House of Dreams

Haley Avant
DEDICATED TO
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Haley Avant has captured love, loss, hope, and redemption in her novel rooted in the early days of the American west. Her characters come alive with emotion which takes the reader’s heart along for a wild ride.

~ M.B. Husman

Hattie thought she heard a voice say, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” She then remembered from where she had heard those wise words, from the Bible! Hattie sat on the floor in the corner, sobbing. Finally, all the noise died away and she heard heavy footsteps on the porch. It was Luther coming for her--
Acknowledgements
Table of contents

1. Nightmares from the Past, and Hopes for the Future
2. The Dread of the Unknown and the Known
3. Pleasant Memories in a Dark Time
4. “This is Not What I Wanted.”
5. Dreams and Realities
6. Beautiful Accidents
7. Drowning Sorrows
8. Seeking Wisdom in the Rain
9. I Now Pronounce You Mr. and Mrs...
10. A New Beginning
11. House of Dreams
12. “Hello. My name is...”
13. Walls
14. Reliving Painful Memories
15. Could It Be Love?
16. Mistakes
17. Repaying the Debt
18. He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not
19. Terrified
20. The Cavalry
22. Happily Ever After
Chapter 1
Nightmares from the Past,
and Hopes for the Future

Hattie Starns had always wondered, talked, hoped, and imagined what her future would be like. She viewed her life like the books. She never even caught a glimpse of what her life was really going to turn out like.

“I love you so much Hattie. Please don’t be mad at me for leaving you,” the quiet frail voice pleaded.

“I could never be mad at you. But you are not leaving me; you are going to get better. I won’t let you leave.”

“Oh, Hattie I want to leave. I don’t want to leave you, but I am ready to feel better. I am only depressed because you will be here and I will be up there,” she whimpered, lifting her eyes upward. Hattie felt like she had been punched right in the gut. She did not see any way to let this precious gift leave her. In the dimming light she looked at that face that was so dear to her heart. The blue in her eyes were not as vibrant as they once had been. She grabbed Hattie’s hand, looked into her eyes and whispered five words: “God...
Twenty-two year old Hattie woke up trembling and her face and pillow covered with tears. “It was just a dream, just a dream,” she told herself over and over again. But Hattie knew the truth: it was a nightmare.

Hattie cleaned herself up, wiped her tears off her delicate face and glanced in the mirror. “Put the past behind you. Get ready for today, tomorrow, and whatever comes in the future,” she repeated to herself the same way she had been doing every morning since the nightmares began. Recently the nightmares had gotten longer. She used to just see just glimpses from the room or of her face, but now it was almost the passing of that whole night. Hattie slapped a smile on her face, got dressed, and headed down the short drafty hall towards the kitchen.

The salty, buttery smell of eggs reached her nose. It was not a smell to which she was accustomed. Ever since moving to Smith County, Texas, her family had not been able to buy delicacies like eggs. She used to not understand why, since her father held a reasonable job. But now she realized he just gambled it all away every week and never had the sense to learn. Her slim, mild-speaking mother stood at the stove frying the eggs. Ruth Ann was a beautiful lady even in her advanced
age. Her graying hair fell in slight curls, like Hattie’s. She had a dainty nose and barely any wrinkles. Her father’s eyes weren’t blind to beauty; that was for sure. Hattie got most of her looks from her mother: the dainty nose, perfect posture, wavy hair, and the pale, creamy, perfect skin. But the very light red hair was from her father whom she wished to be nothing like.

“Where did we get the eggs?” Hattie asked.

“Hazel brought them over this morning. They got a chicken a few days ago. Hopefully, we will have more eggs now.”

“That would be nice,” Hattie agreed. “I am going to go see Hazel before breakfast.” Hattie declared, almost flying out the door out the door. “You don’t want breakfast?”

“I’ll get it later,” came the reply. Hattie hurried down the steps and started the walk towards Hazel’s house. It wasn’t a long walk, so Hattie enjoyed it.

As Hattie reached the Pierce house, Hazel walked out the door. “I was just on my way to see you. Did you like the eggs?”

“I haven’t had any yet. I came to see you instead,” she said with a smile. “I thought we could go to the creek and talk for a while.”

“That sounds fine to me,” Hazel agreed. The creek was behind Hattie’s house, so they had to walk back up the road. When they
reached the creek, they took off their shoes and put their feet in the icy cold water and walked on the slippery rocks.

“Hazel!” shrieked Hattie. “Hazel! Help!” Hazel ran over and grabbed Hattie’s arm before she could fall face first into the cold river. Both of them started to laugh uncontrollably and both fell promptly into the river. “Oh you’re a big help!” Hattie said, laughing and splashing water on her friend. They crawled up on the river bank and lay down to dry out in the sun.

“It’s strange to think we are 21 and 22 years old. You would never know by the way we behave when we are down here!” Hazel giggled.

“Yes, we are children at heart!” answered Hattie.

“Let’s never change!” Hazel proclaimed. “I see no reason we should.” They both started laughing once more. Both were unaware their lives were about to change.
Chapter 2
The Dread of the Unknown and the Known

After a day filled with laughter, the two girls said their goodbyes and parted their ways until the next day. It was dusk when Hattie returned home. When she walked into the door, she knew something was wrong. She heard her mother crying, and she heard her father yelling. Their bedroom door was shut. Hattie figured he had been gambling again. And he might have had a few drinks at the saloon as well.

When the crying and yelling faded, she knocked on the door and walked in. When her mother saw her, she started bawling all over again, and her father gave her a maniacal grin that sent a chill up her spine. He once more turned to yell and scream at her mother.

“Stop it! I don’t know what y’all are fighting about, but you don’t have yell so
loudly and horribly like that!” she yelled to her father.

The room quieted and her father opened his mouth to grumble. “I’ll tell you what we were fighting about. *I lost the biggest bet of my life!*” he screamed, starting Mama’s crying process all over again.

“Enough!” Hattie yelled. “Can it really be as bad as the last time? You lost all our money last time. Remember? We had to move from Denver,” she sang out sarcastically.

“Don’t get smart with me girl! I lost more than all our money. This time I bet money I didn’t even have!” his face was as red as a tomato.

Hattie thought her face must have been the same way. “**HOW CAN YOU DO THIS TO US!**” Hattie screamed. “**DON’T YOU THINK BEFORE YOU ACT?**”

He raised his hand as if to slap her, but just before his hand met her face, he froze. “How old are you?” came the random question.

Hattie was so confused she answered right away: “Twenty two.”

“You’re not married are you?”

“Shouldn’t you know that? You are my father.”

“Just answer the question!”

Hattie bit her tongue. “No.”
Luther turned on his heel and headed towards the door. “You might have just saved your father’s hide, Missy!” Suddenly, Hattie got an unexplained feeling of dread.
Chapter 3
Pleasant Memories in a Dark Time

All night long Hattie sat on the side of her bed waiting for her father to come home. The fear of the unknown kept her awake into the wee hours of the night. Her mother had gone to bed as soon as Luther had left. She didn’t say goodnight; she just closed the door and that was that. All night long Hattie waited for the heavy footsteps to come pounding through the doorway, but they never did.

Hattie walked up the stairs to change her dress because it was covered with flour because a little girl had bounced around the corner and bumped her as Hattie was using the flour. The little girl’s golden curls bounced with each step. She popped out of her room and started following Hattie to her room, talking nonstop about anything and everything as she went. Just when Hattie was about to close the door, she asked with a look on her face
that no one could refuse, “Will you read me a book?”

Hattie gave the beautiful, angelic child one look and sighed and followed her into her room. “Which book?”

She squealed with delight and ran to the bookshelf. She looked for a moment, then chose a battered up book missing its cover. “This one.”

“Really? We read that every day!” She gave Hattie that look again and Hattie gave a huge sigh and cuddled up with the innocent and loving child in the rocking chair to share yet another precious moment with this precious gift.

Hattie awoke the next morning on the floor and still in her clothes, having spent the night reliving the precious memory. She bounced right up when she remembered why she was on the floor. She ran out of her room and into the kitchen. The sun was just barely beginning to rise over the tops of the trees. She quietly snuck into her mother’s room; her father was not there.

He never left that early for town. “He must have stayed out all night,” she decided out loud. As if on cue, she heard heavy footsteps. Luther walked into the door looking quite proud of himself.

“Where did you go?” she asked.
“I was making negotiations. And then, I was celebrating.”
“What is there to celebrate?”
“Your marriage my dear.”
Chapter 4

“This is Not What I Wanted.”

Of all the stunts Luther had played, this one surprised her the most. She stood there with her mouth open, not knowing what to say. Many thoughts bounced and swirled in her head. And by the look on Luther’s face, she knew he wasn’t kidding around. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I didn’t think you would. You see, your engagement was finalized last night. Would you like to know whom you are going to be marrying?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. You can’t force me to get married. I’m not marrying anyone. Especially not anyone you picked out.”

Luther laughed. “You will do whatever I say. I am your father. And it says in that ‘goody, goody’ book you two follow that you must obey your parents, and I’m one of them.”
“I don’t follow that book. It’s full of lies,” Hattie barked spitefully.

“Well, if you love you mother, you will marry this man. Or else, you can watch your mother slowly starve to death because we don’t have any money. And, don’t forget, you would be right alongside her and it would be entirely your fault. I know you don’t give a lick about me, but I know you love your mother. I will leave this choice up to you. But, either way, I will make you marry him.”

