the
SECRETS

EMBERWILD



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For Jason.

You are the hero of my favorite romance. No story could ever compare to the beauty of every day spent with you. Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.

Psalm 115:1

chapter ONE

Emberwild Horse Farm Neshoba County, Mississippi March 3, 1905

Freedom rushed through Nora Fenton's veins, erupting with each breath. Invisible shackles didn't bind out here.

Her independence always came at a price.

Nora leaned forward in the saddle. The wind slipped through her hair and snatched it from its pins, letting the honey-brown tresses fly out behind her. Hoofbeats pounded in rhythm with her heart.

The colt's exuberance for the open terrain would soon have to be contained once more and their ride brought to an end. Wild abandon never lasted long, and Arrow's reckless gallop could snatch life away from the both of them without warning. Caution demanded she draw back on the reins.

Not yet.

Freedom tasted far too sweet. It broke through the cloud of oppression and the pall of death that had made the delicate balance of her household all the more unstable these past months. She would pay for the reprieve.

And it would be worth it.

Nora took in one last look at the morning sky painted brilliant pink, then laid her left rein across Arrow's neck, asking him to make the turn toward home. He pinned his ears in displeasure and lowered his head, resisting her attempt at control. He lengthened his stride until they nearly soared above the ground.

Apparently the neck-reining lesson hadn't lasted past the corral. So be it. Gripping the rein in her leather glove, Nora pulled back and applied pressure to the side of the bit. Arrow shook off the command.

Stubborn colt. He would learn. He might be a stallion, but she was alpha of this herd. Nora planted her foot in the left stirrup and snatched the rein down to her hip, holding firm until his stride jerked to a halt. She dropped from the saddle.

"Got the better of you, didn't it?" Nora laughed, ruffling the shock of mane between his red ears already flecked with gray.

Arrow pinned his ears again and tossed his head. Nora squared her shoulders and pushed into his space. He snorted, then flicked his ears forward and lowered his head in submission.

She patted his neck. "See, now. No reason to get ornery. Keep acting like that and you'll spend your sunrises in the stable."

Arrow tilted his head and gave a good shake. As he did, her saddle slipped to the side.

Nora reached for the girth only to find the leather on the right side splitting. It probably wouldn't safely survive another battle of wills with Arrow, and she couldn't risk falling under his hooves if it broke. Roger would likely use this as a mark against her competence. The surly stable master took any excuse he could find.

Sighing, she gathered the reins and turned back toward the stables. They had a long walk ahead of them, and now she wouldn't have time to change. The best she could hope for was to deliver Father's tray before he woke.

Nora strode through the new stalks of bermudagrass, bright green from the spring sun. If the weather held this year, they'd have plenty to sell after they stocked their herd for the winter.

Arrow snorted and pranced. The stallion, two years old last month, was as high-strung as he was beautiful and brimmed with potential. A few more weeks of training and he'd be ready for his first qualifying race—just in time for the fair.

She hoped.

If only she could work with him longer each day. Father's insistence that a woman had no place training horses hadn't waned as his illness worsened, and the stable hands still thought they were doing her a favor by thwarting her efforts. Mother, for her part, seemed to think it her duty to carry on Father's archaic ideals with a fervor. As though doing so would smother Nora's modernized way of thinking and suddenly turn her into the pristine lady they'd both somehow failed to produce.

Nora swatted a thick seed head. She'd show them. Her methods worked faster and better than any of the stable hands', but none of them would admit it.

She smirked. They wouldn't have a choice if she got Arrow ready on her own.

If she could prove to Mother that women were capable of more than just tending home and hearth, then perhaps she could convince Mother to entertain her other ideas for the farm. Father wouldn't get better, and they needed to prepare. Arrow was the key to her independence.

The horse suddenly tossed his head, nearly snatching the reins from her hand as though in direct defiance to her thoughts. As they neared the stables, he let out a shrill call for the other horses, awakening the rest of the barn and earning a chorus of nickers and whinnies in reply.

So much for going unnoticed. Nora glanced up at the sky, its masterpiece of purple and orange light now a swath of blue.

Late. Again.

