

*A Novel*

The  
LAST  
LETTER

KATHLEEN SHOOP

*To Bill*

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# Chapter 1

1905

Des Moines, Iowa

**K**atherine rubbed the second knuckle of her pinky finger—the spot where it had been amputated nearly two decades before. The scarred wound pulsed with each heartbeat as her mind flashed through the events that led to its removal. Was it possible for an infection to form inside an old sore?

*Don't think about it. Just do your work.*

She snatched the clump of metal from the stone saucer and scrubbed the iron pot as though issuing it punishment. She caught her forefinger on blackened beans. *Damn.* She sucked on the nail. With her free hand she yanked the plug from the soapstone sink then opened the back door. Hot, thick wind brushed her cheeks and forced her eyes closed as she yanked the rope that made the dinner bell clang.

With a jerk of her hip she booted the door closed and wiped her hands on the gravy-splattered apron that draped her body. A crash came from the front of the house. A ball through the window? Another wrestling match over the last “up” at bat? She dashed toward the foyer to see what her children were up to.

She tripped over the edge of the carpet and caught her balance, gaping at the sight. There on the floor was her husband, Aleksey, kneeling over her sister Yale. A shattered flow-blue vase lay scattered around them.

Yale burped sending a burst of gin-scented breath upward.

Katherine recoiled as the odor hit her nose. "She's *drunk*? Take her to my mother's!"

Aleksey looked up, his face strained. "Just help..."

She couldn't handle Yale. Not right then. She turned and headed back toward the kitchen. Their mother would have to rescue Yale this time. As though being scolded from afar, her missing finger throbbed again, like a knife scraping at the marrow deep inside her bones the pain forced her to stop. Her mother hadn't been there when she lost the finger. Her mother was never where she was supposed to be.

Katherine looked over her shoulder at the pair on the floor and clutched her hand against her chest. Yale gurgled, growing pale grey. Aleksey hoisted her and carried her to the couch.

She looked down at her smarting hand, against her heart, and clarity took over. It wasn't Yale's fault she was fragile. She'd been born that way. *She's your sister. Do something.* She puffed out her cheeks with air and then released it. Her anger receded taking the throbbing pulse in her hand with it.

She grabbed a pot of hydrangeas from a side-table and ran out the front door, shook the billowy, blue flowers out of the pot sending coal-black dirt splashing over the wood planks.

Back in the house she slid onto the couch, Yale's head in her lap, pot perched on the floor to catch the vomit. Aleksey paced in front of the women.

"She was at Sweeny's. *Alone*. Men, tossing her back and forth like a billiard ball. I barely..."

Katherine covered her mouth. She had enough of her mother's failures. "I knew this kind of thing would happen. And, now—"

"She's your *sister* and I know you love them even if you say you don't care. Your mother's *dying*. We have to help them." Aleksey's jaw tensed. Katherine bit the inside of her cheek, struck by his rare disapproval of her.

"You can't ignore this one more minute," Aleksey said, "*seventeen* years is long enough to forgive."

Without warning, Yale bucked forward and vomited, spackling Katherine with booze-scented chunks before passing out again. Tears gathered in her eyes. Hand quivering, she swiped a chunk from her chin with the back of her hand then smoothed Yale's black hair off her pale, clammy forehead.

She gulped and gritted her teeth. "If Mother can't take care of Yale, then it's time for the institution." The words were sour in Katherine's mouth, yet she couldn't stop them from forming, from hanging in the air, the spitefulness making Aleksey break her gaze.

Aleksey pulled the pot from between Katherine's feet and held it near Yale as she started to gag again. "Yale can stay here. They both can."

Katherine rocked Yale, not wanting to let her go, but knowing she had to hold her mother accountable. She was the *mother* after all. She shook her head and slid Yale off her lap, patting her head as she stood.

Aleksey rolled Yale to her side as she heaved into the pot. "I'll call Mother," she said heading toward the stairs.