“Well, that is not really giving me a choice now, is it?”

“Nope, guess not. You are marrying him. End of story.”

Hattie held her composure until she got into her room. She would not let him see her cry. But as soon as she got to her room, she broke down almost as badly as the day when they had left Colorado.

16-year-old Hattie Starns sat in her “secret room” in the back of their house in Denver, Colorado. With her knees pulled up to her chest she let the tears fall freely down her face. It was early spring in Denver, but the breeze still brought chills. Hattie got up to close the window and saw her wretched father loading their things into the wagon.
She watched him for a while, then slammed the window shut. Of all times to move and of all places! And so soon after her death, she thought.

She looked out the window and saw many more things for her father to pack up. “I have plenty of time,” she sighed to herself. She opened the back door and ran out behind the barn and kept running till she saw the little white cross. She fell to her knees and sobbed. She didn’t care about the chilling winds that blew leaves in her face. Or the light rain that began to fall. She looked up at the darkened sky and yelled, “Do you hate me? Why are you doing this to me? You took her away and now you’re taking me away to some hot, sandy, dry, little dump of a town! If you really wanted what’s best for me, then why didn’t you stop my father from doing whatever he did to make us run? You may think you’re trying to help but I don’t need your help!”

She looked around the barnyard, the fields, and the white wooden house. She had grown up with all of this, and now she was leaving it all behind. Her tears were mingling with the pouring rain. She heard her mother calling for her; it was time to leave. She gave the precious little cross one last look and placed a little battered book at the foot of it. This book would always be in her fondest memories.

“You will always be in my heart!” she cried. She took one last look at the cross and ran for the wagon that was pulling out onto the street. She hopped in and grabbed a warm blanket that was
being handed to her by her mother whose face was streaked from the ever-present flood of tears. They cuddled up together, and Hattie turned her thoughts to a hot, dusty, sunny place called Smith County, Texas. Her new home.

As Hattie sat on her floor vividly remembering that day, she broke down into sobs again. “This is not what I wanted.”
Chapter 5
Dreams and Realities

Hattie cried until she was convinced she had no tears left. She was exhausted. She picked herself up off the floor and walked to the mirror. She saw her reflection staring back at her with red puffy eyes that looked about as empty as her heart. Over the years she had learned to disguise her pain through her beautiful smile. Hattie knew she was beautiful, but she was not vain. She knew she was beautiful and she used this to hide her pain and sorrow from others. Never had she used it for any other purpose.

Now, she stared blankly into the mirror and pulled up her long, wavy, light red hair into a stylish up do. Anytime she felt pain or felt lost she went into town to wash her problems away from sight. She had no idea why she did this; she just knew it helped.

She pushed back the welling tears and smiled at herself. Hattie looked down at her meager wardrobe lying out on her bed, if you could even call it a bed. Ever since moving to Smith County, Texas, life had been ever so different for the Starns family. Hattie dismissed the thoughts of their old life with a
sigh. She once more looked down at her two calico dresses and her cream colored shawl. She picked the yellow one to wear because it was the most clean. She pulled the garment on and turned to stare at herself in the long cracked mirror that hung on her door. “I’ll just have to make do,” she told herself.

Hattie examined her long, pale, red hair with delight. She found pleasure in doing her hair as fancy as she could just to make herself look more like the other girls in town. She very well could do much better than any of the other girls because she did not take her beauty for granted. Every day since she moved here, she had had to work for what she got, not like these other girls who were given everything. The one thing she did not have to work for was her beauty. “A gift from our maker!” her friend Hazel would say.

“Too bad he left me alone a long time ago,” she thought with a bitter remembrance to those years long ago. Hattie gave herself one last glance before grabbing her shawl and walking out the door.

Hattie had no idea what time it was. It was a dark and clear night. She could see the stars shining perfectly. There was a slight breeze and it blew a stray hair into her face. Sighing, she put it back in to place. Hattie stopped walking long enough to think about her father’s words. She had always thought
about a rugged cowboy riding up, taking her hand, and riding off into the sunset with her. She wanted a little ranch house out in the middle of nowhere, just the two of them together. And then, after a long day they could sit on the porch with extra-sweet lemonade and watch the sun set. She would grow all her own vegetables in her garden that he would plant for her. And every day he would bring her flowers, and if the day was special enough, those flowers would be roses.

“Ahhh, stupid childish fantasies,” Hattie grumbled, without convincing herself that they were. “It is so hard to let go!” she yelled at the rock she had been kicking. Soon Hattie felt warm, salty tears falling rolling down her cheekbones.

“Stop crying like a baby! You can do this! So it’s not what you wanted? You can’t change that. Maybe he won’t be so bad,” she mused, but her thoughts told her another story. She knew he was gambler because he had gambled with her father. The marriage arrangement was proof of that.

“So, he must live in town. There goes my country ranch house! He’s probably as mean as a snake too! What kind of man would agree to let a father sell his daughter to him? A no good snake, that’s who!

Hattie once more broke down into tears. As she sat down on a nearby log, she
remembered something her mother had read to her a long time ago: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” These words gave Hattie comfort. Even though she could not remember the person who had said these words, she knew he must have been a wise man.
Chapter 6
Beautiful accidents

After composing herself Hattie continued on her way into town. She planned to go to the seamstress shop where she sometimes volunteered. Hattie had worked as a skilled seamstress at a young age while her family lived in Colorado. The shop here in town sometimes let Hattie help with their leftover work because the owner there knew Hattie and knew that when she was upset, a little hard work always cheered her up. But Hattie never made it to the shop.

About half-way into town Hattie heard a huge ruckus. It was coming from the Dusty Rose Saloon. There was yelling and smashing sounds filtering out of the front entrance. This was the saloon in which Luther was always “having a little fun.” So, it didn’t surprise Hattie with all the noise. But what she saw next did surprise her: a tiny little woman in her fifties was the one doing the yelling! Her wiry
grey hair was falling out of what used to be a tightly twisted bun on the top of her head. She wore a vibrantly colored dress with lots of frills and lace. The owner of the saloon, Drake, was also yelling. He finally shut the door in her face, but then she huffed, kicked her little black shoes off, and threw them through the window! Drake sent the little black shoes back out the window along with some profane language. She mumbled to herself, picked up her shoes, and then stomped around in circles.

Hattie carefully snuck up beside her and put a hand on her thin shoulder. She jumped back and looked like she was about to tackle Hattie too.

“Hey! You’re fine! I was just coming to see if you were alright?”

“Oh. Sorry, Hon’; you startled me; that’s all. I’m alright though it may not look like it. I am known for my wild temper.”

“I never would have known,” Hattie said with a smile.

The spunky little lady gave a laugh.

“I’m Pricilla Andrews.”

“I am Hattie Starns.”

“Starns… Starns. Are you Luther’s daughter?”

“Yes. I am. I’m not very proud of it though,” Hattie replied distastefully.

Pricilla laughed again. “He ain’t the best of folks, that’s for sure!” she continued,
laughing a cheerful and high pitched laugh. You never would have known she had thrown a horrendous fit a few seconds ago.

“So, umm… what was that about,” Hattie asked, almost shyly.

“My boss kicked me out! Just because I'm getting old.” The way Pricilla uttered this latest comment made Hattie giggle.

“Apparently, I'm not as stylish as young girls such as yourself. But, no matter: I've got a house and a man who loves me, so I am all set!”

Hattie could not believe the scene before her eyes: this woman just broke a window with a pair of shoes in her anger! How could she be this happy moments later? “How are you this cheerful about your situation? You were just yelling and screaming, and now you are saying how thankful you are? I don’t understand.”

“My Dear, as long as I have my husband, my house, and my Lord, I can be as happy as I want to be. With these three things I know I am getting along just fine! Even without my house or husband, I would still be fine when I’ve got my God who loves me! But my husband is pretty swell, too. It’s a funny story how he and I…”

Hattie cut her off right there. “Do you believe in God? Are you just relying on a made-up story to take care of you? How do you even know if He is real?”
The little woman looked at Hattie with big, brown, compassionate eyes and said, “I trust Him with everything because He gave me everything. And I know He is real because I am alive. There is so much proof of his existence all around us! Don’t you see it?”

Hattie was speechless. She had never believed in God, much less loved or known him intimately. But this lady stood before her, speaking with such passion it was obvious that she loved and knew this God.

“Maybe it’s not that you can’t see it--it’s that you won’t see it.” Hattie was taken by surprise.

She was just about to tell Pricilla goodbye when Pricilla invited her to her house. “I live in the blue townhouse just down the way! Stop by anytime tomorrow!”

Hattie almost refused the offer, but something made her change her mind. “I would love to visit,” came the reply. “But, I don’t think I will be able to stay for long. My father is making some changes around our house and he will want me to hear what he has to say.”

Hattie knew her father well. He would start her ‘marriage process’ as soon as he could. But, this little invitation would help her escape the sorrow and misery that would soon take over her life.
“I look forward to whatever time we will have together,” Pricilla answered. “I have so many interesting stories that I think you should hear.”

The comment confused Hattie, but she said nothing in reply. “I guess I will see you tomorrow then!” Hattie called as she walked away.