For the briefest instant she considered leaving Arrow in his stall while she tended Father and then brushing him down later, but she dismissed the notion as swiftly as it came. She wouldn't neglect Arrow just because she'd let herself enjoy his first real ride too long or because they had to walk all the way home.

The massive stone barn of Emberwild fluttered with morning activity. Nora inhaled deeply, breathing in the earthy scents of hay and oats. She felt more at home surrounded by horseflesh than humanity, something her parents never understood. Horses were creatures with pure motives and unveiled intentions.

She led Arrow into his wide stall, pleased it had already been raked clean and the straw replaced in their absence. Her colt thrust his muzzle into the hay bag and snatched out a mouthful with a snort of contentment.

Making quick work with the brush, Nora combed over Arrow's frothy coat and checked his forelocks. After inspecting his hooves for rocks, she tossed him his morning oats and secured the latch to his stall. She replaced her saddle on the stand in the immaculate tack room. She'd have to find a new girth soon.

The heels of her boots clicked down the stone center aisle as the two stable boys, Pete and Andrew, scurried out of her way. She'd long since stopped trying to befriend them. Nora exited through the barn door and quickly surveyed the yard between the house and the stable. Other than the boys tending the horses in the barn, Emberwild roused slowly. Even the hounds didn't seem interested in greeting this humid day.

She passed the exercise track and skirted the pristine, overflowing flower bed on her way into the house. Mother cared about her flowers and the state of the house more than anything—or anyone—else.

The day Father had presented the finished house to Mother, she'd said it looked like a doll's house, with all that gingerbread molding in the eaves and the porch that wrapped around both sides.

For Nora, home became a gilded cage woven with conditional affection and cold conversations.

She entered the still-silent house, praying she didn't leave a trail of dirt behind on the wood floor to condemn her. She rushed through

gathering the honeyed milk, the teapot, and the two eggs she'd boiled the night before and assembled them on a silver tray, making sure to leave Mother's sunny yellow domain as spotless as she'd found it.

She lifted the tray and pushed open the door between the kitchen and dining room with her hip, turning toward the wide staircase to the upper floor. All she had to do was slip into Father's room, drop the tray, and then get herself cleaned up before either parent saw her.

She took the steps carefully, avoiding the fourth one, which squeaked. How long had she dallied? She hadn't paused to look at the grandfather clock in the foyer. The chandelier overhead caught morning sunrays, sending diamonds of color over the green papered walls.

She hurried across the thick carpeted hall, coming to a stop next to Father's room, a room he'd once shared with Mother but now called his prison. Maybe that gave him a taste of what life had been like for her all these years. She pushed the bitter thought down and balanced the tray with trembling hands before carefully turning the knob. With any luck, she wouldn't wake him.

The door swung inward on silent hinges, the sunlight barely piercing the shadows. Nora held her breath and listened for her father's ragged breathing. She moved closer to the bed and set the tray on the bedside table, cringing as the rattle of porcelain gave her away. She paused, waiting.

Silence.

There. She'd left his breakfast for him to partake when he woke, just as he liked. She should hurry to her room to don a gown before anyone saw her in men's pants.

But still she lingered.

The silence in the room unnerved her. She needed to get close enough to make certain only sleep claimed him.

Nora inched toward the carved canopy bed draped in summer mosquito netting. With the scant light filtering through the curtains covering the double window opposite, she could make out the shape of his form under the blankets.

The Secrets of Emberwild

She peered closer. Did his body move with breath?

His form suddenly lurched. Nora yelped and stumbled back, her pulse thudding in her ears.

"Nora?" Her father's voice, raspy yet edged in steel, found her in the gloom.

Maybe he hadn't seen her, and she could still slip out. She took another step back.

"I know it's you. I can smell the horse sweat."

Nora set her teeth. "Good morning, Father. I've brought your tray. I didn't mean to wake you."

"But you did."

She turned and headed toward the safe harbor of light beckoning from the hallway.

"Please . . . stay."

Nora froze. Sweat beaded on her brow, and she swiped the moisture away. She turned reluctantly, despising the long-buried need within that still sought his approval.

"Yes?"

"Come closer."

"I've already brought your tray. Do you need me to pour the tea?"

"I..." His words dissolved into a racking cough more strangled than yesterday's.