"I recall a time," Aleksey said as he held Yale like she was one of his own, "when you called your mother, Mama, and the word swelled with adoration."

Katherine turned from the bottom step, her posture straight and sure, like she was headed to dinner and a play rather than to scrape someone's vomit from her skin. She gripped the banister trying to channel the mish-mash of emotion into the wood rather than feel it.

“I don’t recall that. Calling her Mama, feeling warmth in the word. I don’t recall it a bit.” And with that she trudged upstairs to peel off the rancid clothes and to stifle the rotten feelings that always materialized upon the sight of her family, drunk or not.

## Chapter 2

1887

Dakota Territory

“**M**ama?”  
Jeanie jumped at her daughter’s thin voice. Katherine lay below her in tall sinuous grasses that bent with the wind, covering and uncovering her with each shifting gust.

“I’m hot and tired and when will Father be back?” Katherine rose up on her elbows. “I understand complaining is like an ice-pick in your ear, but I’m plum hot and plum parched and tired of waiting.” She jerked a blade of grass from the ground and bit on it.

Jeanie nodded and rubbed her belly. She was pregnant but hadn’t told anyone. Cramps pulled inside her pelvis. Would she lose this one? Nervous, she grabbed for the fat pearls that used to decorate her neck and smacked her tongue off the roof of her arid mouth.

She hacked up a clump of phlegm, turned her back to Katherine and spit it into the air. A sudden blast of air blew the green mucus back, landing on her skirt. Hands spread up to the sky, she stared at the ugly splotch marveling at how quickly her life had

transformed. She would never have believed it possible before the scandal hit her own family.

With clenched teeth she wrenched a corner of her petticoat from under the skirt to wipe away the lumpy secretion. Her thoughts tripped over each other. Jeanie would not let doubt linger, mix with fear and paralyze her. She would be sure the family re-grew their fortune, that they reclaimed their contentment, their name, their everything. If only Frank were more reliable. Damn Frank was never where he was supposed to be.

Arms wrapped across her body, Jeanie tapped her silk-shoed foot. They should head for water, but she didn't think that was prudent. She'd heard people could lose direction quickly in such expansive land. That frightened her, not being in control, but she also thought perhaps the people who ended up wandering the prairie lost were simply not that smart or were careless. Slowly, as she ran her fingers down the front of her swelling throat, each scratchy swallow symbolized the wagonload of errors Jeanie had made and she started to understand that intelligence and survival did not always walk together.

*Damn him.* Five hours. They'd waited long enough for Frank. She pushed away the rising tears that grew from thinking of the mess her father and darling husband had made for them. Be brave.

They needed to take action or they'd prune from the inside out.

"Let's head for water." Jeanie clasped Katherine's hand and pulled her to standing. *We can do this*, Jeanie thought. Frank had tied red sashes around taller bushes that were scattered in the direction of the well. Katherine wiggled free of her mother's grasp and raced—as much as a girl could dart through grasses that whapped at her chest—over the land.

"Stay close!" Jeanie stopped and pulled her foot off the ground. She sucked back her breath as her slim-heeled shoes dug into her ankles. Katherine looked up from ahead, waving a bunch of purple prairie crocus over her head at Jeanie.

Jeanie turned to see how far they'd moved from the wagon. She could only see the tip of the white canvas that arched over it. She looked back in the direction of the well, of Katherine. The wind stilled. The sudden hush was heavy. The absence of Katherine's lavender bonnet sent blood flashing through her veins.

"Katherine?" *She must be pulling more flowers*, Jeanie thought and rose to her tiptoes. "Katherine?"

Jeanie looked back at the wagon.

"Katherine!" Jeanie stomped some of the grass hoping the depressed sections would somehow stick out amidst the chunky high grass when they needed to return.

"*Katherine!*" Jeanie's voice cracked. She cleared her throat and shouted again. No answer. She shivered then clenched her skirt and hiked it up, thundering in the direction of Katherine.

