

The
HOPE
of AZURE
SPRINGS

RACHEL
FORDHAM



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For Tyler—
who never doubted.
I love you forever.

Prologue

IOWA, 1881

“He dead?”
Em heard a man’s voice from somewhere above her. A strange thumping pulsed through her with each word he spoke. Her throat burned, screaming for water, but she could not cry out.

“There’s life in her. Not much of it though,” a second, raspier voice answered. She felt a hand press against her throat and then move over her body, gently probing. “She’s bleeding pretty bad.”

“Gunshot?” the first voice asked.

If only her eyes would open and she could see them. Straining, she struggled to pull her heavy eyelids open. Finally, bits of light darted in front of her eyes, but she could not focus. The faces above her were fuzzy and indiscernible.

Fear swept through her, suddenly waking her battered body. Afraid the men from before had returned, she opened

her eyes wide, finding strength that only moments before she had lacked. With thrashing arms she flailed at the men. Her arms flopped about but offered little defense—she was too weak from blood loss. And then they moved no longer, subdued by large, strong hands.

“Easy, girl. We aren’t going to hurt you. We just want to help. Take you into town, that’s all. There’s a good doctor there.” The man’s deep voice sounded gentle, but still she did not trust him. Voices could be deceiving. Arms could hurt as well as help. She knew these things well.

Soon she felt her body being raised above the ground, and moments later the hard planks of a wagon became the resting place for her injured frame. Too weak to move, she lay looking at the sky, wishing there were a way to end the agony, but knowing that for Lucy she would fight on.

Once the wagon lurched forward, she lost track of everything again. The wheels bouncing over ruts made her pain so intense that everything closed around her and then faded to black.

One



AZURE SPRINGS, IOWA
TWO DAYS LATER

I'm sorry to come by unannounced, but this business with the girl's been put off long enough," Sheriff Caleb Reynolds said while standing in the doorway of the Howells' home. "I'd have come by sooner, but Doc Jones said she'd need time."

"I reckon that's fine." Abraham scratched his balding head. Then he reached into his pocket and took out his handkerchief. After blowing his nose, he said, "She's been sleeping pretty hard for two days. I think we could rouse her. I know we'd worry less if we knew the whole story." He opened the door wider, admitting Caleb inside.

"Thank you," Caleb said, trying not to sound too eager. In the years Caleb had known Abraham, the man had never spoken quickly. "Most folks wouldn't have taken her in. It was good of you."

“It’s no problem.” Abraham smiled as they made their way inside. “Eliza was a bit put out giving up her bed, but the rest of us haven’t minded a bit. The girl hasn’t asked for anything. Mostly she just sleeps. Follow me. I’ll take you to her.”

They proceeded through the well-lit house. Caleb couldn’t help admiring the details as he walked. Dark decorative paneling. A massive stone fireplace. Large, deep chairs that begged to be sat in. He hoped to have a home like this someday. An involuntary sigh escaped him. A place like this would make his father proud.

Abraham’s quiet words came again as they walked toward the room. “Abigail is in there. She rarely leaves the girl’s side. She’s been so worried that we’d lose her. Even after the doctor told us the wound wasn’t serious, she’s still worrying.”

“It’s not a bad wound?”

“Doctor said she’s lucky the bullet didn’t hit anything important. It should heal up fine. But she lost a lot of blood. My Abigail has been by her side since. Nursing seems to be in her blood—and in her heart.” Abraham spoke of Abigail’s current nursing, but Caleb wondered if he was remembering. A few years back the whole town had suffered from fevers. The Howells had lost two sons. Grief sat heavy on the town, but no one had mourned quite like Abigail Howell.

Focusing on the current circumstances, Caleb readied himself for another glimpse of the waif. For just a moment he’d seen the girl when the wagon lurched into town two days before. She was a sorry excuse for a girl—unconscious, seeping blood, dirty, and smelling like something pulled from the bottom of a privy. He had been near the wagon and had heard the doctor shouting his request for someone to take her in.

“Who’ll house her?” the good doctor had shouted into the growing crowd. “She needs a place to stay. Somewhere safe to convalesce.”

No one had volunteered. No one but Abraham, who happened to be returning home from his store, his books tucked under his arm as they were every night when he locked up and walked the short distance back to his home and family. Stopping to see what the commotion was, he had quietly offered his roof to the girl. The crowd had murmured among themselves, but none seemed surprised by Abraham’s offer.

Caleb had been ready to wake the girl and go after whoever did this. No one was going to get away with shooting a pitiful girl in his territory. Before he’d been able to shake her and get the details he needed, Doc Jones had stopped him. “She’s not well enough to be questioned,” he’d said. “Give her a couple days.”