“I look forward to it,” proclaimed Pricilla,

As Hattie walked away, she realized she was anxious for the meeting too.
Chapter 7
Drowning Sorrows

The next day Hattie arose with mixed emotions. She was glad for the meeting with Pricilla later on in the day, but she was fearful of what her father might try to do. She knew he would soon be putting his plan into motion. She also knew she would have to put aside her dreams and hopes and give in to the realities that were taking place.

Hattie tip-toed down the hallway to the kitchen. She walked as quietly as she could in hopes she could escape without notice from her father. It must have been quite early because no one was in the kitchen. Her parents’ bedroom door was still closed. Hattie took this opportunity to leave the house.

When she stepped out of the little cabin, it looked like it might rain. That didn’t bother Hattie; she liked rain. She reached the bottom of the stairs, and she turned to gaze back at her
little home. The rain and wind reminded
Hattie of her first day in Smith County, Texas.

The carriage slowly pulled up next to a
small log cabin. It was anything but cute-- the
windows were broken, and there were holes in the
roof. All the paint which had been a faded green was
now almost white. Hattie’s father hopped out of the
cart and headed for the door. He didn’t even stay to
help her mother out of the cart. Hattie swung her
feet over the back side of the cart and jumped to the
ground. Sighing, she looked around at her new
home.

The house was on the outskirts out Smith
County, Texas, a county with a single, dusty small
town and dirt roads. Their house was nothing like
their old one; it was considerably smaller with no
barn, field, or animals. There were few trees, but she
could hear the trickling of a creek somewhere. The
sky was cloudless and bright blue; it would seem to
anyone else a perfect day.

Grabbing her meager possessions, she
walked up to the door. Her father came out at the
same time she was going in, and he bumped into
her, scowled, and gruffly said, “Get the stuff inside.
I’m going into town.”

Hattie felt her anger towards this man
boiling up; she was about ready to explode with so
many speeches she had held inside her all these
years, ones she vowed she would say only when the
time presented itself. But before she could say a
word, her mother spoke up, “Luther, you go into town while we will take care of the stuff here.” He smirked and gave Hattie a cold glare and walked into town. Her mother gave her a glance; in her eyes Hattie could see exactly what she was thinking.

Ruth Ann knew the years of hatred which had built up inside Hattie. And, she knew how it had reached new heights that night he had come home saying he had sold everything they owned to pay off a gambling debt. But now was not the time for her to tell her father what she thought. “At least we have a house,” her mother said at the tail end of their silent conversation. “We can fix it up and make it good as knew!”

“I guess, but we won’t get any help from him.”

Hattie smirked as she recalled that day. She still thought as highly of her father as she did then: she hated him. And, he hated her. One day she would get even for all the times he had ruined her life.

Hattie made her way to Hazel’s house. She just wanted to talk a little to this happy soul before heading for town. The Peirce house had already started the day. Smoke was rising from the chimney and Hazel was out feeding the chickens.

“Hattie!” Hazel called to her lifelong friend. The two girls had been friends since Hattie had moved to Smith County. They
knew each other quite well. They knew each other’s emotions and how to cheer up the other. They were closer than sisters. Because Hazel knew Hattie so well, she could tell immediately when something was wrong. When Hattie’s eyebrows were raised and her eyes were wide, it meant she was holding back tears.

“Hattie what’s wrong?” With that simple question Hattie broke down into tears and crumbled into Hazel’s arms.

“Everything is wrong! Luther is destroying my life!” Hattie confessed to Hazel. She told the whole story about how he planned to marry her off to someone she didn’t even know.

Hazel and Hattie sat on the steps of the house while Hattie cried in Hazel’s arms. When Hattie finished her meltdown, she wiped her tears and looked directly at Hazel. Hazel was a pretty girl with dark brown curly locks that fell in perfect ringlets. She had big green eyes and a light dusting of freckles across her face. Hazel hated her freckles, but Hattie thought they added a feminine charm. Hazel wore a dark green dress with a floral pattern. Hattie had always envied her friend’s wardrobe. Hazel’s family was not rich, but they were certainly not as poor as Hattie’s.

Hattie owned two calico dresses, a pale yellow and a light blue. She also had a cream
colored shawl and two pairs of dainty white gloves. Other than this slight envy, the two girls never had a quarrel or disagreement of any kind.

“Oh, Hazel! What am I going to do? What if the man turns out to be an old goat like old Thomas Gumpter!”

“Oh what if he turns out to be your prince charming!” Hazel said slyly with a wink.

“It could be even worse. What if it’s Silas Radford! They say he is as mean as a rattlesnake and as ugly as a cactus!”

“That would be dreadful,” agreed Hazel.

“There are so many stories about him! I heard he killed a man because he stole his table at the Dusty Rose!”

“I heard that too! You know he always sits in that back corner table. It’s in the shadows so no one can see his scarred face. They also say he has a hump back and his fingernails are ten inches long!”

Hattie started to get worked up again.

“Oh, what if it is him? I don’t know what I’d do!”

“Oh Hattie, don’t get all worked up over something that is uncertain! Cross the bridge when you get there!”
“You’re right, Hazel. You always are!”
“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Hazel replied to the compliment.
“Thanks for cheering me up, Hazel! You always know how! But, I have got to go. I have to meet someone in town before noon.”
“Who are you meeting?”
“Someone I met last night. She says she has all the answers! I am going to see if she really does! I could use some answers right now!”
Chapter 8
Seeking Wisdom in the Rain

As soon as Hattie left the Pierce house, it started to rain. “Oh, perfect!” Hattie mumbled as the rain began to pour. “By the time I reach Pricilla’s, I will be wet to the bone!” And wet she was when she walked through the front door of the little blue town house.

Pricilla handed her a towel. “My goodness, child! You must have really wanted to see little old me!” chuckled Pricilla.

“I did,” Hattie agreed. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Well then, shoot,” Pricilla replied as they sat down upon the green striped couch. “You know my father, right?”

“I know him well enough to tell him apart from other folks.”

“Well, the other night, two nights ago to be specific, I came into my house to find him yelling at my mother. He had lost all of our
money!” Hattie looked at Pricilla for consent to carry on with her story.

She nodded her head, “Go on.”

“Well, this wasn’t the first time. He has lost all of our money once before; that’s why we originally moved to Texas. We had been living in Colorado, but that is another story. Anyway… he told me about the money and how all these dreadful things were going to happen if I didn’t help our family. I didn’t see how I could help, but when he came home the next night, he told me that he had practically sold me to the man to whom he owed money. I will be payment for the debt. I am to marry this awful man to pay for my wretched father’s misdeeds!”

Hattie took a deep breath after she finished her story and asked Pricilla, “Well, what do you think?”

“I always knew your father was a viper! Forgive my saying so, but he is!”

“I agree with you completely!” Hattie snapped.

“Do you know whom you are to marry?”

Hattie answered with a sigh, “No.”

Pricilla nodded her head. “This reminds me of my husband and me! We had an arranged marriage! Out of my ignorance, I hated his guts when we were engaged, but after about a month, I knew he was the one for
me! We have been in love ever since! My mother and father had planned our marriage since before I was born. There was no escaping it!” she said with a dreamy smile. “I see now that God had had his hand on me the entire time! He knew I needed Randy and he needed me.” She had spoken this whole speech staring out the window with a contented look on her face and in her eyes. She turned to look at Hattie.

“I am sorry, ma’am, but I stopped believing in God a long time ago.”

“Why ever for?” Priscilla ventured.

“He took someone precious from me, and no loving and caring God would do that to a child. I have hated Him ever since, and for the rest of my life I always will. I don’t want anything to do with Him!”

“I am sorry you feel that way. But God gives us times of troubles to help us grow. You can let it either build you or break you. Have you ever felt broken inside? God will love you and heal your brokenness!”

Hattie cleared her throat. She felt as if Priscilla had taken a cold knife and slit her down the middle. “Well, thank you ever so much for letting me visit. I must be going now,” she added curtly.

“Please stop by again!”

“Perhaps,” she said coldly. She walked out the door without another word. She saw
Pricilla’s worried face gazing down at her from the window.

Hattie felt like she was the worst person in the world. This woman had welcomed her into her home, gave her words of wisdom when she needed them most, and yet she returned her thanks with a slap in the face. Hattie felt so cold and empty inside.

“It’s because of God! If she would have never brought Him up, I wouldn’t feel this way!” she thought aloud. The rain was still pouring, but when Hattie looked back at Pricilla, the rain slowed just long enough to let a ray of sunshine shine down on Hattie. She felt warm and full and happy for a moment, but when the cloud covered the sun again, she felt more alone than ever.
Chapter 9
I Now Pronounce You Mr. and Mrs....

On her way home from Pricilla’s, Hattie decided she would put on some dry clothes and curl up by the fire with a book as soon as she arrived home. But that was not to be. As she arrived at her house, a carriage was pulling out onto the road from in front of her house. Her father had been talking to that person, whomever it had been.

“Ahh, darling! You are just in time!” Never ever had Luther called anyone in the family darling. Something was up.

“In time for what?” she asked suspiciously.

“In time to start packing your things--your wedding is tomorrow.”

Hattie stood in front of a man whom she was so unfortunate as to call her father. She balled her fists, and she could feel her eyebrows scrunching together and her lips
pressing against one another, just like they did whenever she was angry.