*KatherineKatherineKatherineKatherine!* Bolting through the grasses, the wind swelled, it pushed Jeanie back as she pressed forward, turning her shouts back at her, filling her ears with her own words as she strained to hear a reply.

Jeanie stopped as though slamming into a wall, swallowing loud breaths hoping the silence would allow Katherine's voice to hit her ears. Nothing. She ran again, right out of her luxurious, city-shoes, while cursing the mass of skirts and crinoline that swallowed her legs. Her feet slammed over the dirt.

The grasses tangled around her ankles, tripping her. Jeanie scrambled back to her feet and took three steps before taking one right off the edge of the earth. She plummeted into water. A pond. Jeanie stood and spit out foamy, beer-colored water. At least she could touch bottom.

"Katthhh-errrrr—ine!" She slogged through the waist deep water, her attention nowhere and everywhere at once. The sounds of splashing and choking finally made Jeanie focus on one area of the pond. She shot around a bend in the bank to see Katherine's face go under the water taking what little wind Jeanie had left in her lungs away.

Katherine shot back up. “Mama, Mama!” She dropped back under.

Jeanie lunged and groped for Katherine as the bottom of the pond fell away. Jeanie treaded water, the skirts strangling her efforts to be efficient. A bit further! The bottom must be shallow or Katherine couldn’t have bounced up as she had.

But the bottom didn’t rise up and Jeanie choked on grainy water. She burst forward on her stomach, taking an arm-stroke, her feet scrounging for the bottom. Her face sunk under the surface.

*We’re going to die*, Jeanie thought. Frank would never find them. Her boys!

Bubbles appeared in front of Jeanie and she reached through the murky water for Katherine. Finally, hands grabbed back, gripping Jeanie’s. She could feel every precious finger threaded through hers. Jeanie jerked Katherine into her body, lumbered toward the bank then shoved the floppy girl up onto it. Katherine lay on the grass, hacking and inhaling so deep that she folded over, gagging. Jeanie squirmed out and pulled Katherine across her lap, thumping her back until there was nothing left but empty heavens.

Silent tears camouflaged by stale, pond water warmed Jeanie’s cheeks. Her hand shook as she pushed Katherine’s matted hair away from her eyes, rocking her.

“We’ll be fine, Katherine. We’ll build a life and start over and be happy. We will. Believe it deep inside your very young bones.”

Katherine snuffled then blew her nose in her filthy, sodden skirt. Her voice squeaked. “Oh, Mama.” Katherine burrowed into Jeanie’s chest and curled into a ball in her lap.

Jeanie wiped Katherine’s mouth with the edge of her skirt, streaking mud across her cheek. She used her thumb to clean away the muck. Her daughter in need was all that kept Jeanie from rolling into a ball herself.

“My, my. We’ll be fine,” Jeanie said. And as her heart fell back into its normal rhythms heavy exhaustion braced her. “We’ll enjoy the sunshine all the more if we’ve had a few shadows first. Right?”

That’s right.” Jeanie knew those words sounded ridiculous in light of all they’d been through, but still they dribbled out of her mouth, as though simply discussing a broken bit of Limoges.

Katherine nodded into her mother’s chest. Jeanie shuddered, a leaden tumor of dread swelled in her gut. She wouldn’t let it settle there.

“Shush, shush, little one,” Jeanie kissed her cheeks. If Katherine and she lived through that they could live through anything. The pond event, as it came to be in Jeanie’s mind, was evidence they’d paid a price and would be free to accept all the treasures the prairie offered from that point forward.

“Are you crying Mama?”

Jeanie forced a smile then looked into Katherine’s upturned face. “We’re *not* crying people.” Her fingers quivered as she tucked the stiff chestnut tendrils into Katherine’s bonnet. “Besides there’s nothing to cry about.”

Katherine gripped her mother tighter. “I knew you’d save us, Mama. Even in Des Moines, I knew that no matter what, *you* could save us.”

