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Stormy Gray

The morning had been quiet, with snow falling gently upon the dirt road in front of the house, when someone came to fetch Dr. Maghee. The ledger accounting of finances was resting upon the desk before me, and I was entering several small procedures and treatments that Thomas had administered to citizens of Rawlins in the days previous.

*October 27, 1886—amputated toe, chloroform \$5.00+\$5.00=\$10.00*

*Fractured clavicle \$10.00*

*4 office calls at \$1.00=\$4.00*

*Dislocated shoulder \$10.00*

I looked up when the man came in, for he opened the door without knocking, and it was still rather early. The sign on the door read that the doctor's office was not open until nine am, but this man was undeterred, seeing as the clock on the wall read six-oh-nine am.

Had Thomas not been in the front room with me, I might have sent the man away and told him to come back in three hours, when we were open to accommodate patients. However, the doctor was present, and the man's face was worried in earnest, and it was clear that Thomas could not resist.

Thomas invited the man into his office; he looked thoroughly intimidated by all the trappings of the room, and when he walked by me, I could not help but realize that I knew his profession. His clothes were poor and shabby, beard and hair long, and his hat brim folded back in the front. No cowboy would ever be caught in such a state.

Aside from how he looked, the smell from him was so rank I knew he could only be a shepherd.

My father's words echoed in my head, shouting at the top of his lungs at the shepherders on our range, while summer thunderstorms had pelted the ground with hail and rain, flashes of lightening in the sky as sharp as Pa's anger. Those nights had been frightening; Pa had been frightening, like all the rest of the stockmen that had forced those shepherders off their land.

Sheep ruined grazing for cattle and kept the animals back from water, so Father and the other cattlemen had been furious over the presence of sheep on the good cattle grazing lands.

I sat and stared at the door of Thomas's office.

Why would he make an exception and take a shepherd into his office so early in the morning, when we rarely took good, upstanding citizens into the office this early in the morning? I didn't care to think about shepherders, let alone have one under the same roof.

What my father had done to those poor shepherders and their flock all those years ago...

Sitting up straighter, I went back to my ledger.

*October 28, 1886—Lacerated wound of the right arm, visit & first dressing-\$5.00*

*Amputated finger, chloroform \$10.00+\$5.00=\$15.00*

*November 1, 1886—Office call at \$1.00--\$5.00*

I wrote the day's date in the ledger: *November 2, 1886*. I wondered what entry I would be writing tomorrow.

Thomas and the shepherd emerged from the office moments later, and I could tell that the man had brought Thomas a case of great interest. His eyes were alight with the idea of a new and demanding challenge, a look I had seen before in the year I had worked with him.

"Claire, I will be back in a few hours with a patient in need of great attention," he said, pulling on his coat. I looked from Thomas to the herder. He didn't hold my eye contact; he looked away quickly and shuffled his feet, fidgeting with the hat in his hands.

“What kind of great attention?” I asked, forcing myself to think like the assistant to the doctor that I was.

“Surgical,” Thomas replied shortly. “Please have a room ready for him, as well as the supplies necessary to clean a large laceration. Make sure all the surgical tools are clean and everything is prepared, understand?”

I nodded. Of course I understood—but what I wanted to know was what news this shepherd had brought into my doctor’s office to have him running off before his usual hours.

It wasn’t as though Thomas didn’t go running off at all hours of the night under normal circumstances, for he did. Though such calls were not necessarily typical, when he was needed, Thomas never failed to lend assistance. Yet at the same time, he also tried to hold secure to a routine, so that the doctor could be expected to be in his office at certain times.

The majority of our work, however, was done in the office. A great many amputations of fingers and toes in the winter, followed by a great many stitches to close lacerations every other part of the year.

The door slammed a moment later, the herder closing it behind him as he followed the good Dr. Maghee out of the room into the cold. I went to the stove that sat in the back corner of the room and stoked the fire. Taking a moment to stave off the cold air that had blown fiercely in with the opened door, I threw my shawl around my shoulders.

The process of getting things ready for the doctor was one which I was familiar with, and I proceeded to collect everything and set it out accordingly. I could not bring myself to concentrate upon the tasks in front of me; I performed them in a perfunctory manner, my mind with Thomas out in the field somewhere, wondering why he had not asked me to come along like

I often did. I saw no reason for this situation to be any different, yet I was sitting in the office alone, rather than riding out into the cold.