Caleb had questioned the men who had found her, but they’d been no help. When he’d walked back to the jail, he had nothing to show for his efforts but questions. Now here he was. He’d followed the doctor’s orders and waited two days, but it was time to figure out this mess.

“Em, try to wake up. The sheriff’s here. He wants to help you. Can you wake up and talk to him?” Abigail gently nudged the girl’s shoulder. Abraham stood near his wife, silently spectating.

The effect was slow, but the girl did open her eyes. Blue eyes met his own. It was obvious that the Howells had attempted to clean her up, but she was in need of a good dunk in a tub.

“Em, is it?” Caleb asked, trying to sound gentle, not wanting to scare the girl off. *Em*, he said again in his mind. *A mighty plain name for a mighty plain girl.*

“That’s my name. What do you want?” Though the girl’s voice quivered, it still carried a hint of defensiveness.

“I want to find out who shot you and what I can do to help.” He leaned in a little closer and tapped his badge. “I’m the sheriff of this town, and it’s my job to catch whoever did this. You tell me what you can and we’ll keep you safe. I need to know everything you remember.” He’d dealt with youngsters before, often enough to know that a gentle voice helped them stay calm. After years of questioning people, he’d also learned other tricks: Never let them know you’re caught off guard. Always keep control. “Go ahead, tell me what you can.”

She raised herself up a little, her eyes meeting his. “Why are you talking to me like I’m a child?”

“How old are you?” He was okay starting with her age—at least it was something.

“Nineteen. Nearly twenty.”

He could find no words. So much for keeping control. Staring hard at the girl, he tried to decide if he believed her. Upon closer inspection, he thought perhaps she was right. She was so thin, terribly thin, her frame *looked* childlike. Perhaps it was lack of food rather than age that caused her to look so young and small.

Finally, clearing his throat, he spoke, making sure he was using a voice appropriate for an adult. “I apologize. I’m not the best at guessing a *woman’s* age. Can you tell me who shot you?”

“I’ll tell you, but it won’t do you much good. Three men came to the house, yelling and knocking things around, and then they started shooting.” Pausing, Em took a ragged breath. “I’m sure they thought I was dead. They just stepped

over me, cursing and searching the house for something. I just lay there in my own blood, waiting for them to leave.”

“Did you see their faces?” He opened his notepad. “Did you know any of them? Do you know what they were looking for?”

Em’s eyes darted around, and her breathing sounded more labored. Abigail put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right, Em. Just one thing at a time.” Turning to the sheriff, she said, “Perhaps one question at a time. She’s been through so much already. I think we need to take it slow.”

He fought the urge to remind them that he’d already waited two days.

Em took several slow breaths while Abigail wiped her perspiring brow. “Shhh,” she soothed. “It’s all going to be all right. We’ll keep you safe, and Sheriff Reynolds will find whoever did this.”

Em turned toward him. “I never saw them before, but I did get a good look at them. I’d know them if I ever saw them again. I don’t know what they were after, but if you could take me back there, I might have an idea where to find it.”

“Where to find what?” he asked, his voice rising. She was only further confusing him. What he needed were answers, not more questions.

“I said I don’t know. What I do know is whenever George came back from one of his trapping trips, he always went to a certain spot, tucked away on our land. Like he was checking on something. I never thought much of it. He was a quiet man, and this was not his only strange habit. But I’m guessing whatever they were looking for is there.”

Caleb nodded and reached for his hat, relieved that this

would have an easy solution. *A quick ride to an old home-
stead and—*

“I see what you’re thinking, Sheriff Reynolds, but she can’t go anywhere—not yet. Doctor said she’s to take it easy for a couple weeks.” Abigail’s eyebrows pulled together, and her eyes did not leave his until he set his hat back down. For being a kind woman, Abigail Howell could be intimidating.

“I’m not staying in bed for a couple weeks,” Em said. “I can’t stay here. I’ve already been here too long.” As she sat up higher in bed, the blanket fell away from her arm. Caleb was surprised to see wrinkled, discolored skin all along its surface. He was no doctor, but he was fairly certain the grim marks were from an old burn.

Abigail again put a reassuring hand on Em’s shoulder. “Hush, dear. We were happy to take you in. We volunteered and haven’t regretted it for a moment. The doctor says you have a bit of a recovery ahead, and I’m not about to cross the doctor.” Abigail pursed her lips into a tight line and waited.