By the time she took hold of the heavy velvet curtain, his fit had subsided. Nora thrust the fabric aside, allowing the daylight to breach the room and fully reveal her disgrace.

"Come, Sit,"

Surprised he said nothing about her attire, Nora grabbed a ladder-back chair and positioned it by the bedside. She sat and clasped her hands in her lap, eyes downcast.

She waited, listening to his breathing. Each inhale came with a faint whistle, as though his lungs struggled to fill with air.

"Need to tell you . . . something."

"I know. I shouldn't have been out at the stables this morning—" "Enough." He barked the single word, cutting off her explanation.

Hiram Douglass Fenton thought women should listen to orders without comment, and children, daughters especially, should be seen more than heard. Nora clenched her teeth to keep her tongue tamed.

Father settled against the multitude of feather pillows behind his back. He'd become a skeleton draped in papery skin. He hardly resembled the thickly muscled man of her youth, and his eyes held none of the laughter that, if she thought hard enough, she could remember from her childhood.

Somewhere deep in her heart, she recalled calloused hands that would hold hers and lips that were quick to form a smile or story in the evening's firelight. Somewhere around her twelfth year, Father had suddenly ceased to be the cheery man she'd loved. As she'd grown into womanhood, she'd seemed to displease him more with each passing year until the man before her was little more than a demanding stranger.

She could feel his eyes upon her but would not lift her head until he spoke again. He kept her in suspense. Another lesson on humility.

"I have something I need to tell you." Father cleared his throat, but his words remained thick. "Something I need to confess before I die."

Her gaze shot up to his face, and she noted the trickle of blood from the side of his lip. Without comment, she handed him a hand-kerchief. He wiped the blood away, his eyes never leaving her face. Did he expect her to argue? Say he shouldn't talk about death or assure him he would recover?

Such claims were lies they'd both recognize.

He wadded the linen in his gnarled hand. "Everything we have is built on a lie."

Her pulse skittered. "What?"

Father leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "For once, girl, stop talking and listen. I don't have much time, and I need to get this stain off my soul. I've carried it far too long as it is, and if God will have mercy on me, I don't wish to carry it to my grave."

Nora sat back in her chair.

"Fifteen years ago, this place had nothing but four half-starved mares and a floundering stallion that wasn't worth his weight in manure."

While she waited for another fit of coughing to subside, Nora averted her gaze. An uneasy feeling settled in her stomach. She remembered those days. Times when the long winter nights with wind beating at their rickety door left them yearning for thicker blankets and fuller stomachs as they huddled together around the fireplace. Hard times, but happier ones.

"I was desperate to make things better for her, so I didn't question him. That horse was just . . . something."

Nora frowned. What was he talking about?

"But \dots should have known better. Then, all these years, I didn't say anything. Just \dots kept building on the lie."

He clutched at his chest, the coughs racking his thin frame.

"I'm going to get Mother."

"No!" He gasped for air. "I don't like her . . . seeing me . . . this way."

Nora paused, indecision biting at her. He didn't look well. Much worse than yesterday, when she'd honestly thought he wouldn't see another sunrise. Mother needed to know.

"Let her remember me like I was."

His eyes held such pleading and vulnerability that Nora couldn't get herself to move. He clutched his chest again, breaths seeming harder for him to find. His features deepened to a bluish tinge.

"Don't tell her. Don't you d-dare tell her what I told you. Not a ... burden for her ... to bear."

Palms sweating, Nora ran them down her hips, only gathering dust in the process. With her hands too dirty to reach for him, she merely watched him instead.

"Promise."

Promise what? What did he want her to do? Promise she would never tell her mother something she didn't even understand? She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Promise!"

Nora nodded, tears clouding her vision. Then he shot forward, his mouth agape, as though he could not catch the breath he desperately needed.

"Mother!" Nora dropped down beside his bed. "Mother!"

Father grabbed her hand, his eyes wild. Not knowing what else to do, she held on, praying that God in his mercy would remember the faith of a younger man and forget the bitterness of the older one. Helpless, Nora watched until her father's body stopped flailing and he slumped back against the pillows. His fingers slacked, then his eyes stared up at nothing.

Biting her fist, Nora fought back the sobs.

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and then Mother's shrill cry splintered the silence.