I was left wondering for what felt like an entire day, though only a few hours had passed. Once all the necessary preparations were made, I wandered around the office, tidying up rooms and cleaning equipment that needed no cleaning. Finally putting the kettle on the stove to boil, I rechecked the ledger and closed the leather cover.

A knock came at the door, and I answered, as a good doctor's assistant was expected to.

Standing at the door was Mac Tanner, an apprentice to the local blacksmith, and his hand was wrapped in a dirty rag.

"Mac, what's happened to you?" I asked, stepping back for him to go past me into the clinic.

"I was shoeing a horse that tried to kick me," he began, cradling the wrapped hand in the other. "I had a nail through but not clipped off, so when he kicked the tip caught my hand. Ripped me open perty good, Miss Claire."

"Just Claire," I told him, motioning him to the examining table in the next room. "Take a seat on the table. Dr. Maghee's out, but I ought to be able to get you cleaned up."

I gathered the supplies I needed to clean a wound and went to Mac. I smiled at him as I approached. He returned the smile with a nervous face and looked away. Reaching for his hand, I untied the dirty bandage and began to unwind it slowly. As I got further down, the dirt covered rag became damp and dark with the crimson stain of blood.

He sucked in his breath when I got to the bottom and had to ease the fabric away from the actual gash. It was about three inches long, running diagonally across his palm. I felt my throat tighten.

Mac's hand needed stitches, and while I was more than capable of doing such a thing, I suddenly felt quite nervous about doing so with Thomas gone. Particularly on the palm of a hand, rather than stitching up cuts on knees and foreheads as I typically did.

Busying myself with cleaning the wound, I replayed Thomas's instruction in my head, showing me how to carefully pull each stitch around and through. It wasn't until Mac sucked his breath in that I realized I was cleaning the wound with more vigor than necessary.

"I'm sorry, Mac. I know this is uncomfortable for you."

"It's alright, Mi—Claire...Claire. I'm mighty glad you're here, my hand hurts somethin' fierce."

"I'm sure it does," I replied, trying to clean as gently as possible.

"Where's the doc at today?"

"He's gone to take care of a patient out on the range."

The wound was clean, so I set my rag aside and reached for the stitching supplies I'd laid out.

"You like workin' with Doc Maghee?" Mac asked.

"Of course," I answered, bending my head low. "I'm sorry, Mac, but this is likely going to hurt." He sucked in his breath as I pushed the needle through the skin for the first stitch. I went along carefully, making neat and even stitches the way that Thomas had taught me to. When I was done, I tied the thread off neatly, snipped the excess with a pair of scissors. Covering the wound with some salve, I bandaged it.

"Are you alright?" I asked Mac.

"Yes." His voice was closer to my ear than I'd expected, and I realized that his head was bent close to my own. "Thanks for patchin' me up, Claire."

I nodded, face suddenly flushed and warm. I'd known Mac for several years now; his uncle was a rancher, and a friend of my father's, and local dances had found us as partners more than once before. It was Thomas's belief that Mac harbored affection for me, and with the way I could feel his gaze upon me, I knew it to still be true.

Finishing the bandage off with a tight knot, I stepped back before looking up at him. His face was flushed as well, though whether it was from pain or proximity, I knew not. "You'll need to keep that clean," I said. "And not use it until the skin begins to heal itself and close up. If you go about shoeing horses, you'll just keep ripping the stitches and that would not be particularly advantageous."

He gave me a sideways grin. "You're starting to talk like Doc Maghee, you know. All high and mighty with those big words."

I bristled a bit at his accusation. But his brown eyes were so warm and full of mirth when I looked at him that my irritation died, and I laughed. "I suppose you can't much help but have it rub off a little."

"I suppose," he agreed, stepping off the table. I was about to tell him the charge for my service when he stopped and turned to me. "Claire, you comin' out to the dance this comin' Saturday night?"

"Well, I—"

"Because if you were, I'd like the opportunity to come by and escort ya there."

I blushed deeply, and Mac chuckled softly. "I'd sure like to take ya, Claire," he said softly. "You looked awful pretty in that blue dress."