“You don’t have to get married of course! You can just subject your family to starvation, my Dear.”

This shut Hattie’s mouth before it was even fully opened. “I... I... I will marry him,” she managed.

“I thought you might,” Luther said as he smirked.

“But please, tell me who the man is!” she begged. Then the two fateful words came out of his mouth, the two words that would change her life forever: Silas Radford.”

Hattie stood still as a tree for a long time. The rain continued to pour down and the wind started to pick up. Hattie heard nothing; her ears were ringing with the words of her father: Silas Radford. Silas Radford was all she heard. She must have stood there a long while because her mother came and grabbed her by the hand and led her inside.

She led her to Hattie’s room and sat her down on the bed. Her mother pulled out a carpet bag and began to pull things out of drawers. The whole time Hattie kept trying to wake herself up from this living nightmare. “Hattie,” whispered the sweet, soft voice, pulling Hattie back to reality.

She had to do this for her mother. She thought to herself, “Be strong! This is for her!”
Hattie gazed up at her mother and gave a watery smile.

“Oh, Hattie, don’t be brave for me. Please don’t do this for me!”

“I must be brave, Mother! I must do this for you! You have to understand!”

Her mother rubbed her cheek with a cold, slender hand. “I understand, but I don’t want you to do this! We can find another way! We will just move again!”

“With what money? And I couldn’t leave Hazel! Would you really leave everything behind again? Things would only get worse. I have to do this, even if that means marrying Silas Radford!”

“I knew you would say that, so I already have packed your things. Hattie, I want you to wear my wedding dress. Will you?”

“I would be honored to wear it!”

“It’s not a fancy one like you have always wanted, but it bests the dresses you have now. I hear Silas Radford is a rich man! Maybe you will have that fancy life you have dreamed of after all!”

Hattie got up from the bed and walked to the window. As she stared out into the empty blackness of the night, she thought it resembled her empty heart. “I will never have my dream life now, Mother. My dreams have been stolen from me. They were just the dreams of a child. I know that when I say I do
tomorrow and am united with a man I have only heard stories of, they will truly be gone, never to return. They will be always one step around the corner that I will never turn.”

Hattie awoke the next morning feeling anything but refreshed. She sat on the porch steps until the sunrise. It was a beautiful sunrise, but Hattie hardly noticed it. A bunny hopped along in front of the stairs and stared up at Hattie.

“I thought it would have rained today,” she mused to the bunny. “I am getting married to a horrible man today. Oh, why am I talking to you? You’re a bunny!” The bunny must have gotten its feelings hurt because it ran away after this comment.

Her father had told her the night before to be ready to leave by nine o’clock. So, she sat on the steps for 45 more minutes and then rose to get ready for her wedding.

Her mother’s dress was a cream color, and it went to her ankles. It was adorned with lace leaves and flowers on the bodice and on the bottom of the skirt. It had long sleeves and a high collar. As Hattie put it on, her mother came into the room. “You look beautiful, dear. I just wish this was a time to celebrate.”

Hattie allowed her mother to fix her hair. She piled her gentle curls on top of her head. She left a few to hang down and frame her face. And for the finishing touch, her
mother pinned a red rose in her hair. “Oh, Mother! Where did you get it?” Hattie asked excitedly about the flower.

“It was growing right outside my window.”

“But, we don’t have a rose bush.”

“A little wedding present from our Maker, I guess.”

At nine o’clock sharp the wagon pulled out onto the dusty road. Hattie was going to be married in the tiny church at the edge of Smith County. It was a pretty church that overlooked the fields. Hattie looked back at the small, rundown cabin she had called home for eight years. Never again would she sleep under its roof. No more living next door to Hazel. Her father hadn’t even allowed her to say goodbye to her dear Hazel.

When they arrived at the church, another wagon was already there. She could only assume that was the wagon in which she would be riding “home.”

Her father and mother got out of their wagon and her father walked into the building without even giving his daughter one parting word. Her mother, though, took her hand and said, “I love you, Hattie.” And those four simple words were enough.

She looked through the doors of the church and saw the pastor waiting with a Bible in his hands. He was looking at her as if to say,
“Whenever you are ready....” If she didn’t walk through those doors right now, she would run into the fields that surrounded her and never look back. Hattie took a deep breath, and plunged through the doors to meet her husband who stood at the end of the aisle.

Silas Radford had always lived a quiet life in the shadows. He knew the people held many stories about him. How he was a hunch back with a scarred face. How he didn’t ever care much. Because of this, he never thought he would end up with a wife, and thanks to the stories, this wife was most likely scared out of her mind. He never really knew how the stories started, but he never really cared to find out either, until now.

Silas was probably almost as scared as the young lady at the end of the aisle. He had never met the girl, but now he was expected by his vows in front of God and everyone else to take care of her. The only thing he had ever taken care of was his cattle! He certainly could not just throw her into a pasture and forget about her the rest of the day like he did the cattle. Distractedly, he looked up at the ceiling and quietly prayed for the wisdom and for love so he could take excellent care of this woman.

Twenty-five-year-old Silas had never once thought of marriage until that night when Luther Starns came begging on his knees for
him to take his daughter to repay his debt. Silas had no idea why he agreed to such a preposterous idea, but at the time, he just felt it the right thing to do. After all, he could give this woman protection and comfort, things she probably had never known. Heaven knows how horrid life would be living with a man like Luther Starns. Silas confirmed-- in his heart, it was the right thing to do.

When Hattie stepped into the church, she looked for a scarred, hunchback man with 10-inch fingernails. All she saw was a handsome man with rusty, dark red hair. He was tan from working in the sun. He had muscles from hard work and a beard. His eyes were a dark blue like the ocean at its deepest point. They had laugh lines surrounding them, proof that this villain smiled. His lips were full and a delightful, pinkish-red color. He wore a white buttoned shirt with tan pants and black shiny boots. Hattie could not believe that this was Silas Radford. After all the stories, was this the man the whole town feared? Maybe his appearance was the sport of the stories, but his character was what everybody feared? But, his eyes looked so kind....

Silas was in awe of this dainty woman that was walking towards him. Silas had seen many pretty girls, but all paled in comparison to Hattie Starns. She lit up the room with her beauty. Her light red hair fell in perfect waves.
Her skin was as flawless and pale as porcelain. Her lips were rosy and full. Her eyebrows were the same pretty color as her hair. She had a little smile on her face that made her even more radiant. Also, a little dimple lightly dented her right cheek. She was the slimmest girl he had ever seen. She was so dainty that she looked as if she would break under a light touch, reminding Silas of a China doll. She had perfect posture as she walked down the aisle. Silas made his mind up right then and there that he would like having a wife as pretty as Hattie Starns.

Hattie reached the end of the aisle and started up the steps. The preacher looked out over the pews where many people would have been in Hattie’s dream wedding, but where now there was only Luther, her mother, and a man Hattie did not know. “Please join hands,” the preacher said in an assured voice.

Silas took her hands with a grip that surprised Hattie. She expected his hands to be the tough, hard, cold hands of a monster, but instead, they were firm, warm, and reassuring.

When the preacher got to the end of the ceremony, he looked at Hattie and asked if she would be Silas’s wife forever and ever. Would she? Could she do it? The preacher must have noticed her hesitation, so he delicately cleared his throat.
“I will,” she said as confidently as possible.

Then the preacher asked the same thing of Silas. “I will,” he spoke with such a deep voice. But somehow, it was a comforting voice.

“I pronounce you: husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

After that, they walked down the aisle arm in arm as the new Mr. and Mrs. Silas Radford. Her mother rose to greet her at the door. She gave her a goodbye kiss and slowly walked them to their wagon. Luther shook Silas’s hand and left without a word to Hattie. Hattie looked down at the little gold band Silas had placed on her dainty finger. It was a sign of their marriage, a never-ending covenant symbolized in a never-ending circle of gold.

She looked up at her new husband and once again realized how very handsome he was. He spoke to her in his deep voice. The first words he ever spoke to her were: “I swore in front of God and our families that I would take care of you as my wife, and that is exactly what I am going to do. We do not know each other, but when a husband and wife are united, it is for forever. I swear as your husband to give you protection and comfort for as long as I am living.”

Hattie could not believe her ears. This man was no monster! Here he was standing in front of her swearing to take care of her! Hattie
didn’t know what to say. The words just flowed from her mouth. “And I swear as your wife to give you comfort and a cheerful household. I will be a submissive wife; whatever you say goes. As long as I am living, I will follow and obey you as a wife should.”

Hattie had no idea where those words came from, but they must have been the right ones.

Silas gave her a gentle smile and led her to the wagon. “I do believe we will get along just fine, Mrs. Radford.”
Chapter 10
A New Beginning

Silas led Hattie around the wagon and helped her climb into it. Hattie was surprised! Her father had never done such a thing for her or her mother. The gracious gesture made her think that maybe, just maybe, what she had thought about Silas was all wrong. After he realized she was seated comfortably, he climbed up on the other side. The man she hadn’t known in the church was driving the wagon. He must have been Silas’s brother; he looked just like him. The only difference from Silas was his blonde hair and blue eyes. Silas noticed she was giving the man a curious glance, so he whispered, “He is my brother. His name is Wesley. He helps me manage my farm.”

