

PROLOGUE

*Libby Prison
Richmond, Virginia
Winter, 1864*

Glen Herrington spat blood from his mouth, then glared up at the Confederate guard. "I'll see you in hell!"

Lifting his fist to hit Glen again, the guard glanced at Captain Sneed, the warden on duty. The captain's angry smirk was all the approval the guard needed. Over and over, he swung his fist at Glen's face, the last powerful thrust sending Glen and the chair he was tied to crashing to the dirt floor.

Captain Sneed leered down into Glen's battered face. "Sooner or later, Major, we're gonna find out who you're gettin' your information from and they're the ones gonna see you in hell."

The burly guard grabbed hold of Glen's arm and yanked him and the chair upright. He rubbed the back of his knuckles and sneered. "Sir, do I need to persuade the blue belly some more?"

Peering out of swollen eyes, Glen saw Sneed about to nod his assent when sounds of a female voice drew the warden's attention outside the solitary cell. Frowning, Sneed held up his hand and shook his head. "Throw that hood over his head, Benson and lock him back up."

With a last menacing glance at Glen, Sneed stepped from the cell just as another guard hustled around the approaching woman and grasped her shoulder. "Ma'am, I've asked you to halt. You are not authorized beyond the hospital quarters."

With an armload of folded blankets, she jerked to one side. "Unhand me, Jeeters! You know who I am and why I'm here. If it wasn't for me and the town's charitable donations of which your mother is a contributor, you wouldn't be wearing those shiny boots. I've been throughout this prison a number of times and this day shouldn't be any different." She peered around the guard and through the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but I have orders. This cellar is for dangerous prisoners, spies, and slaves under sentence of death. You cannot —"

"Corporal Jeeters," Sneed interrupted, "who have we here?" A forced smile hitched the corner of his mouth. "Why, Mrs. O'Malley, I see you've brought blankets. God knows our soldiers need them," he said, standing directly in front of her.

"And ..." she said, raising an eyebrow, "for the prisoners as well, brought to *them* by the Sanitary Commission."

Jennifer stepped aside the warden to get a better look at the prisoner inside the cell. Her heart skipped a beat. Dear Lord, it was him. The rumors she'd heard repeated throughout Richmond were true after all. Another notorious Union spy had been revealed. Major Glen Herrington had been caught and incarcerated right here at Libby Prison. For a long moment, her eyes met his, direct and probing. Then the guard threw a black cloth over Glen's head and Captain Sneed led her by the elbow down the hall.

"Mrs. O'Malley, we are grateful for all the contributions of food, clothing, and blankets that you bring, don't get me wrong. However, you must realize for your own

safety, you or any visitor cannot come through this prison without proper authority.”

Jennifer found it hard to compose herself. So shocked was she to see Glen for the first time since ... *since she had been a mere twenty years old ... and he ... in her mind's eye, she could see an image burned into her memory of him at twenty-four, so distinguished in his West Point uniform. Nine years ago, yet it seemed like yesterday.*

And now he was a war criminal, his face beaten and bloody, with a dark growth of whiskers and disheveled black hair hanging over his forehead. If it wasn't for the rumors, she might not have recognized him. *Oh, yes, you would, she chided herself. No matter how long it had been, you'd never forget those steel grey eyes.* As that old familiar yearning seeped into her heart, she was thankful when the captain's voice penetrated her thoughts.

“... and Major O'Malley would have me court-martialed if anything inappropriate happened to his wife.”

Jennifer thought better of voicing the retort that instantly came to mind. Sneed's maltreatment of prisoners that she'd witnessed numerous times could just as well get him court-martialed. Still, not many would side with her and any complaints she brought to the attention of Libby Prison's commanding officer would only serve to embarrass her husband. Most knew the infamous reputation of the prison but turned a jaundiced eye.

Although Jennifer was against the North's war of aggression and understood the need for statehood rights, she did not approve of prison brutality on either side. And though she kept her personal thoughts to herself when it came to the politics of war, she wished the fighting would cease and the country could join together in peace as one whole and free nation again. In order for that to happen, the Federals would have to be victorious. Something she knew her husband, a staunch secessionist, would lay down his life to prevent.

As Captain Sneed led her up the prison stairs, she tried to shut out the mental picture of Glen's tortured body. Union soldier though he was, she knew what she must do. With her mind made up, she would take the risk and set the necessary plans in motion.