"I haven't been to dance for months," I said, embarrassed by the fact that he remembered the blue dress I'd worn. It was the only time I'd worn it, as it was made of a lovely blue muslin,

and far too fancy to wear every day. Thomas kept me far too busy to regularly attend socials; I'd only gone to the last because it was the fourth of July and Thomas went as well.

“Then it ought to be about time for you to come to one again,” he said.

“I don't know,” I answered. “I very much so doubt that I'll have time to come, particularly if Thomas brings a patient back with him today, as I suspect he will.”

Mac raised an eyebrow, nodding. “Well, if *Thomas* can spare you for an evening, send word to me? I'll still be able to swing ya 'round, even with a bad hand.” He winked at me.

“If I can come, I'll send you word,” I answered.

Mac's grin told me he was pleased with even the possibility of my going, even though I knew it to be unlikely that I would. “How much do I owe you for my hand?” he asked.

“Two dollars.”

Mac gave me a handful of coins, then picked his hat up off the table and slipped his coat back on. With a tip of his hat brim, Mac opened the door and left as quickly as the icy blast of winter air came in.

His stopping by left my heart beating faster than normal, and I stood dumbly in the middle of the room for a few moments, wondering what to do with myself now. Would Thomas permit me to go to the social? And moreover, if he did permit me, did I want to go with Mac?

I sat down at my desk and opened the ledger once more. Next to the date I had already written, I began to write once more.

*November 2, 1886: office call \$1.00*

*Stitches and bandage (palm of left hand) \$1.00*

With that recorded, I looked for something more to do. Though the medicine cabinet was spotless, I cleaned and organized it anyway. It was then, as I wiped the bottles of chloroform free

of dust, that the front door opened. An icy blast of cold wind rushed through the opening, and in with it came the shepherd, holding one end of a makeshift stretcher. I saw Thomas's familiar figure follow in with the other end of the stretcher.

I hurried as they carried the man on the stretcher into the examination room and set the entire thing upon the flat bed. As I hurried to the table's side to see what we were going to be treating, Thomas barked at me sharply, "Claire!"

I stopped short, looking at him. The man on the table was half hidden from my view, blocked by both the herder and by Thomas.

"Please," Thomas said, "go make some tea and warm some milk. I'll need a rubber feeding tube as well." Thomas turned to the other man. "You would do best to go back to your work. Waiting would be a fruitless thing, as your friend here will be with us for a while."

The man nodded. "Thank you," he said, speaking with the gentle lilt I had heard Brits speak with before. As he walked passed me, the man's blue eyes found mine and he nodded to me. "And thank you as well, miss," he said before going out the door.

I suddenly felt ashamed of myself and my disparaging thoughts of shepherders, so I nodded with red cheeks and told him "you're welcome," before he was gone.

With water coming to a boil already, I put some milk in a pan to heat.

"Thomas, what can I do to help you now?" I asked, walking into the exam room and looking at the patient on the table.

I never heard his immediate reply, as my gasp drown it out.

Working for a year as a doctor's aide had given me circumstance to see a great many things, many of which were unpleasant in nature. Lacerations open and infested with maggots,

broken bones that poked out through skin, amputation of gangrened arms and hands and feet, and well as many horrid head wounds, gashes, stabs, bullet holes, and even an arrow wound or two.

Little seemed to bother my constitution or my mind any longer, but there was nothing that had prepared me for a sight such as what lay on the table that day.

The man was clearly a shepherd as well, for his clothes and the smell from him gave him away as clearly as it had the other man. His boots were well-worn and trousers as well, showing signs of heavy wear and multiple mendings.

As I looked, I could hardly tear my gaze from his face; or rather, the place where his face ought to have been. His eyes had opened when I gasped, and I was shocked to see how clear and understanding the stormy gray irises were. They were the color of a thunderstorm rolling in, when the air changed and the evening no longer felt calm, but fearful and dark.

He regarded me as I regarded him, trying to bring my shock under control.

His eyes and forehead were the only part of his countenance left intact. Everything below the bridge of the nose had been mangled beyond recognition. Dried blood and fluid caked the wound, and since he was heavily bearded, the hair was caked as well and matted down.

There was a large chewed up hole where his mouth ought to have been, extending well out into his cheeks. I could see the tip of his tongue, I thought, in the twisted mess of flesh. There were small white chips of bone fragments embedded in the flesh along with burned blood clots and clumps of whiskers. Up along his nose the tissue was burned black with powder, and there was an even more fowl odor being admitted from what I recognized to be an inflammation of the mucous membrane. His lips, both upper and lower, along with his chin, were simply gone.