“Y-you have a farm?” Hattie asked, shocked.

“Yes. I raise cattle along with the usual crops.”
Hattie was bursting with excitement inside, but she remained calm and collected before her new husband. She turned and saw that they were heading the opposite way from town; they were riding into the fields that surrounded the church. “I had always thought you would have had a town house.”

“You have probably thought a lot of things about me,” he stated, looking out over the sea of grain. Hattie started to smooth her skirt and looked down at her hands. Embarrassed, she listened as he spoke: “You probably have heard the town stories, and as a child growing up with them, you can’t help but think them true. I’m not blaming or rebuking you, Hattie. I know there are stories, although I do not know exactly what they say. I’m sure they have gotten quite imaginative!” he said chuckling. “I bet you were shaking in your bones when you found out I was to be your groom!”

Hattie smiled sheepishly as she remembered the night her father had announced she was to be the bride of Silas Radford. “I must admit I was quite frightened.” Hattie was pleasantly surprised how easy it was to talk to Silas.

“I do not doubt it! And I must admit I was just as scared as you were. I never thought I could have gotten married. No offense, but I never wanted to marry.”
Hattie smiled, but said nothing. They rode the rest of the way in silence. Hattie had never been to this side of Smith County. She was enthralled with the beauty of the fields, lakes, trees and plants.

“I own all this land,” Silas said unassumingly.

Hattie could not contain her excitement; her face lit up with pleasure. She put a dainty, pale hand on her flushing cheek and whispered, “Oh my,” under her breath.

Silas laughed when he saw her apparent delight. It was such a jolly laugh it made Hattie want to laugh along with him.

“I have always dreamed of living in a little country ranch house with lots of beautiful land, but I never thought I would actually be able to live out that dream!”

Silas gave Hattie a smile with a look in his eyes that was a mystery to Hattie. She could not decide if the look in his eyes was kindness, happiness or pity. Maybe it was a mixture of all three.
Chapter 11
House of Dreams

Suddenly, the wagon lurched to a halt. Wesley jumped out of the wagon to guide the horses from foot. Hattie looked up to survey her surroundings. The ranch was stunning. The brown fence enclosed the whole barnyard, and a huge barn stood in the center of the fenced-in area. There was a massive corral behind the barn. Golden fields circled the picturesque site. On the far side of the yard a forest stood in full splendor. Hattie could hear the rushing of water just beyond the line of trees.

Finally, Hattie laid her eyes on a perfectly-sized, two-story, white farmhouse. It had a huge front porch with two quaint rocking chairs, a little table between them, and a porch swing gently swaying in the summer breeze at one end.

“This is exactly what I have always imagined,” she thought to herself.

Wesley drove the wagon into the yard and stopped to let the bride and groom off at their front
door. “Good day ma’am,” he said politely to Hattie as he drove off towards the barn.

Hattie turned to face Silas as they walked towards the porch.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think it’s lovely!” was her ready answer.

“Would you like to see inside?”

“Oh, yes!”

He opened the door for Hattie and led her through the door. “This man is such a gentleman,” she told herself as she was introduced to a common courtesy she had been so long denied.

The front door opened up directly into the kitchen. It was quite large with superb furnishings. All the furniture was hand-crafted with splendid wood-carving detail. The table was expansive with eight chairs sitting around its edges. The cooking station was behind the table to its left and had all the latest equipment. Straight past the table was a broad window with blue floral print curtains and flowers on the window sill. To the right of the window was another room. It was a sitting area with a hand-crafted couch with the same detail as the kitchen furnishings and brown cushions. A rocking chair and a regular chair, both handcrafted, sat in front of a prominent fireplace. Each chair had a petite table at its side. On the mantle were flowers and a picture that looked like an old family portrait. There were a few tables and desks around the border of the room. The room was also adorned with pleasant light blue wallpaper.

Hattie walked about the room silently. Silas watched her intently to make sure she found
nothing out of place or unsatisfactory. She walked to one of the doors on the far side of the room. She opened the door to find a small, dark, wood-paneled room with a desk facing a handsome window. This room also had the same ornate wood furnishings as the other two rooms. She strode inside the room and found a door on the right side of the small room which led into a brightly lit room filled with sunshine. The room smelled of fresh wood. It had a grand window overlooking the breathtaking fields of gold. The room had yellow and white striped wallpaper with white wainscoting panels on the lower portion of the wall. The furniture in this room was a little different from the other rooms. It had a lighter color wood and was more dainty and delicate in its detail. There was a desk, couch with yellow cushions, a good sized table with chairs, yellow and pink floral cushions on the chairs, and tea set with pink flowers painted on each dish was set out in the middle of the table.

“This room is simply charming!” Hattie practically sang.

“I furnished it for you,” Silas confessed. “This was my mother’s room. When she died, I used it for storage. I make all my furniture myself. I had intended to sell this set but when your father came to me the other night, I decided to give it to you. The rest of the bottom floor is just storage. There is a sewing room across the hall. Would you like to see the upstairs?”

“Yes, please,” Hattie answered.
Silas led Hattie back through the kitchen and showed her the stairs. They were on the right side of the kitchen and angled above the door. Going up the staircase there were four family pictures and a window overlooking the barnyard. At the top of the stairs a wood-paneled hallway led them straight forward. There were three bedrooms-two on the right side of the hall, and one on the left. The two on the right were guest rooms. Each held a small plain bed, table, and a chair and had a window overlooking the fields. The bedroom on the right was the master bedroom; it was considerably larger than the other two. It held a larger bed, again with the ornate detailing. A window on either side of the bed opened out over the yard. There were two wash basins, but on separate sides of the room. A beautiful vanity also occupied the right corner next to one of the wash basins. A dresser stood in front of the bed and a desk was on the left of the tall dresser. There was also a rocking chair on the right side of the room next to the window.

Silas cleared his throat. “This is our room. Do you like it?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes, it is very nice. This room is almost the size of my old house!”

“Oh! I forgot to mention this, but I have a lady from town coming tomorrow to measure you for some new dresses.”

Hattie was aghast! Never in her life had she been able to wear a new dress! “A new dress? For m-me?”
“I figured that if you had lived with Luther, you probably didn’t have the best of clothes, or anything for that matter! From now on, anything you have ever been denied you will have! If there is one thing that you want, I will get it. You shall never want again.”

Silas’s words fell on Hattie’s heavy heart like a soft spring rain. She felt as if he were washing away her worries. Hattie was doing all in her power to hold back tears. This man whom she hated just this morning was offering to give her anything and everything. Hattie didn’t say it, but one thing she knew for sure: this man could not give her love. The one thing she wanted more than anything, she knew would remain just a dream.
Chapter 12

“Hello my name is…”

After Hattie composed herself, all she could say was, “Thank you.”
Silas sat down on the bed and said, “We do not know each other very well. Would you like to go down into the parlor and get acquainted?”
“I would love to,” uttered Hattie, and she meant it.
After Silas started up a blazing fire in the grand fireplace, he sat down in the chair opposite of Hattie. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees. He said with a chuckle in his deep voice, “Let’s start over. Hello my name is Silas Radford.”
Hattie suppressed a giggle and introduced herself. Then, he grew serious. “First and foremost I want you to know why your father came to me three nights ago.”
Hattie grew very quiet, so he continued.
“It is true your father gambled with me and bet more money than he had. That much I am sure you already know. But, what you probably do not know is that I had no intentions of making your father pay me back.”

Hattie was surprised with this information, but said nothing. She studied his rugged features in the firelight glow. He looked so sorrowful compared to the jolly fellow making promises and laughing with her earlier.

He once more began to speak. “Your father came to me begging that I would take you as my wife. At first I was going to refuse and tell him to keep his money, but then I thought that it might not be such a bad thing. I cannot imagine what living with Luther was like. I am sorry if I offend you, but he is hardly a man of good intentions. So, I don’t know why I did it at the moment, but I agreed to take you as my wife. You probably think me a cold, heartless snake, but I now see why I did it: I did it to keep you away from your father. It may sound strange because I hardly know you, but I would do that for anyone in such a situation. I decided to give you the best of things, to give you a comfortable home.” When he finished, he looked at Hattie.

Hattie didn’t know what to say. How many times today would this man continue to surprise her?
He began to speak again saying, “I think God put it on my heart that night to take you into my house, and He never makes mistakes. He puts us right where we need to be.”

This time Hattie was unhappy with his endearing speech, so she set the matter straight instructing Silas, “If we are to get to know each other and spend our lives together, I must say this-- I do not believe in God. I hate him. And I always will.” Hattie waited for the long lecture that always came after she made this speech to anyone, but it never came. Silas just sat up in his chair, and his deep blue eyes grew very sad. In the fading light Hattie could see his disappointment. Hattie suddenly felt like she shouldn’t have said this. She hated the look of disappointment reflected back to her. Surely, she had caused this dear man grief. She hated the feeling that she had let him down so immensely, but the feeling passed quickly when she remembered her past with God. Silas said nothing at all, but the look in his eyes remained. Hattie continued to peer into his eyes, and then, as if he had decided something new, they lit up. He never spoke about the matter, he just changed the subject.