Glen wasn't sure he could take much more. Three days had passed since his last interrogation. He'd never give into the bastards, so the choice would be death, slow and agonizing, or if Sneed had anything to do with it, a firing squad.

Seated on a rickety chair in solitary confinement, he strained to see through the dim light filtering in from the cell's steel-barred door. Truth be known, he'd give anything to get another look at Jennifer in that doorway ... yeah, even his life. Hell, why not, it wasn't worth anything now.

The warden had addressed her as Mrs. O'Malley. He'd spied the gold band on her finger. Jennifer O'Malley ... not Jennifer Herrington as he had once hoped it would be. For all he knew, she may have a brood of kids by now. He smiled, but felt no joy, instead surprised to feel a stab of jealousy stuck deep in his craw.

He'd met her at a dance his last year at West Point. A fellow cadet who was the son of Jennifer's art instructor in New York introduced Glen to her. Nine damn years and he still could remember everything about her; her sweet Virginia accent, her golden blond hair and sky blue eyes that reminded him of sunshine, the reason he'd nicknamed her, “Sunny.” He smiled again in spite of himself. And oh, how she hated to wear

shoes and loved to go barefoot; a vivid recollection surfaced of her wading in the creek that ran past the old abandoned cabin where they met for many a secret rendezvous.

You fool ... after all this time, still pining over a woman who didn't even recognize you ... and if she had, she'd probably be the first one lined up to witness your execution.

A sudden draft of frigid air swirled down the hall and through his cell door. He shuddered, his cynical thoughts only serving to emphasize the hopelessness of his existence. Swearing under his breath, he clutched at his ragged Union jacket, then leaned over to pick up the stale cornbread the guard had placed inside the door that morning. His vision blurred and the ground shifted under him. He felt a sharp pain when his head hit the hard dirt floor, then the satisfying relief of losing consciousness once again.

Rats were pulling at his sleeve.

"Cap'n ... Cap'n, do ya hear me?"

Glen yanked back his arm, then swung outward, fighting the rodents off.

"Cap'n, it's me, Tucker."

Bright light from a lantern flickered next to him, the familiar voice coming from a distance, his nightmare receding. He squinted his eyes and grimaced. "Maj ...," he rasped, his throat dry. Licking parched lips, he looked up at his friend. "Damn it, Tuck ... I'm a major now."

"Yeah, well, at the rate you're going, you'll never make lieutenant colonel!" Sergeant Tucker set the lantern down. He grabbed Glen under the arms and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall. He lifted a canteen to his lips. "Here, drink some water."

Glen lapped at the welcoming liquid, then holding his sergeant's wrist, raised the canteen and poured the cold water over his head. He wiped his face with a ragged sleeve and leaned back against the wall, struggling to gain control of his thoughts. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Tell ya later."

Glen spied the guard, Corporal Jeeters, standing outside the cell door. Baffled, he looked back at Tucker. "What's going on?"

Tucker stood and walked over to Jeeters. He took an armload of clothes from the guard's outstretched arms and set them beside Glen. "Put these Greys on, Major, and no more questions until we're out of here."

Seated before her easel, Jennifer O'Malley set her paint brush down and peered out the library window. Frowning, she turned and glanced across the hallway into the kitchen. "Snow's starting to fall again, Kate," she said, her voice loud enough for her sister to hear.

Kate Lewis flipped a bowl of bread mixture onto a wooden table and began kneading the dough. "I'm getting kind of tired of 'ol man winter, aren't you, Jenny?"

Jennifer agreed wholeheartedly, her hope for an early spring reflected in the bright shades of green she'd finished brushing onto the trees in her Shenandoah landscape. She sat back and stared at the painting, but her thoughts weren't on her artwork, rather about her husband, John.

Hopes for warmer weather were not so much for her sake as his. Last letter she'd received, he wrote they would be setting up an encampment further north. He was concerned for his soldiers, saying they were in dire need of warm clothes, boots and tents. Most of them were sleeping on oil cloths on the bare ground, the sky their only roof. They'd seen so much snow this winter, he wrote, his men were target practicing with snowballs. Jennifer smiled. Always like him to temper war's harsh realities with a sense of humor.