Jeanie hugged Katherine close hiding the splintered confidence she knew must be creased into her face. What did Katherine know? She *couldn’t* know the details of their disgrace. She must have simply picked up on the weightiness of their leaving the family home for this—this nothingness.

Jeanie squeezed her eyes shut, trying to find the strength inside her. She would not fake her self-assurance. She believed that kind of thing lived inside a person’s skin, never really leaving, even if it did weaken from time to time. Yes, Jeanie told herself, she was the same person she had been three weeks before. Losing everything she owned didn’t mean she had to lose herself.



Jeanie stood at the edge of the pond and inventoried her most recent losses: impractical shoes she shouldn't have been wearing anyway; silver chatelaine that held her pen, paper, and watch; pride. Well, no, she was determined to salvage her self-respect. She clutched her waist with both hands, considering their options, then pulled Katherine to her feet.

"This standing pond water will poison us. We'll continue to the well."

Katherine patted her mother's back then bent over to pluck some prairie grass from the ground.

The wooly sunrays seemed to lower onto their heads rather than move further away, settling into the west. Their dresses dried crisp—the pond-water debris acted as a starch—while the skirts underneath remained moist and mealy.

Jeanie wiggled her toes. They burned inside the holey stockings.

"Our new home will have a spring house, right Mama? Icy, fresh spring water?"

"I'm afraid, no, little lamb."

"Oh *gaaaa-loshes*," Katherine said.

Jeanie slung her arm around Katherine. "Let me think for a moment, Darling."

The endless land looked the same though not familiar, appearing perfectly flat, though housing hidden rises in land and gaping holes that were obvious only after it was too late. All Jeanie could remember was running straight to the spot that ended up being a pond. Her heart thudded hard again reminding her she had no control of her existence.

A sob rumbled inside Jeanie, wracking her body, forcing an obnoxious, weak moan to ooze from her clenched lips. *Toughen up*. She pushed her shoulders down as her throat swelled around another rising sob.

Katherine pushed a piece of grass upward, offering it to Jeanie to chew on. "You said you came around a bend, Mama."

Jeanie closed her fingers over the blade of grass and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "We'll curve back around to get to the point where we can head straight back toward the wagon. Then we'll know where the well is from there."

They held hands, traipsed around the edge of the pond and rose up a gentle hill. From there, they could see a tree. Just one. Tall, yet knobby, as though surrendering to death a bit. But, even in its contorted form, Jeanie could see its vibrant green foliage and white blooms.

Katherine pointed. "I forgot the world had trees."

"Yes."

"I'm thirsty Mama."

"Don't feel out of spirits. We'll find the well. Better to ignore the thirst until then." Jeanie wished she could take her own advice but she'd felt parched since she first perched atop the wagon seat three days before.

Katherine squeezed Jeanie's hand three times saying "I love you" with the gesture. Jeanie squeezed back to say the same then looked away from the tree into nothingness.

They hugged the edge of the pond, following the bends back to the spot where Jeanie's foot caught the cusp of the pond, tearing out some earth. Facing directly east, they headed back to where Jeanie thought the wagon sat.

"Get on my shoulders," Jeanie said.

They faced each other with Jeanie's wrists crossed, hands joined. Jeanie bent her knees and exploded upward swinging Katherine around her back. Katherine wiggled into a comfortable place on Jeanie's shoulders and fastened her ankles around Jeanie's chest.

"You all right, Mama?"

"My yes, Sweet Pea. All is well." She was going to make all of that true. "Peel your eyes for the wagon." Jeanie plodded, feeling Katherine's weight quickly, thinking of the baby inside.

"Yes, Mama." Katherine hummed a tune.

"Concentrate on the looking," Jeanie said.

"The humming helps me look."

"Well, then," Jeanie said through heavy breaths. "Keep those eyes wide as a prairie night."

"Wide as a what?" Katherine said.

"A prairie night," Jeanie said. Katherine's legs stiffened and she pulled hard around Jeanie's neck.

Jeanie halted, absorbing Katherine's tension.