After hours of jovial conversation and getting acquainted, Silas stood up and said, “I feel like I have known you for years, Hattie. I think we are off to a good start! We now have years to discover all that there is to know about
one another.” He gave his speech with a smile that contained pure happiness, and Hattie returned that same smile. She felt content and safe for once in her life!
As Silas lay in bed awake into the late hours of the night, he couldn’t help but think about what Hattie had said about God. What would make her say such a thing? What had happened in her past that was so painful that she now blocked God out? He intended on finding out.

Silas had grown up a Christian. His family had taught him from an early stage about Jesus and how believers are supposed to live, like followers of Christ. Until the age of about 18, Silas had just gone along with this way because it was his parent’s faith, but after his father’s his point-of-view changed, Silas changed. He and his father had been very close. They did everything together and Silas’s father taught Silas everything he knew today. He showed him the character of a true man of God, but he died of scarlet fever when Silas was 18. Right before he died, though, he drew
Silas to his bedside and spoke softly into his son’s ear, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Silas had heard these words a thousand times. This was the Bible verse he and his father repeated each morning, but in the dimming light, the verse seemed to hold a deeper meaning than just saying it over and over each morning had held. Finally, Silas understood what his father had been trying to teach him. He needed to be a man of God and live with the light of Christ in this dark world. His father died later that night.

Silas had planned on denying God if his father died, but God used his father until the very last moment of his life so as to change Silas’s life. Silas saw the hands of God working there that night and was forever changed. He, too, had become a believer.

Silas took over the farm in his father’s stead and took care of his mother, who died a year later. His brother was all the family he had left, until Hattie. It was so new to him to have someone living under his roof who did not believe in God! He liked Hattie a tremendous amount already; she was nice, funny, pretty, and caring. But for some reason, she put up a wall to block out something from her past. Silas knew it was his job to protect her
now, and that meant he would have to break down that wall and allow her to ask Jesus in. Silas knew he couldn’t change her life on her own, so he crawled out of bed, trying to not wake Hattie, and got down on his knees beside the bed. He then started to whisper, “God, I can’t change my new wife’s mind about you, but I know you can. Please use me in her life. Amen.” Short but sweet, he thought. He crawled back into bed and tried to get used to the fact that he was a husband. “I leave it all to you,” he proclaimed softly as he drifted off to sleep.
Chapter 14
Reliving Painful Memories

Hattie woke to the sound of someone in her room. When she opened her eyes, she could not remember where she was! She panicked. When she sat up and looked about the room, she saw a man with red hair; then she remembered and whispered aloud to assure herself, “I'm married.”

Silas had already gotten dressed and was washing his face at his washing bin. “Good morning,” he said politely.

Hattie gave him a smile and asked, “What time is it?”

“Ten till 6:00.”

Hattie nodded and climbed out of bed. She began to make her way to her wash basin. After washing her face, she glanced at the large wardrobe that held only her two meager dresses. She chose the blue one and looked at Silas as she laid it out on the bed. Silas gave her an uncomfortable look and cleared his throat.
“I-I'm going to start breakfast.”
“Don’t bother. I will start it as soon as I get dressed.
“Really?”
“That is what a wife does, isn’t it?”
“That’s right, I guess. I think I’m going to enjoy having a wife!” he chuckled.
As soon as he left the room, Hattie threw on her dress, brushed her hair and tied it back with a ribbon she found on her vanity and left the room. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, the smell of black coffee reached her nose.
“I see you have already made coffee.”
“Well, I don’t want to brag, but I can make a pretty darn good cup o’ coffee.”
Hattie laughed melodiously. “Well, what do you want for breakfast?”
“Whatever you want to fix,” he chimed.
Hattie opened the pantry to find it fully stocked. She gave a little gasp.
“What! Did you see a mouse?” Silas shouted jumping up from the table.
“No, I just have never seen such a full pantry!”
“Oh…” was all Silas could say. And then catching Hattie of guard, he pulled her into his arms and gave her a hug. Hattie was so stunned she just let him hold her. They stood like this for a long while until Hattie realized she hadn’t started breakfast.
“I... um... should start breakfast,” she stuttered as she pulled away from his strong embrace. Hattie chose to make grits, scrambled eggs, bacon and toast with blackberry preserves. She fixed the meal in a sort of trance. She was still shocked by his show of affection. She sat down with him at the table to eat the meal.

“I will work in the fields pretty much all day. My brother Wesley, whom you met yesterday, is my foreman. We will come in for lunch at noon. All the other workers will eat at the bunk house; you don’t need to fix anything for them. You can do pretty much whatever you want, but the seamstress lady is coming after our noon meal.”

“Oh, yes. I forgot about that, she replied. Then she added quietly, “Thank you.”

Silas nodded and then he spoke cautiously, “Why don’t you believe in God?”

Hattie was taken by surprise. No one had ever asked her this; she didn’t even know the answer!

“Well, I...um...” she stuttered as she tried to find words that weren’t there. Silas just stared at her with a look of patience, telling her that he would wait until she was ready to tell him. Finally, Hattie knew why she had turned her back on God. Could she really tell him? She had never told anyone about her pain! She couldn’t tell him. But for some reason Hattie
felt the need to tell him, to get the painful memory off her heavy heart. It had always caused Hattie pain. Every day since her passing, it had haunted her. Without even thinking, words spilled out of her mouth. She started to relive the painful past.

“I love you so much Hattie. Please don’t be mad at me for leaving you,” the quiet, frail voice pleaded.

“I could never be mad at you, but you are not leaving me; you are going to get better. I won’t let you leave,” 16 year old Hattie pleaded.

“Oh, Hattie I want to leave, but I don’t want to leave you. I am ready to feel better. I am only sad because you will be here, and I will be up there,” she said, lifting her eyes upward. Hattie felt like she had been punched right in the gut. She did not see any way to let this precious gift leave her. In the dimming light she looked at that face that was so dear to her heart. The blue in her eyes was not as vibrant as it once had been. She grabbed Hattie’s hand, looked into her eyes, and said four words: “God will be there.”

With those words said, Ada looked as if she had accomplished a huge task. She looked relieved. She turned her eyes from Hattie and closed them for the last time.

Hattie sat at the side of her eleven-year-old sister’s bed in shock. “No, no!” she cried! “Ada,
please don’t leave me! I need you!” She jumped up from her chair and grabbed her sister’s lifeless hands and held them to her face. “Ada, please wake up!” Hattie realized that her beloved sister had passed. Her eyes were closed and her little, frail chest had ceased to rise and fall. Her angelic face grew as pale as the whitest cloud. She looked so peaceful. Her pain had ended. She had been in a fight with tuberculosis for the past three months. She had lost.

Hattie ran to the window and screamed out into the cold empty world. Tears fell onto the earth more than ever before. At that moment something snapped inside Hattie. “You did this!” she yelled at the sky. “I hate you! Leave me alone! I don’t need you to help me with my life! You’ve done such a great job so far! I would have never let such a beautiful child be taken away from a girl who needed her more than anything else in her pathetic life! I bet I can do a whole lot better job than you! I’m done with this! I’m done with you.”

After the words came out of her mouth, she felt as if her soul and her heart had been ripped from her. She had never felt so afraid and alone. Hattie collapsed on the floor and sobbed until her parents came in to see their little daughter was no more in this world.

Ruth Ann sat down next to Hattie and tried to comfort her. “Hattie, she is no longer in pain. She is with God now.”
“Don’t EVER talk to me about that Savior again! He hates me and I hate Him!”

Hattie’s mother never did talk about God again to Hattie. “Hattie, look at me. I know what she meant to you, but remember, she was my daughter as much as she was your sister.” Hattie peeked up at her mother to spot tears freely flowing down her cheeks too. Hattie realized she was grieving as much as she was. “Hattie, you are all I have now, and I am all you have. We need to be there for each other. Promise me you won’t turn away from everything,” Ruth Ann pleaded.

“I – I promise.”

And Hattie kept that promise; she turned her back on God only.

Hattie finished her story and peered up at Silas’s face. His face was a mask of pity and pain for Hattie. Tears welled up in Hattie’s eyes, but she pushed them back; she couldn’t let Silas see her cry.

“Hattie, I am so sorry.”

Hattie was surprised that he didn’t give some speech about how it was wrong for her to deny the Lord.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but you can’t blame God for Ada’s death. He gives us trials to help us grow. You can either let trials build you or destroy you.”

“Oh, there it is,” Hattie thought spitefully.
“You can’t do everything yourself, Hattie,” Silas finished.

Hattie, for some reason, felt comforted. He reached out and grabbed her hand gave it a gentle caress and stood up from the table.

“Breakfast was delicious! I am so glad you are a good cook!” he suddenly announced with a completely different tone of voice. “I can’t cook anything that is suitable for eating! I can’t wait for lunch now!” he chuckled. “I have to get to work now,” he said as he walked towards the door. But before he walked out onto the porch, he turned and looked Hattie in the eyes and said, “Thank you for opening up your past to me; I know it wasn’t easy for you. I just want you to know that you can trust me, and I will always be there for you and do my best to help you.”

“Thank you, Silas. That means a lot! I'm glad I told you. I needed to tell someone because I never had said anything about it to anyone since the day she died,” Hattie confessed.

Silas gave her a dazzling smile with his lips and his eyes, and he walked out the door towards the barn. As Hattie watched him go from the front door, she felt a feeling she thought she would have never felt again. Could it be love?
Chapter 15
Could It Be Love?