Caleb hoped that Em knew when to admit defeat. Despite Abigail’s resolute look, he saw the good woman’s tenderness and concern.

Abigail Howell was as near a saint as there was in Azure Springs. This girl in her sorry shape could not have landed in a better home.

“I second what Abby said. You’re welcome here,” Abraham said, crossing his arms over his pudgy belly. Abraham Howell always stood by his wife. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do. Good day to you, Sheriff, ladies.” He stood deliberately, nodded, and then turned and left.

“I’m not one to put things off that need to be done. But

I'll follow the doctor's orders and wait to take you back out there," Caleb said.

"Her recovery will be much quicker if she takes it easy," Abigail said.

"I'll trust her to your care. But I can't just sit around here waiting. I'll head out there myself and see what I can find. Those men might have left clues. There's no reason for me to wait."

"If you head out there, you could bring back her clothes and some of her essentials." Abigail turned to Em. "Are there any personal items you would like the sheriff to bring?"

"Won't find much by way of essentials," Em said. "The dress I was wearing is my only dress. I know it's not much to look at, but it's the only one I have. If you do head that way, there's something I could use your help with." Avoiding eye contact, she turned her head toward the wall, her hand fiddling with the edge of the quilt. "Would you bury George? I hadn't meant to leave him, but I knew I had to get away."

"George? You mentioned him before. Who is he?" Caleb's voice again rose as he spoke. He had not expected to hear that someone else had been shot. Someone killed. Why hadn't she told him that first? Caleb rubbed the dark stubble on his chin, giving himself a moment to calm down. "Tell me about George."

Em's voice was softer now, barely above a whisper. "George is the owner of the homestead. I lived with him—in a way."

Caleb looked from Em to Abigail, hoping to understand. "You lived with him? Was he your brother, father?"

"I think we should slow down. These have been a taxing few days." Abigail came to the rescue again. "I'm sure Em can explain it all. But you must give her time."

Em spoke up. “It’s all right, Abigail. I’ll tell what I can. I suppose you could say I worked there. Though I wasn’t paid. And yes, he’s dead. They shot him more than once in the chest before they shot me. I checked before I left and he was dead. I wouldn’t have left him if he hadn’t been. He needs someone to bury him. It’s not right, him rotting aboveground. I’d do it myself if I could, and I will if you won’t.”

Caleb pictured those frail limbs digging a grave and dragging a grown man into it. He doubted she possessed the strength, and even if she did, it would be a daunting task. It wouldn’t be a pleasant job for him—dealing with death never was—but he’d had years of good meals to run on and he did not want for muscle.

“I’ll bury him, don’t worry yourself about that. But this is more serious than I thought. Depending on what these men were after, they may be back.” He scratched at the back of his neck, then stood and paced the room. “When they return, if they return, they’ll know you’re still alive and may come looking for you. Seeing as you are a witness to George’s death, they might want you dead. I’ve been sheriff long enough to know there’s a breed of men who hates a witness.”

He felt Abigail’s and Em’s eyes trailing him as he walked back and forth. They said nothing.

“Judging by the wound in your side, they’re not afraid of pulling the trigger. If they’re smart, they’ll know you may be able to identify them.” He ran his hands through his hair. He hadn’t anticipated anyone coming after this pitiful girl. For two days he’d assumed that she was merely the victim of some senseless crime. Never had it crossed his mind that this might have been a planned attack. The longer he talked to her, the more he was convinced this was not just a matter

of her being in the wrong place at the wrong time. These men were after something.

“I don’t even know where I am. How will they know?” Em asked. “I took a horse when I left. I rode it a long way before I fell off.”

“Even if there’s no trail of blood, there aren’t many towns around. If someone wants to find you, they will. It’d be best for all of us to be cautious. We don’t know what lengths they’ll go to in order to find you. I don’t want you leaving this house, not yet anyway. Not until those men are behind bars. I’ll enlist some men to help me keep a watch around this home, and we’ll spread the word to others to be careful.”

Abigail jumped into the conversation again. “In another day or two we’ll give her a real bath. I’ll find her some of Eliza’s clothes to wear. A little freshening up will change her appearance. I’m certain that will help. Already she’s improving.”

Caleb took in Em’s disheveled and ragged appearance—her hair caked with dirt and oil, a layer of filth covering her skin. Never had he seen a face so thin. The bones in her cheeks looked harsh and sharp, the skin pulled tight around them. No man would look twice at her for her beauty. But if a man were looking for the plainest, thinnest waif of a girl, she would not be hard to pick from a crowd.