I clutched my skirt in my hands and couldn't look away.

“Claire,” I finally heard Thomas say. Snapping my attention back to him, I was able to bring myself under control.

“Yes?” I answered, focusing on his face.

“We need to get this cleaned up. Can you bring me a pair of scissors, some hot water and towels?”

I nodded numbly and fetched what he asked for.

When I returned, Thomas said, “This is George Webb.”

“Hello, Mr. Webb,” I said softly.

George Webb made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a greeting, surprising me. I looked at Thomas.

“His mental state is quite clear,” he answered simply as he went about cutting what was left of his long beard and hair away. “Mr. Webb is a sheepherder, and his friends did him a good thing, coming to get me.”

If I had complained inwardly as to the morning passing slowly before Thomas returned, it was something I regretted soon after starting to help treat this man. The day flew by, Thomas turning away any person with a malady which could keep for a delay of treatment.

George Webb was a quiet patient as we worked on him, a fact which surprised me, seeing as most of our work was uncomfortable in nature.

It took Thomas several hours to clean away the hair, clotted blood, bone fragments, burned powder residue, and other debris. Curiosity burned in me as we worked, as no explanation for the man’s condition had been offered during the course of the day.

It wasn’t until we had managed to help Mr. Webb take some tea and soup down with a rubber feeding tube that Thomas decided we were done for the day. The sky was darkening

outside as we together helped to move Mr. Webb down the hall to one of the patient rooms so that Mr. Webb could sleep.

Thomas said, “We’ll have to wait several days for the dead skin to slough off.”

I didn’t say anything as I started to make supper.

Finally, as the stew bubbled in the pot, I asked what I had wanted to know all day. “What happened to that man, Thomas?”

Thomas sat down wearily and looked at me. “He tried to kill himself.”

I gasped. “And failed?”

Thomas nodded. “He put a shotgun muzzle up to his chin, and discharged it with his foot. However, he tipped his head back when he administered the blow, and as a result, the buckshot damaged his face, rather than lodging in the brain cavity and killing him.”

A shiver ran down my spine. “Why would you bring someone like that here when he wants to die?” I blurted out before thinking.

Thomas’s look was reprimanding, and I realized my tone was far more biting than I meant it to be. “I’m a doctor, Claire. It’s my duty to help those who require it.”

I immediately felt guilty for my question and my attitude. “Is he lucid?” I asked.

Thomas nodded. “Quite,” he answered. “He seems to me to be very intelligent, but rather melancholy. He was well aware of what he was doing and regrets very much having failed at the attempt.”

My stomach turned. The image of Mr. Webb’s restless gray eyes flooded my mind. I could simply not imagine the state of mind required to try such a thing as suicide with a shotgun...

Moreover the worse feeling of trying such a thing and failing so miserably as to leave his face mangled beyond recognition.

“What will you do for him?” I asked, ladling thick stew into a bowl for the doctor.

Thomas’s eyes had a distinct gleam—the love of a challenge—when he looked at me. “I’m going to put him back together,” he answered simply, beginning to eat. He said no more.

I knew that Thomas’s mind was most likely lost to his thoughts of how to obtain such a goal, so I left him be. Nibbling half-heartedly on my dinner, I became lost in my own thoughts, recalling memories from years before, wondering what my father would think of Thomas going to such effort to save the life of a lowly shepherd.

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I sat again with the ledger, recording ailments and costs. There was little to enter, as Thomas has sent everyone that he could manage to send away, with good conscience that they would not die, from the clinic.

It had been three days since Mr. Webb had been carried into the clinic. I had done very little in those three days, as Thomas felt he did not need any great deal of assistance for the most part. He tended to George alone for the most part, and any time he was not caring for George, he was pouring over notes, scribbling in his notebooks, and mumbling to himself.

In recent months, I had proven myself to be of great help to him in all situations, and he had even entrusted me with the treatment of smaller ailments in the clinic. In this case, however, Thomas sent me away from him more than he called for my help, spending hours in the room with Mr. Webb, cleaning and doctoring and trying to figure out a way to put this herder’s face back together.