A quick glance at a shelf displaying a daguerreotype recently taken of John when he'd been promoted to major, prompted memories of their past to surface. At the very time when her world seemed so bleak, John O'Malley nicknamed the "gentle giant" by family and friends, had entered her life, promising the "luck of the Irish" if she'd marry him.

Granted her father, always the pragmatist, had influenced her decision, John being a major investor in his bank. But it wasn't only the promise of financial security or her wish to have a father for her three-year-old son, Benjamin that swayed her to accept John's proposal of marriage. More important was his sincere confession of a love she could count on at a time she needed it most. And she'd never looked back ... *that is, not until...* Jennifer bowed her head, trying to keep visions of Glen from creeping into her thoughts.

"Jenny," Kate called out, "I think I hear knocking at the front door. Want me to see who it is?"

Not liking where her mind was drifting, she was grateful for the intrusion. "Probably Benjy's friend, Ethan, come to help him feed the horses."

Kate chuckled. "Those two are joined at the hip." Wiping her hands on a towel, she scurried out the kitchen doorway.

Jennifer strained to get a better view through the frost that had collected on the window. She wasn't surprised to see a light blanket of snow already covering the ground and evergreens alongside the house. She hated to think of John and his regiment dealing with such frigid temperatures.

Kate appeared in the doorway. "A soldier is outside wanting to speak to you, Jenny. Awfully cold out, should I have him step inside?"

Dear Lord, had something happened to John? "Yes, of course, show him into the parlor." Jennifer slid aside the small table that held her palette of oil paints. "I'll be right there."

Hurriedly she pulled off her apron, tossed it over a chair and shoved her bare feet into house slippers. She jabbed at hairpins holding her chignon in place, not caring that several loose tendrils fell about her face. Passing her sister in the hall, she told her to have Benjamin wash up for supper.

Jennifer stepped to the open door of the parlor. The confederate soldier stood across the room with his back to her, warming his hands in front of the fireplace. When he turned around, she froze.

"Hello, Sunny," he said.

Jennifer grasped the door handle for support. "*Glen*," she said, her voice barely audible.

He saw the shocked look on her face and knew he shouldn't have come. But damn it, he couldn't help himself. Even with the risk of being captured again, he had to

see her, tell her if it hadn't been for her, he'd be dead by now.

He regarded her for another moment, then walked toward her. When she took a step back, Glen halted. Seeing her visibly shaken, he frowned. "Jennifer, don't be afraid of me."

She emitted a heavy sigh as if she'd been holding her breath. With a quick glimpse down the hallway, she pulled the door closed. "How'd you know where I lived?"

"Seems Major O'Malley has made a name for himself in Richmond." Glen kept his voice even, not revealing the jealousy gnawing inside him. "The local barber was more than happy to give a fellow Reb directions to his house." Having gotten a shave and haircut, he knew he looked a damn sight better than the last time she saw him.

Jennifer crossed her arms and looked away. Several seconds of uncomfortable silence fell between them before she faced him again. "Sergeant Tucker promised me you both would leave Richmond immediately ..., she said, then added with a desperate firmness, "for your sakes as well as mine."

Glen drew in a deep, tired breath. This was harder than he'd thought, confronting the woman that had haunted his dreams all these years; standing so close to her, yet unable to touch her. His gaze traveled over her pretty face and searched those liquid, blue eyes staring back at him. He rubbed the back of his neck, sensing the tension between them. He needed to say what he'd come to say and then get the hell out of her life, and this time for good.

"Jennifer, we intend to but not before I've had the chance to thank you for helping us escape." He thought something in her manner changed for a minute, her expression softening. "Why ... why'd you do it?"

A sudden look of anxiety swept across her face. She hugged her arms across her chest again as if to shield herself ... *from what, he wondered. Her true feelings?* If she had loved him as she'd professed nine years ago, why didn't she answer his letters? He glanced at a large framed portrait of Major O'Malley, Jennifer, and a child displayed above the mantel. Seems it didn't take her long to find someone else.

The sound of footsteps could be heard running up the hallway. The door handle turned and a young boy's head popped in, his eyes partially covered with a fringe of unruly black hair.