“A good bath and clean clothes couldn’t hurt, but it still won’t be hard to track her down. Half the town saw her come in on the back of that wagon. All those men would have to do is ask a few questions around Main Street and she’d be found. I’ll spread word to everyone I see, but it’s best if she stays put, away from people. Guarding one house will be

easier than watching the whole of Azure Springs. I'll get to the bottom of this and then she'll be free to go."

Turning his attention from Abigail and back to Em, he said, "I know you can't talk long today, but can you give me descriptions of the men and tell me where your place is?"

Em's eyes were looking weary, but she nodded. In a tired voice, she gave him details. Specifics most people would overlook came pouring out of her. He wished everyone he interviewed remembered the little things the way she did.

"One man had a scar running along his left cheek," she said. "It was red, like it was new. Another had red hair, deep red, and he was missing a front tooth. The third man had fair hair and bushy eyebrows. He didn't talk much—just followed orders."

The images of all three of the men came alive, the details vivid, as Caleb scrambled to keep up with her, frantically writing notes.

"I don't know where I am now, but I know George's place is next to Hollow Creek, about a mile south of where it meets the Eagle River. It's tucked in the back of a little clearing. It's not much to look at, but I think you'll be able to find it."

Clutching his notes, he stood. "Thank you, Em. I'll let you rest now. I'll be back soon to talk. Please think hard about what these men could have been after."

He made his way through the house and was reaching for the handle of the front door when Abigail said, "Sheriff?"

Caleb turned around to see her standing in the front room. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I've heard of a man living back along that creek. I remember the preacher saying he'd tried visiting before, but the man had sent him away without letting him in. And I think

the Walkers have mentioned a strange man back there. They live out that way. It's pretty secluded, but you know Ruth Walker, she likes knowing what's going on. But I've never heard of a girl back there, not from Ruth or the preacher or anyone. And this man, George, no one really knows him." Creased worry lines formed on Abigail's face.

Caleb wished he could ease her mind somehow. "I've never heard of anyone living on Hollow Creek. I try to know everyone, but I've never heard a single mention of George. I'll head out there as soon as I can. I don't know how the pieces will come together, but they always do. Let me know if she tells you anything else."

"I will." Abigail took a few steps toward Em's room before turning back. "I hardly know the girl. It's strange, but already I care for her. Please stop these men. I want Em to be safe. I know she's frightened. She hasn't said she is, but I can sense an uneasiness. You have to stop these men. She deserves a chance." With that she stepped back into the sickroom.

Caleb put his hat on and left. James, the town's land agent, would have a detailed map of the area and any land deeds. With his long arms swinging at his sides, Caleb made his way toward the land office, his mind working like the gears in a clock. Who was George and what kind of arrangement did the girl have with him? The few ideas he conjured up sickened him. He hoped for a simple, untainted explanation.

Em was plain looking, with her stringy, straw-colored hair, freckled nose, and thin frame—no denying that. But she was quick and alert. The details she'd provided told him she had a keen mind. *What's her story? Who would shoot a girl like that? What reason could they have?* Lost in thought, he was startled to hear his own name.

“Sheriff Reynolds. Pleasure running into you.” Eliza Howell approached from the side. He stopped. Skirts swaying, she moved closer until she stood very near, smiling up at him through long lashes. He found himself staring at her perfectly rosy cheeks. He couldn’t help admiring her curled blond hair with just a hint of red. The land office did not seem so urgent now.

Caleb stepped out of the way as several men passed by. He watched as the men’s eyes drifted to Eliza and lingered on her. Everything about Eliza turned heads, including his.

“Miss Eliza. What has you out and about in Azure Springs?” Caleb asked the local beauty.

“I walked in to meet Olivia. She wanted to visit Miss Caroline because she was expecting a new order of lace today. Olivia’s still looking. I think she might stay all day trying to decide which she likes best. I saw you passing by and thought a quick hello would break up the monotony of my day. Besides, Miss Caroline has already talked my ear off long enough about Mr. Norbert. Poor old maid, someday she’ll realize no one is interested in a spinster.” Eliza reached up and brushed at the shoulder of his jacket. “Seems you picked up some dust from these dry roads.”

He offered his arm and walked her along the street toward the dress shop. “I’m glad you stopped me,” he said. “I was just over at your place. I met Em. It’s a puzzling case.” He felt the pull of his conscience at the mention of Em. “I won’t be able to visit long. I need to do some digging around and see what I can learn about her.”