The one task I retained through the seven days was that of making sure Mr. Webb was eating something to regain his strength before Thomas began surgery. I didn't particularly care for the task, as being around Mr. Webb made me rather uncomfortable.

I was the oldest daughter of a cattle rancher, and been brought up to hate sheep and the herders, to think of cattle and horses to be the superior animal, and myself a better kind of person for raising them. I always felt like my father was perhaps too harsh regarding these men, it was still the only thing I had ever known. The cattlemen ruled the range, and sheep were a potentially deadly threat to a good cattle operation.

Yet this man had restless gray eyes that begged for someone to listen to him, and now he had a face that would never again be unnoticed in a crowd, regardless of what Thomas was able to do in order to restore the man's visage.

These thoughts were with me in the room with Mr. Webb, and we never spoke to one another as I helped him take nourishment.

The compassion I normally felt for patients eluded me as I worked around Mr. Webb. I wanted to feel such a thing for this poor man, but I could only see him as a shepherd, and in that, feel an alien sense of pity. Not only because of his dire straits, but because he had the misfortune of being a shepherd, and shepherd's lives were worth no more than the sheep they took care of.

The nights of that week stretched on endlessly for me, as I was unable to sleep restfully. Tossing and turning, I could think of nothing but the man laying in a bed a few rooms away. When I did drift off to sleep, I dreamt of nothing but the days of that summer so long ago, the days during which my father and uncles spent trying to figure a way to get rid of those men and their "range maggots."

I awoke in a cold sweat more than once, the faces of those dead men staring at me, their eyes open and unseeing. I had never wondered the names of those men until now.

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It was the dawn of the fifth day that I came out of my room early in the morning, wrapped in a shawl against the chill that woke me, and found Thomas in the same place that I had left him the night before. He was hunched over his desk, his long fingers gripping a pencil as he brushed long strokes over the pages, sketching something.

“Thomas,” I said reproachfully. He didn’t look up at me. “Thomas.”

His eyes were bloodshot and red-rimmed when he looked up at me, his face blurry and confused. “Claire?” he asked. “What are you doing up? It’s so late.”

I suddenly felt more worried about Thomas than I had been previously. His dedication to his work was commonplace, but I had never seen him so absorbed by anything before.

“It’s morning, Thomas,” I said, standing behind him and placing my hand on his shoulder. “Dawn’s breaking outside.”

He jerked around, peering out the window.

“Oh,” he said, looking up at me from his seat.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

Thomas put his hand atop mine. My face flushed at his action.

“Of course,” he answered, giving me a tired smile.

“Would you like me to make breakfast? A pot of coffee?”

Thomas patted my hand, then stood, and I stepped back, wrapping my shawl a little tighter around me. I shivered. At a glance, I could see that there was no fire in the stove at all. I could see one glowing ember through the holes in the cast iron door.

“You’re cold,” Thomas stated.

“The fire’s gone out.”

Thomas looked hurriedly down at the stove, and sprang into action. “I’m terribly, sorry, Claire,” he said, going about to stoke the fire back up. “I didn’t realize how late it had gotten...is it really morning already? Breakfast would be ideal...”

As he fussed with the stove, I moseyed to his desk and looked down at the page that was open in his notebook. There was a neat sketch of Mr. Webb’s injuries on the page, with many notations scribbled around the drawing. I caught a few words of one of the tight scribbles—*needed skin graft...shin? Hand? Thumb...*

The stove door banged shut and I startled, stepping back from my overlooking the notes just as Thomas turned around to face me. “Please, Claire, warm yourself, I’ll get a pot of coffee ready for the stove.”

He left me standing, somewhat bewildered at his strange actions. Had he ever reached out to touch me before? My hand tingled a little from where his long fingers had rested on mine.

I put my hands out the stove so they would warm, and it wasn’t long before the stove’s warmth began to permeate the room, and he had returned with a pot of coffee to set to a boil. Once he’d done that, Thomas treaded down the hall to check on Mr. Webb. I poured myself a cup of coffee shortly later, pouring some milk into it. The color in the cup struck me, as it was the same color as Mac’s warm brown eyes, for whom I’d not had a thought about all week.

The memory of his visit to the office flooded back to me along with the vision of his warm chocolate eyes, the blue muslin fabric of my dress, and the invitation to the social. I had forgotten completely about the social in the wake of Mr. Webb’s convalescence. I chewed a corner of my thumbnail for a moment. Ought I to ask?