"Momma ..." He looked from Jennifer to Glen, then grinned back at her as he stepped inside. "Can I go down to the barn and feed Tilly and Cherokee? Papa wouldn't want me to forget. Besides, Aunt Katey said we can't eat yet 'cause you got company." He offered the same friendly grin to Glen. Below the thick black bangs, his eyes glittered with boyish curiosity. "Are you gonna stay for supper, sir?"

"Benjamin, shame on you!" Jennifer grasped hold of the boy's shoulders and abruptly swung him around to face her. "You know better than to interrupt when I'm meeting with someone in the parlor. No, you may not go to the barn. Go to your room."

"But, Momma, I —"

"Benjy, I said go to your room!" she demanded in a voice that forbade any further argument. The boy looked forlornly at Glen, then with head bowed, he eased out the door and closed it behind him.

Glen frowned. "A little hard on the kid, weren't you?"

He was surprised to see Jennifer's eyes tearing as she faced him again. She swiped an errant blond curl from her forehead and squared her shoulders. "That isn't

any of your concern,” she said. “You have your forged passes ...” she pulled her gaze from his and opened the parlor door, “please leave now.”

Retrieving his hat from the fireplace mantel, Glen gave another cursory glance at the portrait. Sadly, he realized there could be nothing more said between them; time and distance had made them strangers. He fitted the hat on his head. He’d given her his thanks, that’s what he’d come to do. Christ, he knew better ... he wanted to do more than give her his gratitude; he wanted to see her again, see if she was really happy. Damn thing was, it should’ve made him feel good to know she had a home, a son, and a husband to take care of her, even if the man was a Rebel. But fool that he was, knowing those things made him feel worse.

When Glen stepped out the parlor door, he purposely brushed her shoulder. For him, the spark of magnetism that shot through his body at the mere touch of her was no surprise.

But for Jennifer, Glen’s touch ignited a feeling she thought had long since died. After he walked out the front door, she silently wept for them both.

CHAPTER 1

*O’Malley Home
Richmond, Virginia
Summer, 1866*

Jennifer tripped over the trunk and let out a yelp. Rubbing her shin, she looked around the room at the wooden crates, satchels, and trunks stacked atop each other. She shook her head and sighed. “Good heavens, seems like there’s no end in sight.”

Using the large parlor as their staging area, Jennifer and Kate had been packing their belongings room by room for two days. Preparations had taken longer than first thought, but she still hoped to make their planned departure for Colorado Territory by the week’s end. After closing on the sale of her house, their older brother, Seth had arranged their itinerary. They would leave the ravages of war-torn Richmond and travel by train, then stagecoach for the long journey to his ranch in Pineville.

Kate was busy at work in the kitchen, the clatter of china and the clanging of pots and pans echoing through the hallway, so Jennifer returned to the library. Having packed their books and her artist materials, she directed her gaze to the mahogany writing desk, one of the few pieces of furniture with sentimental value they’d kept and were holding until the freight company picked them up tomorrow. Her father, Noah Lewis had built the desk a few months before his death from heart failure in ’63.

Attached to the desk was a hutch that contained several open slots, a center drawer, and a small enclosed cabinet ... Jennifer felt her chest constrict ... a cabinet she kept locked, though she could visualize its contents as if there were no door.

She pulled back the chair, sat down, and slid open the middle drawer. Inside lay the mother-of-pearl pen holder and blue glass ink bottle that Kate had given her on her twentieth birthday. Her chest tightened more. She hadn’t used that pen since Her eyes shifted to the cabinet.

Taking a small key out of the drawer, she fitted it into the keyhole and opened the

wooden door. She removed the yellowed envelope and stared at the faded George Washington three-cent stamp with the words written below the 1855 postmark, "Addressee Unknown – Undeliverable. Return to Sender." Absently, she continued to finger the envelope holding the one letter she had sent in a desperate attempt to reach Glen. She closed her eyes. *How was it that the hurt and longing could still tear at her heart after all these years?*

She knew the answer to that. It had been over two years since John's death at the Battle of Swift Creek. Respecting his father's fervent request, Jennifer had shipped John's body to Ireland to be buried in the O'Malley family plot. The passage of time had helped ease the loss of her husband, but also served to rekindle memories of her first love years before she met John. A love that had produced the joy of her life, her son, Benjamin.