Hattie shut the door and walked around the house thinking about Silas. Did she love him? Could she love him? He obviously couldn’t love her… right?

Silas walked to the barn, thinking about Hattie. He was shocked by her story. It pained him to think that she resented God. Was there anything he could do? The whole morning, every time he looked at her, he felt a feeling he had never felt towards anyone before. What was it? Was it love? That would be a reasonable answer since they were husband and wife. But she could never love him … could she?

Hattie decided to go into her private parlor in the back of the house and write a letter to Hazel. Hattie loved the room because it was so beautiful. She ran her hands along the furniture that Silas had carved. He was a gifted
wood worker. Hattie got lost in thought thinking about the strength and comfort in his hands, and the support she felt when his arms held her. She sat down on the yellow cushions on the couch and thought about her feelings for Silas. She could possibly love him! She had only known him for three days, but he was so nice and caring and she felt so safe with him. He was handsome and thoughtful too! He was exactly what she had always pictured as her knight in shining armor. But, this couldn’t be the one for whom she was meant--it was an arranged marriage! She would have been mighty lucky if this was her intended man.

As she sat on the couch, she remembered Pricilla! She said something about having an arranged marriage, didn’t she? Hattie immediately started a letter to Pricilla. She wrote how she was sorry about her behavior the last time they had seen each other and how she longed for her lively company. She gave Pricilla her new address and said that she hoped to see her soon. After she finished her letter, she decided to start the noon meal for Silas and his brother. She started to make ham, wheat rolls, green beans, and lemonade.

As soon as she set the meal out on the table, the men walked in. “Smells yummy!” Silas exclaimed.

“Sure does!” Wesley agreed.
“I'm glad you got yourself a good cook for a wife Silas!” Wesley said with a teasing look at Hattie.

Hattie smiled and took her seat at the table.

“This lemonade is fantastic, Hattie!” Silas proclaimed.

“I put extra sugar in it; that is my secret,” she declared. “I'm glad you like it!”

“I love lemonade that is extra sweet.”

“Me too! I wouldn’t drink it any other way!”

Hattie laughed, and Silas thought that it was such a melodious laugh that it reminded him of silver bells. They had a splendid meal filled with many laughs. “Well, we should get back to the fields,” Wesley said. “It was a wonderful meal Mrs. Radford.”

Hattie took a breath; she wasn’t used to being called Mrs. Radford.

“Yes, thank you, Hattie,” Silas added.

Hattie smiled as she watched them go. She took her lemonade and sat on the porch in her rocking chair. She closed her eyes and listened to the clear and golden sounds around her; the river, the wind moving through the trees, the mooing of the cows, and the birds chirping. Hattie felt totally relaxed. Hattie opened her eyes when she heard the gate opening, and she spotted a wagon pulling in. “Ah, this must be the seamstress!” she almost
sang excitedly to the bird that sat on the porch railing. She stood on the stairs waiting for the lady as she climbed out of the wagon. The lady looked up and smiled at Hattie. Hattie took a breath when she caught a glimpse of who was in the wagon. “Pricilla!” she exclaimed with joy.

The two women walked inside the house hand in hand. “I just finished a letter for you! I never thought you would be the seamstress I have been waiting for all day!”

“After I lost my job at the saloon, I went back to my old job at the wardrobe store,” she answered with a smile. “I have brought you the best dresses today Hattie! They are the latest fashion statements!” Hattie and Pricilla went into the back parlor to try on all the dresses. They had a jolly time catching up on the latest town news. After Hattie had tried on all the dresses and Priscilla had marked for a custom fit, she sat down on the couch with Pricilla.

“Pricilla, I want to apologize for the way I acted the last time we saw each other,” Hattie spoke glumly.

“Oh, child, don’t even think about it! How is the married life treating you?”

“Well, I have only been married for barely three days, but it is not at all what I expected!”
“How so?” Pricilla asked with worry in her voice.

“Well, I thought Silas Radford would be some creepy, mean, old man, but he is really a sweet, caring man with a tender heart,” Hattie said softly.

“Do you love him?”

Hattie laughed. “I don’t know! I want to say yes, but I couldn’t love him, and he couldn’t ever love me.”

“Why ever not?”

“It was an arranged marriage, Pricilla! We could never have been meant for each other!”

“You know, I thought the same thing when I married my husband, but it turns out he was exactly the man for me. I knew I loved him after the first week. We didn’t admit it to each other for months though. You might be surprised; Silas might have the exact same thoughts about you!” Priscilla encouraged.

Silas and Wesley sat in the tack room of the barn taking a break. “So what do you think of Hattie?” his brother asked.

“I like her; she is nice and a good cook too.”

“Do you love her?”

“You don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

“Nope,” Wesley affirmed.

Silas just laughed aloud.
“Well, do you?”
“I don’t know! We have been married only two days.”
“That’s no excuse! You should have known as soon as you met her if you loved her.
“It was an arranged marriage, Wesley! She could never love me. So, I might as well say I don’t love her so I don’t get too attached.”
“Well, you are going to be married to her the rest of your life, so you might as well get attached. Why don’t you just ask her how she feels? She might have the exact same feelings you have, but maybe you are both just too afraid the other won’t return the same feelings.”
Silas cleared his throat and said, “Let’s get back to work.” He tried to ignore what his brother had said, but he couldn’t help wondering what Hattie felt for him.
Chapter 16
Mistakes

Luther Starns had never been more proud of himself. What a brilliant idea--giving away his daughter to pay a debt to Silas Radford. He had congratulated himself by buying a few drinks at the Dusty Rose. When he sat down at the bar, Luke Payne sat down next to him.

“So, I heard your daughter got hitched to Silas Radford a few days ago.”

“Ya, So?”

“I was just thinking that that was pretty smart of you.”

“I thought so too,” Luther said proudly.

“You gonna kill him?”

“What? Why would I kill him?”

“I thought you married her off to him ‘cause of his money?”

“Is he rich? I hadn’t even heard that part. I married her off to him to pay the debt I owed him. How rich is he?”
“He’s the richest man in Smith County!”
“You’re kidding, right?”
“ Nope.”
Luther got up from his stool, almost knocking it over.
“Where you going?”
“To right some wrongs.” Luther couldn’t believe it. He had married his daughter to the richest man in town. He had to get his hands on that money!
“It’s a mistake,” he heard someone say behind him. He turned and saw Donny Stone.
“Excuse me?”
“I said you’re making a mistake. You’re going to kill Silas Radford, right?”
“What does it matter to you?”
“You’re going to regret it; it’s a huge mistake.”
“No, the only mistake is that I didn’t kill him in the first place.”
Chapter 17
Repaying the Debt

Donny Stone watched Luther walk away. He took off in the opposite direction. He had to find the sheriff. He never would have said anything, but Silas had helped him and his family a few years ago; it was his turn to help Silas.

Silas Radford had taken over the farm after his father’s death and was taking on new workers. Donny had gone to get a job when a man jumped Donny and his family. Meaning to seriously wound the attacker, Donny had accidentally killed him, but at least it all happened before the man could get to his family. Donny was terribly afraid to go to jail because he was poor and his wife was pregnant with their fourth child; they could not survive without him! The only person who saw the unfortunate occurrence was a man with red hair and blue eyes. Donny recognized him as the oldest Radford boy! He knew he would turn him in to the Law for sure! The Radford boy walked over and yet said nothing.
“Please sir, my family needs me,” pleaded Donny. He saw Silas glance at his wife and then he turned to look over his shoulder and saw people coming to see what had happened. He then said, “Quickly! Come with me.” He hid the family for a while and shortly thereafter gave them enough money to buy a house and start their life over. Donny Stone had never had the chance to say a proper “thank you.”
Chapter 18
He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Silas and Hattie had dinner alone that night. Hattie was wearing one of her new dresses that Pricilla had brought. It was cream calico with accents of a pale yellow. “You look very pretty tonight Hattie,” told Hattie.

“Thank you for the compliment and for the dresses too. I have never had such pretty things in my life.” Silas smiled a sweet smile, but for some reason she thought she detected pain in the smile as well as joy.

“How was everything in the fields today?” she asked.

“Pretty good. We will have a great harvest this year. I also worked a bit on a furniture set that will sell at a handsome price. Did you have a nice day?”

“Yes, quite nice.” For some reason his answer disappointed Hattie. She sensed he was holding something back. Or maybe, she just wanted him to profess his undying love for
her. Hattie smirked at the silliness of that idea. After dinner they sat in the living room to finish out an uneventful day. They both sat waiting for the other to profess their love, but it never happened.

The next morning Hattie awoke to find the bed empty and to see the sun had already risen. “Oh, shoot!” she moaned as she remembered she was supposed to fix breakfast for Silas. She turned over to get out of bed and found a bouquet of a dozen light pink roses. “Oh, my!” she gasped. She had never been given a bouquet of flowers, much less roses. A note sat at the base of the exquisite crystal vase. It read:

Don’t worry about breakfast. I had leftovers.
I remembered that you said you liked roses;
I hope these are the right color!

Silas

Hattie was ecstatic! She just wished it had said love Silas at the closing. She climbed out of bed and put on a pale pink calico dress with her cream shawl, and she pinned a rose in her hair. Before she left, she put her face into the flowers and drank in their fragrant smell. What a way to start the day!

