been stolen by the boy. She sat back down, shoulders caving, tears burning her eyes. The Texas heat was suddenly suffocating. Was she a fool to have left Boston?

Glancing back at the train, Grace watched dark tendrils of smoke still rising into the sky. Fool or not, she had few choices left to her. Well, really only one. She had no money to go back home, but her ticket, which was thankfully still stowed in one of her bags, would allow her to keep going to New Haven once the train was back in commission. In the meantime, however, she'd have to find somewhere to spend the night. And without funds, it would likely be somewhere outside. Did the nights in Texas cool down at all? She could only hope.

Getting to her feet once again, she collected her bags and moved along the main road toward what she assumed was the train station. It was as good a place as any, and since the train would likely be there to pick up its passengers sometime the following day, once the fire was put out and any damage repaired, she'd already be there the moment it was ready. With the delay of the train, the platform was deserted, as was the ticket booth. Nearby was a small alcove with benches along the perimeter. Grace sat, holding her bags close, and waited with trepidation for the sun to wend its way down the horizon and the unknown of night to creep in.



The sound of muffled laughter jerked her out of her uneasy slumber. The train station was dark save for a single lantern lighting the street and its nearest surroundings, including some of the platform and the alcove where she sat. Grace rubbed at her eyes and then looked around for the source of the laughter. She tensed as two shabbily dressed men sauntered into view in the street, the lantern's glow reflecting off a glass bottle in one of the men's hands.

Shrinking back, Grace prayed they would not notice her. The laughter turned to arguing. The man with the bottle swung it at his companion, who somehow managed to dodge, but tripped on his own feet, tumbling onto the station steps. Righting himself, he raised his head and looked straight at Grace. His mouth widened into a nearly toothless smile.

"Hey, Ray, come looka' this," he called out, slurring his words. His companion shuffled over, their scuffle forgotten. He, too, grinned as if he'd been presented with a marvelous gift.

“Whatcha doin’ there, pretty lady?” he asked, his voice loud and even more slurred than his companion’s.

Grace didn’t answer. Well, *couldn’t*, as per usual when a situation of heightened emotion found her, nor could she move. Even if she could take the necessary actions to escape, she’d have to somehow get past the two men gawking at her. The curiosity etched on their dirty faces soon become something more sinister, their beady eyes glinting with an interest that made Grace’s skin crawl. They ambled up the steps with a confidence belying their drunken state, both chuckling under their breaths.

“A bit lonely out here, ain’cha?” the one with the bottle asked, pausing just beyond the alcove. “Wantsome comp’ny?”

His companion put out an arm to stop him from advancing. “What if she’d rather ‘ave me as comp’ny?”

They argued back and forth once again, their words nearly unintelligible. When the bickering devolved into shoving, Grace regained some of her faculties. It was likely her only chance to slip away, else she risk finding out what one or both men had in store for her. Jumping to her feet, her bags clutched tightly in both hands, she darted towards the narrow space between the men and the alcove wall, the stairs a beacon of safety. There was just enough room for her to squeeze through as long as they—

She came to a halt as a hand grasped the back of her dress, yanking her violently. Another hand reached for her waist, pulling her flush with a solid body, accompanied by breath so foul she gagged.

“You ain’t goin’ nowhere,” one of the men growled; she didn’t know which one. It didn’t matter. She squirmed, trying to get free, but his hold tightened and he moved closer, bringing more foul bodily odors to her nostrils. Now was the time to scream. But would anyone hear her? She opened her mouth, hoping some semblance of sound would come out, but it was suddenly no longer necessary. A rush of movement to her left

brought the ordeal to an end as the man holding her was knocked fully to the platform.

“Leave now, or you’ll regret it,” a deep menacing voice commanded.

Grace heard, rather than saw, the two drunkards scramble away, muttering curses as they disappeared from sight. Her eyes were trained on the tall, broad figure standing before her. In the lantern light, he seemed unreal, like a giant from a storybook. Grace peered hesitantly at his face, expecting to see something monstrous, but he was human. A handsome human, even though he was glaring at her as if she was equally as offensive as the two drunk men he’d dispatched. Yet, despite his imposing, looming presence, Grace wasn’t afraid of him. Should she be?

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Grace heartily agreed, and she’d be happy to explain the situation, but would need her voice in order to do so. Her throat eventually obliged, though not without effort. “The train,” she whispered. “We had to evacuate. To a hotel...” She knew she wasn’t making much sense. If he’d stop glaring, would she be able to regain her ability to speak? Likely not. Would he be even more handsome with a smile gracing his face? She swallowed the urge to ask the ridiculous question. “My money was stolen.”

His stance shifted, relaxing a bit as he studied her with eyes she couldn’t look away from. She would guess they were blue, but the light from the street lantern wasn’t enough. Another second passed. He reached into his pocket and then held something out to her. She blinked at his outstretched hand, seeing a wad of bills.

“Take ‘em,” he said, “and get yourself a room at that hotel.” He nodded towards the large building not far from the station where Grace had intended to go. “You’ll be safe there.”

She nodded slowly, her fingers brushing against his as she took the money. The contact was like an electric shock. She heard him inhale

sharply at the same time she did, but as soon as the money was in her possession, he drew back. In fact, he took two large steps away from her.

“Thank you,” she uttered, glancing up at him once more. He said nothing as he gazed at her, his brows still pulled together, his perfect jaw tensing. Having nothing else to say, at least nothing that wouldn’t come out as nonsensical babble, Grace grabbed her bags and hastened down to the street, directing her feet toward the hotel. She looked over her shoulder, seeing him move to the street as well, but he didn’t follow as he watched her. Turning, she came to the two story building and ascended the steps to the front door. With another look at the street behind her, she took in his tall, motionless figure one last time and then entered the hotel, her limbs numb and mind whirling.



He hadn’t planned to stop in Grantsville. He’d never liked the city much—nor any place outside of home, for that matter—but business paid no heed to such things. Nor had he planned to come upon two brazen drunkards accosting a young woman during his walk from the mercantile to the boardinghouse. He could well afford one of the nicer hotels but preferred the ease and anonymity of the cheaper establishments in the places he visited. And he certainly never expected the young woman to be the most beautiful human he’d ever seen.

Her pale complexion, likely from the fright she’d experienced, had gleamed like porcelain in the lantern light, accenting the deep chasms of her eyes and dark curls framing her face. He hardly remembered what he’d

said to her, or her responses to him. But he'd given her money. How much, he had no idea. Whatever had been in his pocket. Breathing had certainly become difficult as he gazed at her, and when her fingers had brushed against his...

He moved to the street to watch her, making sure she got to the hotel safely. He could have accompanied her, of course, but then he would've been tempted to hold her and caress her cheek or some other such foolishness. She was a stranger, one he'd never see again. But when she turned back to look at him, twice, he wondered if it was because she could hear the pounding within his chest.

Chiding himself for being ridiculous, he turned and continued to his accommodations, where he was certain he would soon see her again in his dreams, whether he wished it or not. And while he was not about to admit to anything, his thudding heart was answer enough.