She set the letter on the desk and returned her gaze to the cabinet. Inside, the silver dollar shone as bright as the day Glen gave it to her. She picked up the coin and ran her thumb over the hole in its center. Curling her fingers around it, she rose and walked to the window. Time stopped for Jennifer. The view of the backyard and dense woods was overtaken by a memory so vivid it seemed to be happening all over again.

"Steady your arm, Sunny, and squeeze the trigger slowly." Standing beside her, arms folded across his chest and showing her that ever-present, lop-sided grin, Glen added, "and sticking out your tongue won't help you hit the target."

Jennifer smiled. She could visualize the coin stuck in the trunk of one of the trees just like Glen had wedged it in the bark of a pine eleven years ago.

Living the memory again, she heard the sharp blast of her pistol and saw the Blackbird flutter from a branch above and plummet to the ground.

Glen threw his head back and belted out a peal of laughter. "Well, don't that beat all!"

"Oh, my heavens!" Shocked, she blew out a breath. "It's not one bit funny. I didn't mean to kill that poor thing."

"Maybe you should have aimed for the bird instead ... then you might have hit the coin!" When he offered her that teasing smirk again, he saw she wasn't amused. "All right, we'll bury the poor bird. But not before...." Glen drew his .44 caliber revolver from his holster, took careful aim and fired. The coin flipped several times in the air before landing on the ground.

He gave her a wink and holstered his gun. "Now that's how you do it!" he said. He walked over and picked up the coin. Returning, he placed it in Jennifer's palm and closed her hand. "A good-luck charm, Sunny." His voice deepened. "Keep it so you can call me back in your mind even though time and distance may come between us." He whispered the words before he lifted her chin and then pressed his mouth over hers in a deep, soul-reaching kiss.

Jennifer abruptly turned from the window, tears welling in her eyes. *"Glen, why ... oh why, didn't you write like you'd promised you would? What was I to think?" she whispered.*

She'd remained in New York with her father's sister who out of the goodness of her heart insisted she stay there until after Ben was born. She knew Aunt Martha had

offered her the sanctuary to save her from the hurtful gossip that was sure to follow as her pregnancy became evident with no husband in sight.

The weeks passed, then months. In the mail that Kate forwarded to her from Richmond, there was never a letter from Glen, even though he had assured her as soon as he reached Ft. Mason in Texas and found out which outpost he was assigned to, he would write her.

Where once she had thought of the love for her handsome West Point soldier as something predestined and beautiful, as time wore on and she grew heavy with his child, regret and bitterness set in. Moreover, the burden of guilt and embarrassment at bearing a baby out of wedlock had bruised her pride and hardened her heart.

She became convinced Glen hadn't loved her, just used her for his own satisfaction, knowing he'd soon be transferred to a far away frontier outpost. After the return of her letter and the birth of her son, her father told her he'd read that Comanche Indians had raided several Texas army posts and reports of soldiers killed. God forgive her, but she'd been relieved to think he was dead rather than believe he'd lied to her with his vow of coming back for her after he was settled.

"Bless my soul, Jenny, you've about wrapped it up in here, haven't you?"

Jennifer lurched, dropping the coin from her hand. It skipped over the wooden floor and rolled a few feet from where Kate and Ben stood in the doorway. Shoving her painful thoughts aside, Jennifer swiped an errant tear from her eye and managed a tremulous smile. "Goodness, you startled me.

Ben swooped down and picked up the coin. He stared at it a moment before looking up at Jennifer. "Golly, Momma, where'd you get this coin?" He turned it over in his hand, an expression of wonder on his freckled face. "It has a hole in it."

Jennifer was at a loss for words. She glanced at Kate, who raised a questioning brow. She realized that whatever she chose to say to her ten-year-old son, it would have to be the truth. She'd never lied to him and she wasn't going to start now. She walked over to Ben and knelt in front of him. She cradled his small hand that held the silver liberty dollar. "Your real daddy gave it to me before you were born."

Ben gazed up at Jennifer, his eyes wide with intensity. "You mean the daddy grandpa said was killed by Injuns?"

Jennifer's stomach tightened, the familiar torment gnawing at her insides whenever she thought about that fateful day, two years ago when she saw Glen in Libby Prison. Although she'd been honest with Ben from the time he was old enough to understand that John was his stepfather, she saw no reason after his death to tell Ben that his real father was alive. Why should she, knowing Glen had been the one who'd chosen to walk out of her life. Clinging to her age-old hurt and resentment, she felt just as strongly that he had no right to be a part of her or Ben's life now. And that was assuming he'd made good with his escape from Richmond and survived the war.