It seemed that there was no real work for me to be doing in the evening anyway, so what harm could there be in asking? Surely Thomas would let me go. Perhaps he'd even be so inclined as to join me.

However, when Thomas returned to the room, any vestige of the tired man that had patted my hand tenderly just minutes before was gone, replaced with the focused doctor who returned to work at his desk. Any hope of his joining me to the social was gone, though asking for myself still an option.

He flipped open his notebook and returned to his sketches, beginning to mumble to himself. I poured him a cup of coffee and set it on the desk. Thomas mumbled a thank you without looking up and my heart sank in my chest a bit. Without a word, I set to making breakfast and preparing Mr. Webb's routine meal for the morning.

When I set a plate of bacon, eggs, and biscuits on Thomas's desk, I paused a moment and gathered my thoughts. "Thomas?"

"Hmm," he answered, scribbling away.

"I've had an invitation to join Mac Tanner at the social in town tonight," I said. "I'd like to go, if you can spare me for an evening."

He stopped writing and scrawling across the page. Looking up at me, Thomas's face was baffled. "A social?"

"Yes," I answered. "Tonight."

"With who?"

"Mac Tanner," I answered. "Eli Winter's apprentice. If you'd rather I not go, I don't—"

"No, no," he cut me off. "It would be advantageous for you to go out and socialize, I believe."

“But, Thomas, if you’d rather I—“

“You ought to go, Claire. I’ve kept you far busier than a lovely young lady like you ought to be.”

“Are you quite certain?”

“Of course.”

There was an awkward silence between us, and I found myself wishing it were Thomas who was willing to take me to the social, though I knew it to be impossible.

“I’m going to the mercantile to get some things,” I finally said. “Would like anything? We’re low on groceries.”

“I don’t need anything,” he said, effectively dismissing me with the wave of his hand and returning to his notebooks.

I ignored the sinking feeling in my chest and left the clinic wrapped in a heavy cloak with a basket hanging on my arm. I would get the things we needed at the mercantile, but the blacksmiths was to be my first stop.

The sun had set by the time Mac was to fetch me for the social. I had dressed carefully in my blue dress, taking extra pains with my hair, curling and pinning it up. I regarded my reflection in the mirror. Little wisps of hair rested around my face, their honey blonde color darker than the pale color of my skin.

For years I had lived outside under the sun, working on the ranch, so my skin had often been tanned darker than a lady’s ought to. But since beginning to work at clinic in town, I had been so shaded from the sun that my skin had returned to a pale white, far more in fashion than tan.

I dabbed some rose water on my neck and stared at myself. My blue eyes stared back and I found my mind wandering to the patient in the other room. I had no doubts in my mind that Thomas would be able to fix him, though I wondered about how horrific the process might be to accomplish that.

I'd helped Mr. Webb eat earlier in the day, using a feeding tube as we always did to spoon some broth and milk into him. His body was weakening rapidly as Thomas waited for the dead skin to slough off before performing surgery.

We'd spoken for the first time since he'd come into the office.

"Yooour num?" Mr. Webb had asked as I readied the broth by stirring it. I nearly dropped the bowl. I had been forced to think for a moment, to understand what he was saying.

"Claire," I replied, fairly certain that he had inquired as to my name.

"Luv—ly," he'd gotten out.

"Thank you," I answered, picking up the feeding tube. "Are you ready?"

He nodded and we went about the same eating routine we'd been doing for several days.

I stood, leaving my mirror and the room behind. Mac would arrive at any time, and I thought it best to wait in the front room to greet him. My mind was still on Mr. Webb, however. Mac had been raised mostly on his uncle's ranch, not far from my own father's place. Did he remember those summers when the sheep had been moved onto the range? Had ever given thought to what those men's names were?

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. When I answered, it was Mac, standing with his hat in his good hand, wearing a clean set of clothes and smelling like soap. He grinned at me and bowed.

“Claire, you look as pretty as the sunset on a summer’s day,” he said. I blushed and he chuckled, stepping into the clinic.

“Thank you,” I managed to get out as I reached for my cloak. Mac helped me shrug it on with some difficulty.