"What's wrong? What do you see?" Jeanie looked upward at Katherine's face above her. She squeezed Katherine's thigh to get her attention. Were they about to step into a snake pit, be trampled by a herd of cows?

"What is it?"

"A man," Katherine said.

"Who?" Ridiculous question in light of them not knowing a soul in Dakota.

Katherine's legs kicked—she gripped Jeanie's bonnet making its ties nearly choke her.

Jeanie's heart began its clunking patterns again. "Where?"

Katherine didn't respond so Jeanie swung her from her shoulders and tucked her behind her skirts. Jeanie glanced about the ground for something sharp or big. There was nothing that could be used as a weapon against a small rodent let alone a man.

Katherine clenched Jeanie so tight that the two nearly flew off their feet. Steadied, Jeanie couldn't see anyone coming toward them. Her bare feet pulsed with pain making her feel more vulnerable. Katherine must be hallucinating, the thirst taking its toll on her.

Jeanie spun in place, craning for the sight of a man, the sound of feet, but a windblast made anything that might emit noise, soundless.

For a moment Jeanie was tempted to burrow into the grasses, hide there, play dead, anything to avoid the man, if there was a man. A new burst of sweat gathered at her hairline and dripped down the sides of her face. Katherine's fingers delved into the loosened stays of Jeanie's corset.

"Who's there?" Jeanie yelled into the wind. She shuddered. She could feel someone watching them. She whirled again, Katherine whipped around with her.

"*Who's there?*" Jeanie shouted. This time her words tore through the air, the winds momentarily still.

"It's Howard Templeton! Jeanie Arthur? That you?" A full, gruff voice came from behind. Jeanie and Katherine twisted around a final time. Jeanie's body relaxed. If he knew her name it must be a good sign. She tensed again, maybe not. Maybe he tortured Frank and the boys and...she wouldn't think about it. This Templeton sported a pristine black hat. His rosy limbs were strong though not bulky, not threatening in any setting other than that of the naked prairie.

Jeanie shaded her eyes and looked into his six feet two inches, meeting his gaze. A crooked grin pulled his mouth a centimeter away from being a smirk.

"Mrs. Arthur, I presume? There. That's more proper, isn't it? Don't be nervous."

"It was the wind," Jeanie said. You scared me blind, she wanted to say, but wouldn't. "I couldn't pinpoint...well, no matter." She wasn't accustomed to making her own introductions. It felt rude to say, *who are you?* So, she said nothing.

Templeton removed his hat and bent at the waist, lifting his eyes. Was he flirting with this dramatic bow? She grabbed for absent pearls then smoothed the front of her dress before pulling Katherine into her side.

He straightened, replaced his hat. "I met your husband, Frank, on his way to stake a claim."

Jeanie flinched. Where *was* Frank?

Templeton jammed one of his mitts toward Jeanie, offering a handshake. She stepped backward while still offering her hand in return.

He clasped her hand inside both of his. They were remarkably soft for a man ferreting out a home on the prairie. He held the

handclasp and their gaze. Jeanie looked away glimpsing their joined hands. She cleared her throat and wormed her hand out of his.

She wished there had been a manual pertaining to the etiquette of meeting on the prairie. Etiquette *should* have traveled anywhere one went, but she could feel, standing there embarrassed in so many ways, how unreliable everything she had learned about life would be in that setting. Jeanie ran the freed hand over her bonnet, straightening it then smoothing the front of her pond-mucked skirt.

Templeton shifted his weight, and drew Jeanie's attention back. "I advised your Frank to jump a claim. To take up in the Henderson's place. That family never proved up and rather than you starting from scratch, I figured you might as well start from something. Besides, I miss having a direct neighbor. Darlington Township might have well over a hundred homesteads settled, but it's really the few closest to you, the ones you form cooperatives with, that matter."

Jeanie swallowed hard. She eyed his canteen and had to hold her hand back to keep from rudely snatching it right off his body. "Well, I'm not keen on jumping a claim, Mr. Templeton. I'll have to consult my own inclination before we put pen to paper on that."