“That horrible, dirty girl is in my bed and I’m upstairs with Mae and Millicent. Have you ever seen a dirtier creature in all your life? It’s rather disgusting.” She scrunched up her

nose. “I’ll have to boil the entire bed to get the smell out. Even then I’m afraid I’ll catch something she left in it. Let’s talk of other things. I’m so tired of everyone talking about Em and worrying over her.”

Caleb stared a moment, surprised such ugly words could come from someone so beautiful. Odds were she hadn’t meant to sound so harsh. “She was a sight. I don’t think she’s had enough to eat in a long time. Gets me wondering what kind of life she was leading.” Drawn back into his reverie, he wiped his brow absently and looked off into the distance. “Whatever her story is, it’s my duty to help her. If I don’t, those men could hurt others. You, even.”

“We all rest easier knowing you’re the sheriff. Always our valiant man in arms.” Eliza’s voice was playful, but he liked the image she painted of him. He’d been too young to fight in the war. Sheriff was the closest he could come to being a hero.

“I know you’ll take care of us all.” She squeezed his arm a little tighter.

Olivia stepped out of the shop just as they approached. Olivia Bingham was eighteen, a year younger than Eliza. She was dark haired and fair skinned. The two were often together. Everywhere they went the pair drew attention. More men talked about these two than any other females in the county.

“So nice to see you, Sheriff,” Olivia said when they approached. “About time you took Eliza for a stroll. I was beginning to think you’d never ask her. Don’t stop on my account. I can turn right around and buy more lace. The shipment today is better than any other. I plan to have a new frock made just so I can trim it with ivory lace.”

Caleb dragged his foot around in the dry dirt. “A stroll would be pleasant. To be honest, it sounds much more appealing than the day I have waiting for me. I can’t stay though. I have to see James over at the land office. But I’ll look forward to seeing your new frock. I’ll let you two go and pick out lace.” Caleb reluctantly unwound Eliza’s arm from his own, then turned and stepped away. “Good day, ladies.”

Smiling back at the pair of them, he forced his legs into motion and headed south. A few steps later he allowed himself one more backward glance. The women had linked arms and were whispering together, smiles lighting their faces, both carefree and radiant. Spending the afternoon with them would have been enjoyable. But he had a job to fulfill, and now was as good a time as any. Being a sheriff was an honor and a responsibility he took seriously. Still, there were days he wanted to walk away from the demands. Lead the quiet life he’d once dreamed of.

Caleb put all thoughts of Eliza from his mind as he walked to the land office. Once there, he pushed open the heavy wooden door and looked around for James. Cigar smoke filled the air, mixing with the smell of musty paper, the same smell that always greeted Caleb when he stopped by. At the sound of the door, James stood, put his half-smoked cigar down, and walked over.

“Sheriff Reynolds, what brings you here?” James’s voice was big and hoarse, as always, and he sounded as if he had something trapped in his throat. “Can I get you something?”

“I need you to help me dig up a claim. I want to see who owns a stretch of land.” Caleb fumbled through papers in the top drawer of an old desk. He pulled out several maps before finding the one he was looking for.

“Hollow Creek area?” James asked after giving the map only a glance.

Caleb nodded but didn’t look up. At last he pointed to the section he was sure was George’s land. “This bit here. I don’t know how big the claim is, but this is it. Can you tell me who owns it?”

“It’ll take me some time. I don’t recall anyone buying up any land there for years, but I can find out for you. I’ve got the records around here somewhere. When do you need them by?” James was already shuffling through papers, his head bent low, eyes racing across faded lines of scrawled handwriting.

Caleb wondered how he knew where anything was. There seemed to be no system, no organization. “The quicker the better. I’m going to ride out there as soon as I can. I’d go today if I could, but it’s too late. Tomorrow I have to take the Strafford boy in to the county judge. There and back will take me the whole day. I’d have someone else take him, but there’s no one.”

Caleb scratched at his collar. “I’ll probably head out the next day before dawn. Do you think you could have it for me by then?” He knew James would find it by then, probably much sooner. Whenever he asked a favor of him, he managed to find a way to help.

“I’ll have it before you head out. Come by tomorrow when you get back in town.” James bent over and fought the frog that seemed to live in his throat. When it was finally suppressed, he asked, “Is this about that girl? The one they brought in half dead a couple days back?”

“Yeah. Not sure what the story is yet, but it might end up being a big one.” Caleb walked back toward the door.

“Thank you, James. I’ll come by tomorrow evening and see what you’ve found.”

Caleb opened the door and stepped outside, away from the stench of the stale cigar smoke. He felt grateful for his position and his shiny star. People were eager to help, and depending on how the next couple of days went, he might need that help. Already his gut was telling him this was no usual crime.