“I’m better with two good hands, but one will have to do for now,” he quipped. I smiled.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll let Thomas know I’m leaving.” I headed for Mr. Webb’s room, where I knew Thomas would be. Opening the door, I came face to face with two men whose expressions might not have been able to be more opposite from Mac’s.

I stood for a moment, uncomfortable as they both stared at me and said nothing. “I’m leaving, Thomas. I shan’t be out too late.”

“Leaving?”

“The social, remember?”

He nodded jerkily, clearly recalling our earlier conversation.

“You look very nice,” he said stiffly. I looked from him to Mr. Webb, whose eyes seemed to be lightened a bit with humor.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Make sure that lad walks you home,” Thomas instructed me. Mr. Webb’s shoulders shook, ever so slightly. He was laughing, though no smile could be detected on his face. I felt the corners of my own mouth turn up, and I said, “Of course. Good night.”

“Good night,” Thomas replied as I left the room.

Mac offered his arm to me after following me out the front door. I linked mine through his and we headed down the boardwalk to the town hall.

Mac was clearly pleased that I had agreed to accompany him, and I found myself enjoying the music and the company far more than I'd expected. True to his word, Mac took me to the dance floor and swung me around again and again. He was an excellent dancer, as I remembered, and even with one hand injured, and he smiled at me the entire time.

"Can we sit for a moment?" I finally asked as a song ended. "I need to catch my breath."

Mac had me to an empty chair hardly before I was done asking. We sat together, watching people twirl across the dance floor.

Mr. Albright, the cattle baron of area, was dancing with his wife, and the way his hat was tipped on his head reminded me of my father. My thoughts trailed back to the injured sheepherder at the clinic and my father and Mac's uncle. Then thought of Thomas and his strange behavior.

A sigh escaped me.

"Are you alright?" Mac asked.

I nodded. He looked at me, placing his good hand on my cheek and turning my face to him. "What's wrong?"

Taking a deep breath, I gave him a half-hearted smile. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I've had much on my mind since our newest patient came to the clinic."

"And shouldn't the newest patient at the clinic put much on the good Doctor's mind?" Mac suggested.

"Oh, it has."

Mac raised an eyebrow. I tucked my head down, knowing that my tone was harsher than I meant it to sound.

"And your mind? Why's it on your mind?"

“It’s an unusual case,” I said. Mac waited. “That day you came for stitches—Tho—Dr. Maghee came back later that day with the patient. The man was a sheepherder west of town, and he tried to kill himself last week.”

“Tried?”

“He blew most of his face off with a shotgun, but he didn’t kill himself.”

“That’s terrible,” Mac said.

I nodded in agreement. “He’s...well, Thomas is determined to put him back together, but it’s just that...he’s—the man, his name is George Webb—he’s, he’s a sheepherder.”

Mac pursed his lips and looked away from me, gazing at the bandage on his hand.

“Hmm,” he said in an understanding tone.

“You remember that summer, don’t you?” I asked softly after a few moments.

Mac nodded slowly. “How could anyone forget?”

I looked at him, surprised to find my eyes filling up with tears. Mac cupped my face in his hands and said, “There was nothing you could have done, Claire. It was a choice your father made. A choice my uncle made. It didn’t have anything to do with us.”

I nodded, my heart in my throat, knowing he felt awful over it as well.

“Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes.”

We strolled outside, where the snow was falling softly and for once, the wind was not howling down between the buildings on Main Street.

“Thank you for asking me to come tonight,” I offered, long before we were anywhere near the clinic.

“I think I ought to thank you for coming with me,” he answered. The smile he directed down at me was wide and sincere. I stopped, looking back up at him.

“I wasn’t going to come.”

Mac looked at me hard for a moment. “That patient has got your mind all wrapped up, hasn’t he, Claire?”

“I keep having nightmares about what happened. I never really thought twice about it until now. Always just tried to forget about it.”

Mac put his good hand against my cold cheek and looked into my eyes, where snow had settled on my lashes. “What our fathers and uncles did was wrong, Claire. They know it. But you can’t change it. Maybe the man ya got in the clinic can help give ya some peace of mind about it, by helpin’ him. But the wrong done those summers is on your pa’s head, not yours.”

Swallowing, I nodded once more, and dared to turn my face back to his. Those kind brown eyes crinkled at the corners a bit and suddenly his lips were on mine, warming me straight through, all the way down to my toes.