She bit the inside of her mouth, regretting she'd lost her manners, her mind. "I'm sorry. My manners. It's a pleasure to meet you. This is my daughter Katherine."

Katherine smiled. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Templeton shook her hand then folded his arms across his chest.

"You, Katherine, are the picture of your father. Prettier though, of course, with your mother's darker coloring, I see."

Katherine reddened, peered upward from under her bonnet then darted away, leaping and spinning.

"Stay close!" Jeanie said.

"So what bit you with good old prairie fever?" Templeton asked.

Jeanie looked around as though something drew her attention. She hadn't considered what her response to that query would be. Her heart burst at the chest wall. Templeton's quiet patience, his steadfast gaze heightened Jeanie's discomfort.

"Circumstances."

"I know all about circumstances," Howard said.

"I don't mean to be ill-mannered, but..." Jeanie eyed the canteen Templeton had slung across his body.

He rubbed his chin then slid the strap over his head. "Frank sent me with some water, figured you'd need it, that I'd be the best person to find you."

"Water, thank you, my yes." Jeanie licked her lips.

He handed it to Jeanie. Her hands shook, nearly dropping it as she unclasped the catch. She would give her daughter the first drink.

"Katherine! Water!"

Katherine skipped toward them. She took the canteen, shoulders hunched, eyes wide as they had been on Christmas morning.

"Watch, don't dribble." Jeanie held her hands up under the canteen. She forced her gaze away, knowing she must look crazed, staring at Katherine's throat swallowing, barely able to wait her turn.

Katherine stopped drinking and sighed, eyes closed, content. She held the canteen to her mother.

Jeanie threw her head back, water drenching her insides. The liquid engorged every cell of her shriveled body. She took it from her lips and offered it back to Katherine.

"You finish up," Jeanie said, cupping Katherine's chin, lifting it to get a good look into her now glistening eyes.

"There's got to be plenty back at the wagon now, right, Mr. Templeton?" Jeanie said.

He didn't reply. He squatted down, squinting at Jeanie's bare feet.

“You’re not going another inch with naked feet and phalanges. What a great word, I haven’t had use for since, well, never mind that,” Templeton said.

Katherine’s eyes widened.

“I’ll thank you to find your manners, Mr. Templeton,” Jeanie said stepping back.

“Don’t be harebrained, Mrs. Arthur. Allow me to wrap your feet so they’re protected should you step on a rattler, or into a gopher hole. I’ll be as doctorly as possible.” Templeton stood and unbuttoned his shirt.

Jeanie waved her hands back and forth. “No, now, no, now please don’t do...” But before she could arrange her words to match her thoughts, Templeton ripped his shirt into strips and helped Jeanie to the ground. He turned her left foot back and forth. Jeanie’s eyes flew wide open, her mouth gaping.

Katherine sighed with her entire body. “Sure am glad we stumbled upon Mr. Templeton. My mama wasn’t trying to be disagreeable. She’s just proper is all.”

“Katherine Margaret Arthur.” Jeanie snatched for her daughter’s arm, but she leapt away, humming, cart-wheeling. Jeanie’s face flamed.

Templeton’s deep laugh shook his whole body. He began to wrap her foot. “These feet look to have been damaged by more than a simple run across the land.”

Jeanie bit the inside of her cheek. She wouldn’t confide her utter stupidity to a stranger.

“Let me guess,” Templeton said. “I’d say you had a little trouble parting with your city shoes? Perhaps? The way your feet are lacerated below the ankles, as though stiff shoes meant for decoration more than work had their way with you?”

“Stay close Katherine!” Jeanie shouted to avoid admitting that in fact, she’d kept three pairs of delicate, pretty shoes and only traded one for a pair of black clodhoppers. The clodhoppers that

bounced out of the back of the wagon just beyond their stop in Yankton.

Jeanie flinched as Templeton bandaged the other foot.