Concerned that Ben might read into her troubled thoughts, Jennifer gathered her composure and smiled down at her precious son. "We don't know what happened to your daddy after he went out west, Benjy, but whatever it was, he couldn't come back for us."

She was relieved that Ben didn't press her for any more explanation and like a typical child, was far more interested in the shiny object in his hand. He held the coin up to one eye and peered through the tiny hole. "But why does it have a hole in it?" he

asked.

"He shot a bullet through it. That way it's different from all the other coins. He said it would bring good luck."

Ben's eyes widened, eyes the same steel grey color as Glen's. "Wow, he sure must have been a good shot. Can I have it?" He tightened his fist around the dollar possessively. "Please, I promise I won't lose it. I'll keep it in my pocket all the time."

Jennifer wasn't surprised by what he was asking. Instead his innocent request stirred her soul with such deep emotion that she allowed tears to run unchecked down her face. Who but her son should possess the only thing she could offer him from his real father.

Ben frowned at her. "Whatcha crying for?"

"Sweetheart, they're tears of happiness because, yes, I want you to have the coin."

"Can I go show it to Ethan?"

"Yes, but come right back, it'll soon be supper time."

"Thanks, Momma." Flashing her a quick grin, Ben pivoted on his heels and ran out to the front porch, the screen door slamming in his wake.

Jennifer spied her sister standing by the desk holding Jennifer's letter. "Is this the letter you sent to that West Point cadet...", Kate asked, peering at the faded envelope, "... Glen Herrington?" At Jennifer's quiet nod, she smiled. "And that coin ... it was his," she said, her words more a statement than a question.

Jennifer hesitated a moment, unsure if she should confess her innermost thoughts and feelings. *But to whom, if not her own sister, whose love and support she'd depended on more and more since her husband's death?* "You remember the confederate soldier that came to the house a couple months before John died? He asked to speak to me and you let him into the parlor."

"Why, yes, I remember," Kate replied, creasing her brow thoughtfully, "Seems to me we had a heavy snowfall that day."

Jennifer nodded. "That soldier was Glen. He and another Union soldier were among the prisoners involved in the escape from Libby Prison that made headlines in the Richmond Enquirer. I had a hand in seeing that Glen and his friend were given confederate uniforms and set free as well."

Seeing Kate's shocked look, she continued, "When I first heard he was imprisoned, it was hard to believe after all those years thinking he was dead. I had to see for myself. And when I found him in that awful cell, tortured and condemned to die ...," her voice cracked, "I had to do something. It didn't matter that he was a Yankee spy." She searched her sister's eyes for understanding. "I couldn't allow Ben's father to be executed."

Kate shook her head resignedly. "Honey, I've known all along Glen Herrington was Ben's father." She heaved a deep sigh, resting a hand on Jennifer's shoulder. "I never let on to you that I knew, figuring someday if you felt the need, you'd tell me."

Stepping away from the desk, Kate squeezed Jennifer's shoulder. "Daddy introducing you to John was the best thing that ever happened for you and Ben." She slid her arm around Jennifer's waist and squeezed her sympathetically. "Shame the war had to take him from you."

Jennifer felt the familiar ache deep inside. She clasped her hands together and

stared down at them. "I miss John terribly. He was a good husband and a good father to Benjy."

Kate turned and walked to the window, her silence causing Jennifer to look up. She saw the tension in the way Kate stood, not peering out the window, but with her head bowed. The sun leant a bright shine to her sister's well-coifed chestnut brown hair. Even though Kate was ten years older and had already dubbed herself an old maid at forty-one, Jennifer thought her sister quite attractive.

"Jenny, it's time I tell you some things ...," Kate hesitated, her expression somber as she met Jennifer's gaze, "and after you hear me out, I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me." She walked over to an upholstered settee and sat down. She motioned to Jennifer. "Please, come sit."