His strong arms wrapped around me, and I let mine slide around his waist, so that we were pressed together as the snow fell on us.

When Mac eased back and let me go, the grin on his face was wide, and I was glad he couldn’t see my face flush yet again in the darkness. He brushed a strand of hair back from my forehead and said, “You look mighty pretty tonight.”

He tucked my arm back into the crook of his elbow before I could reply and we walked in silence to the clinic, where he kissed me again before saying goodnight, disappearing into the darkness. It wasn’t until I had changed from my dress to night shift and crawled below the covers that I realized I hadn’t thought of Thomas once as Mac had kissed me.

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On the ninth of November, the seventh day of Mr. Webb's stay at the clinic, Thomas stopped me as I headed to the patient's room with a bowl of broth and rubber tube.

"He'll not be eating this morning," he said. "I am going to perform the first procedure upon him today."

I nodded. "I'll get everything prepared. Am I to assist you?"

Thomas shook his head. "Dr. Thode will be helping me."

I frowned. "The dentist?"

"Yes. Now, I've already prepared my instruments, would you kindly help Mr. Webb into the examination room?"

I nodded slowly, setting the bowl of broth down on the table in the hall. Going to his room, I told Mr. Webb that we were to go to the examination room. His eyes told me of his apprehension. My eyes told him of my unease.

Mac's kind words had been rolling around in my mind since our walk home from the social. Though he'd meant to comfort me, I had only felt more and more uncomfortable around my patient. The compassion and sorrow I knew I ought to feel seemed to argue with the intense attitude of disdain with which I had been raised to have regarding shepherders.

"Dr. Maghee is going to operate on you today," I said.

Mr. Webb didn't move from where he sat in his bed. He just looked at me.

"We can only help you if you come with me," I told him.

Slowly, he shook his head.

I nodded, speaking to him like I would a child. "Come on, you must get up and come with me."

“No,” Mr. Webb said, his voice sounding like his tongue was too thick to let the word out of his throat.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” I asked, unsure of what to do. We stared at one another for several long moments. Finally, I said, “You must come with me.”

Again, he shook his head. Those restless gray eyes bore down on mine, and I saw tears pool at the bottom of his eyes. One lone tear slipped free of his lashes and fell down the little bit remaining of his cheek, running into the mangled flesh of his face.

To my great surprise, I felt tears pool immediately in my eyes, and the compassion I had lacked for this man in the previous week welled up in my breast. Shepherd or not, it suddenly mattered not to me. The choice that had been my father’s all those years ago would not be the choice I would make now.

The tears in my eyes fell down my cheeks as I said, “I know you’re afraid, but Dr. Maghee can help you. Everything will turn out just fine.”

We continued to look at one another as tears streamed down both of our faces. I held a trembling hand out to him. He took it, slowly swinging his legs over the edge of bed.

His hand was rough and calloused and very large, enveloping my hand the way my father’s hand had when I was young. Shame unlike any I had ever known burned in me. Those men, with those unseeing eyes, had been men like my father, like Thomas, or like Mr. Webb.

I clutched Mr. Webb’s hand a little lighter as we walked down the hallway. When he sat down on the examination table, he let go of my hand and looked at me intently for a moment. There was something kind in his eyes in that moment and he reached out to pat my cheek lightly, like he would a child’s. My throat ached as I patted the back of his hand in return, as it lay on my face, before turning to leave the room.

Thomas followed me out. “Are you alright?” he asked me.

“You have to help him, Thomas,” I said urgently. “He can’t be left in such a state for the rest of his life.”

Frowning, Thomas said, “Of course I am going to help him, Claire.”

Nodding, I blinked back the tears that filled my eyes. “You best go do so, then,” I told him. “Dr. Thode is waiting for you.”

Thomas regarded me as though he wanted to know why I was crying, but I could also see that his mind was already back in the exam room, with his patient.

“I’m fine,” I said in as reassuring a tone as I could muster. “I assure you.”

Thomas didn’t believe me, but it didn’t matter. He had a surgery to perform, so he turned on his heel and reentered the exam room. He left me to wonder about the men with the open and unseeing eyes from that hot summer, all those years ago, whom my father had chosen to kill, and to say a prayer for the man with deep gray eyes to whom I had chosen to offer compassion.