“Did I hurt you?”

Jeanie covered her mouth then recovered her poise. “No. Let’s finish this production and get moving.” It was then Jeanie realized she was shoeless—and not temporarily speaking. She wouldn’t be able to sausage her swollen feet into the pretty shoes and she had nothing utilitarian in reserve. Frank was a miracle worker with wood, but wooden shoes? That wasn’t an option.

Templeton whistled. “Nice you have such a grand family to cheer you while you make your home on the prairie. Times like this I wish I had the same. No wife, no children to speak of.”

“You’re *unmarried?*” Jeanie smoldered at the thought that not only a strange man handled her feet, her naked toes, but one who was batching-it! A scandal in the eyes of many. Thankfully, there were no prying eyes to add this outrage to her hobbled reputation.

Templeton snickered repeatedly as he moved with a doctor’s detachment. The feel of hands so gently, though firmly, caring for her, nearly put Jeanie in a trance. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had done such a thing for her.

“There. Good as new. Until we get you to the wagon, anyway. I assume you have another pair of boots there.”

“Well, I uh, I...” She told herself to find her composure, that she was one step away from a reputation as an adventuress or an imbecile if she didn’t put forth the picture of a respectable woman.

“Had a shoe mishap?”

“It could be characterized that way.” Jeanie wanted to die. How stupid could she have been?

She turned one foot back and forth and then the other before having no choice but to look at Templeton and thank him for his assistance. Blood seeped through bandages and she nodded knowing he had been right. She’d have been wrought with infection and open to the bone if he hadn’t wrapped her.

“Thank you Mr. Templeton. I thank you sincerely.” Jeanie put her hand over her heart.

He pulled Jeanie to her feet.

“My pleasure.” Templeton gave another shallow bow then tied an extra shred of his white shirt to a small cobwebby bush to use as a landmark, to show Jeanie and Katherine how the prairie land could work against even the most knowledgeable pioneer.

Jeanie knew she’d been careless that day, but she certainly didn’t need white ties all over the prairie to keep her from getting lost again. She’d be more vigilant next time.

*Move on, Jeanie. No time for moping.* Jeanie drew back and lifted her skirts. She stepped onto the fresh bandages then snapped her foot back in pain. She held her breath and pressed forward ignoring the pain.

“It’s *this* way,” Templeton said. “You’re turned around.”

Jeanie halted. Her face warmed further than the heat and anxiety had already flushed it. “I suppose I’ve made some dire errors today, Mr. Templeton.”

“I suppose we all do at first, Mrs. Arthur.”

Jeanie puckered her lips in front of unspoken embarrassment. When was the last time she’d faced a string of endless failures? Never. She wondered if that could be possible, or if she was just making such a fact up in her mind.

“This way, my sweet!” Jeanie pushed her shoulders back, tugged her skirts against her legs and took off in the correct direction, Katherine beside her with Templeton just behind, gently guiding them back to Jeanie’s family, back to the life she didn’t think she could actually live with, but would not survive without.

## Chapter 3

1905

Des Moines, Iowa

In the three days since Yale had stumbled drunk into Katherine and Aleksey’s home, the couple had made the decision that their Edwardian home, even with four children, allowed more than enough space to care for both the cancer-stricken Jeanie and Yale, who was slow. There wasn’t much to do in the way of transporting her sister and mother’s belongings into Katherine’s home for other than two trunks and some hanging clothes; they did not own a single item that needed to be moved.

It wasn’t Katherine’s decision to have them come. She resisted with all her might but Aleksey, had for the first time in their marriage, asserted the type of overbearing male dominance so many men reveled in regularly. He told Katherine she had no choice but to let Jeanie and Yale live with them. It was Katherine’s duty to nurse her mother back to life or onward to death and it was her job to comfort and house her struggling sister.

Katherine stood in their doorway and watched Aleksey help Jeanie, one awkward step after another, up the front steps and across the porch. Katherine may not have remembered any warmth