Hattie decided to take Silas something special as thanks for the flowers. She decided to take him some lemonade as he worked and to bake him a strawberry pie with fresh whipped cream for a dessert. She prepared the
lemonade in a crystal glass. Before she walked out to the barn, she made sure her wavy locks were styled just right. When she was satisfied with her up-do, she walked out across the yard to the barn.

Half way to the barn she met Wesley. "Do you know where Silas is?"

"He is in the woodshop, Mrs. Radford."

"Thank you, Wesley. You can call me Hattie!" she called after him as they parted ways. As soon as Hattie entered the woodshop door, she saw Silas straighten up and wipe his hands off on an old dusty rag.

"Hello Hattie! Is everything alright?"

"Yes everything is fine; I just brought you lemonade since it is a scorching day," she declared.

"Well, thank you! It is so nice to have a wife now," he chuckled.

"Thank you so much for the roses! They are my favorite flower."

"I'm glad you like them! I guessed on the color."

“You picked the perfect color,” she confirmed.

“Well, I will let you get back to work since I have a pie baking in the oven for whenever you come inside. It’s strawberry."

“Now that’s my favorite!”

“I just guessed on the flavor!”
“Well you picked the perfect one,” he laughed aloud as he stepped closer. Hattie felt butterflies in her stomach, but before either of them could hear what the other was waiting for, someone called, “Silas.”

“Well, I will be in for that pie soon!”
“I’ll get it out to cool,” she giggled. They both turned away to go in the opposite directions. Both sighed.

“Would he ever say it?” she wondered. Little did she know he was thinking the exact same thing!

After dinner, the couple ate the anticipated pie. “This is top notch! I can’t even describe how good this is.”

“Oh, Silas, please. It’s not that good,” giggled Hattie.

“It is to someone who can’t cook,” he replied, giving a hearty laugh. They stayed up late that night and had an exceptionally satisfactory evening filled with laughter and sweet words, but never exactly I love you.
Chapter 19
Terrified

The next morning Hattie woke up before Silas. She slipped on a pale green dress with a chestnut brown sash. She fixed breakfast and had it on the table right as Silas walked down the stairs. “Good morning,” she said with a smile.

He returned her smile and asked, “What did you make today?”

“Biscuits and gravy.”

They both enjoyed their meal, and after they were through, Silas spoke with a grave voice, “I have to go to town today. Will you be okay alone for the day?”

“Yes. Yes I will be fine, of course.”

“And you don’t mind me going, do you?”

“No, not at all!”

“Good! Just one thing though, please stays inside the house. I trust all my men, but I
don’t want them giving my pretty wife any stray glances.” Hattie was sure she blushed. He thought she was pretty!

“Of course, I will just stay and write some letters I need to get sent.”

“Good. I'm glad you don’t mind. I will be back for dinner.”

“Alright. I will have dinner ready and waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Hattie,” he said with a look in his eye that made Hattie blush even more. Maybe he really did love her! He stood up and said his good bye and they parted their ways for the day.

Hattie watched him go and she caught her breath as he turned and waved. When Silas saw her wave back and smile, he caught an expression in her glance that he hadn’t seen before. Maybe she did love him after all! Hattie stayed inside all day just as she promised Silas.

It was about four ‘o’clock when she heard a knock at the door. She had been in the back parlor writing letters to her mother, Hazel, and to Pricilla. She hurried to the door, and when she opened, it she wanted to slam it shut again.

“What are you doing here?” Hattie yelled at the visitor. The caller was her father. “Haven’t you ruined my life enough? I'm happy now! Please leave me alone!”
“Where is Silas?” he asked gruffly.
“He’s not here. Now please leave.”
“I need to see Silas!”
“Well, he won’t be back for a while.”
“Then, I will wait.”
“Oh, no you won’t! Leave!”
Luther pushed Hattie into a chair and his hand rose to slap her. Then suddenly, Silas burst through the door! Hattie breathed out a sigh of relief. He took the room in two strides.
“Luther doesn’t touch my wife. What are you doing here?” Silas’s tone of voice was so commanding that she felt safe now that he was here. How dare Luther try to abuse her in her own home!
She ran to Silas’s side. He put his strong supporting arm around her slim waist. She had never felt so safe in the presence of her father. Silas kept her calm; he must have sensed she was afraid of her father because he tightened his supporting arm around her just to assure her. “I’ll ask you one more time, Luther. What are you doing here other than frightening my wife?”
Luther smirked and sneered at Hattie, “Am I frightening you, Dear?”
Okay, Mr. Starns. You must be going,” he said as he left Hattie’s side and shoved Luther out the door.
Hattie felt so vulnerable without Silas by her side. She was doing all in her power to
stifle her scream and to wait for Silas to come back to her side before she ran to his.

“I need to talk to you about some business, Mr. Radford.”

Silas gave Hattie a look of question and reluctantly agreed to meet with him outside. As they walked outside, Hattie caught a heart-stopping look from her father. What was he up to? Something terrible was going to happen. She just knew it!
Chapter 20
The Cavalry

Donny knew that Luther had already headed down to the Redford farm. He just hoped they weren’t too late.

The sheriff and a few men from town came with him to help catch Luther. And even if he didn’t try anything tonight, they just filed three other charges that had recently come to light. So, they were going to arrest him either way.

Donny just prayed that they would get there in a nick of time.
Fear took over Hattie. She knew her father was up to something. She wanted to help, but she knew Silas would tell her to get back inside. What if Luther killed Silas, and she had never told him she loved him? She couldn’t bear that thought. After what seemed like a lifetime of waiting, she heard some racket out in the yard, but she was so scared she couldn’t even get herself to move to the window.

She heard a gunshot and yelling and fighting. She froze, dropped to a seat on the floor, and started to bawl. “No, no! You can’t take him from me too! Please don’t take him, please!” Hattie finally knew what her sister had meant all those years ago--God will be there!”

“God, you have been with me this whole time and I never realized it! I have denied you all my life, but you never left me
alone. God, I need you now more than ever! I'm so sorry. Please don’t take Silas from me. God forgive me. Please come back to me. I want you. I know I can’t do this by myself.”

Hattie thought she heard a voice say, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” She then remembered from where she had heard those wise words, from the Bible! Hattie sat on the floor in the corner, sobbing. Finally, all the noise died away and she heard heavy footsteps on the porch. It was Luther coming for her--she just knew it! She felt the dread that followed him everywhere he went.

But, when the door opened, it was Silas that came running in! He didn’t see her sitting in the corner and he started to yell, “Hattie? Hattie, where are you? Please answer. Oh, God, it can’t be true. Please don’t take her from me!” he wailed as tears gushed down his cheeks. It shook Hattie out of her socks to see him alive.

“S- Silas! Silas I'm here,” she yelled. He turned around to see her huddled in the corner. He ran to her and dropped to the ground in front of her. “Are you okay? He told me you were dead! I'm so sorry.”

“I'm fine. Are you okay? I heard the shot and assumed the worst,” she blurted out as she started to cry again, and they both stood up. She fell into his arms.
“I'm so glad you are okay, Hattie. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you. I love you!” he whispered in her ear.

She gasped and looked up at his tear-streaked face. “Really? You love me?”

“Yes! I love you so much, Hattie.”

“I love you, too, Silas! More than words can say!” he spoke as he looked lovingly down at her beautiful face. He smiled and then he kissed her. It was their first kiss since the marriage, and it was everything Hattie had hoped it would be!
Chapter 22
Happily Ever After

The whole rest of the night the couple could not be separated; they were either hand in hand or Silas’s arm was around Hattie’s dainty shoulders. They found out that Luther had come to kill Silas for his money, and that he would have either killed Hattie or taken her with him. They also found out that the gunshot was from one of the men the sheriff had brought with him. His finger had slipped and he shot a tree. Luther had used the sound of the shot to try to distract Silas; he told him that someone had just shot Hattie. They also found out that Luther had been taken to jail under three other warrants for his arrest. He had been given a lifetime sentence. After the sheriff talked to Hattie and Silas, Donny Stone came up to them and shook Silas’s hand and introduced himself to Hattie.

“Thank you, Donny. I would not be alive if it wasn’t for you.”
“Neither would I” was his reply. Things after that took place all so quickly, but everything finally started to fall into place. Hazel married Wesley Redford and moved to a house neighboring with Hattie. “I knew we were meant to be sisters!” they told each other.

Ruth Ann moved in with Pricilla and sold the family’s old property for a decent price. She came to visit Hattie every week.

Silas and Hattie went on a honeymoon after everything was settled. And for all their years, Hattie and Silas led one of the most romantic and Christ-centered lives Smith County had ever known.
Hattie Redford looked out across the yard to see her four-year-old son Danny running to her husband Silas. He had just returned from three days in town. Silas picked up his son and put him on his shoulders. He looked up and saw Hattie in the window and ran to see her. She met him on the porch and gave him a kiss and hug. Her pregnant belly kept him farther away than in a usual hug. Their little two-year-old girl Susan came along holding Hattie’s left hand. Silas ruffled her red, bouncy curls. He set their eldest son down and ruffled his sandy blond hair. He gathered them all up in a hug and faced out to the setting sun and whispered into Hattie’s ear, “I love you.”