Late that night, sitting outside on the porch swing, Jennifer stared out beyond the overhang at the pitch black sky blanketed with bright glittering stars numbering in the hundreds. Any other night, she'd be searching for her favorite constellations. But not tonight. No, tonight she could barely make out the stars, her sight blurred by tears she'd held back for far too long. They streamed down her face; her breath came in heavy, shuddering gasps. What her sister had told her today tore the fabric from her heart and opened the floodgates to all her pent-up emotions.

Angrily she swiped away the tears. Overcoming her shame and facing her family and friends with an illegitimate child had been hard enough. Now she'd found out how different her life would have been if it had not been for her father. Because of his controlling and self-righteous ways, her destiny as well as that of her son's and Glen's had been forever altered.

She closed her eyes feeling a sudden stab of guilt as she thought about all the love and care her father had bestowed upon her as well as her siblings their whole life. Raising a family became especially difficult for him after her mother had died soon after Jennifer's birth. *Oh, Daddy, please forgive me for thinking harshly of you. I know you did what you thought was right at the time, for my sake and your grandson's too.*

That afternoon Kate had revealed the awful secret she'd kept from Jennifer all these years. She looked at the three envelopes in her lap. The ones her sister had managed to hide from their father, knowing he would have destroyed them as he had the first two.

Kate tried to defend the actions of their father. Knowing of Jennifer's professed love for the West Point cadet, Noah was sure Glen's letters would influence her to follow him out west. He told Kate he could not allow his daughter to traipse off to some God-forsaken frontier outpost known for poor living conditions, limited medical supplies and the continual risk of attack by Indians.

Glen's letters weren't the only thing he wanted to destroy. After he'd learned of her pregnancy, though he'd restrained from saying such volatile words directly to Jennifer, he'd told Kate, "If I could have gotten my hands on that bastard, I would have killed him!"

Absently Jennifer fingered the envelopes. Although her father put the blame solely on Glen for their illicit love affair, such a union takes two...and she knew all too well that she had been the one to seduce Glen into consummating their love before he left.

She lifted out the stationery from the earliest postmarked letter. She'd read the contents so many times that day, the words were engraved in her memory. Even Glen had written that the outpost was too dangerous and the accommodations were cramped and overcrowded, certainly no place for a wife. He'd said that promotions came quick out there and he would be transferred to a larger fort with living quarters more suitable for them. He asked her to be patient and wait for him.

Jennifer heaved a deep sigh. *But he hadn't known about the baby. By the time he'd sent the next letter, she would have been several months pregnant.*

He'd blamed the mail service for not receiving a letter from her, saying the mail from the East could take weeks to reach the territories. He repeated over and over how much he loved and missed her.

Not receiving any of those letters and desperate to know where he was, she had written the one letter, the letter that had been returned, *addressee unknown - undeliverable*. That, too, had been a part of her father's deceit. A close friend who worked for the local postal service and was sympathetic to Noah's plight, had agreed to intercept any letters Jennifer mailed to Glen and return them with the false notation.

In her letter, Jennifer hadn't told him about Benjamin. She knew if he found out he had fathered a child, he would marry her because it was the honorable thing to do. If he was to come back for her, she was adamant his reason would be love, not guilt. But as the months passed and never hearing from him, she faced the awful truth that he wasn't coming back.

Jennifer closed her eyes, the words of Glen's last letter filtering through her mind. She knew it was his last letter as much by what he didn't write as what he did.

Dear Jennifer,

Your silence speaks to me far more than words ever could. I don't want to let you go, but I realize now you were never mine. Maybe it's because our time together ran out and maybe that's for the best. God knows, I couldn't have offered you much of a life out here.

My wish for you is a life filled with happiness. You deserve it, Sunny.

I'll always love you,

Glen

Jennifer shuddered inwardly, assaulted by her sick yearning. All those years ago, her father had convinced her that Glen hadn't loved her and she must forget him. But in her heart, she'd always known. Theirs had been a true love. But alas, a lost love. Their fate sealed. Her father had seen to that.

She gathered up Glen's letters and rose from the swing. She was beyond tears. She lifted her eyes to the heavens and for the first time in many a night, took in the beauty of the multitude of stars twinkling overhead. Just as Glen had wished, she would make a new life. Jennifer drew in a deep breath and managed a smile. *For herself and for the cherished gift he had given her, their son.*

Destiny's Journey is Book 2 in the Wheels of Destiny Trilogy

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