

The days seemed to grow longer and longer for us here in the West. My friends and I have tried hard to build up this ranch of ours; fear and death nearly dragged us back home to the Southeast states where we grew up. The values of our fathers and mothers are what ripped us apart as the Civil War began.

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I was able to avoid joining the Confederate army. I love everyone and physical aspects don't change that – black, white, male, female. I only judge from what I see in the heart. My friends felt the same, so we stole away to the Union to start out fresh for ourselves as the distance between our values and southern values grew larger. The future for us was bright.

As the war raged on, my close friend James felt driven to join the Union army. When he went to the recruiting office, his thick Southern accent caused much mayhem and my other friend had to bail him from the jail only hours later. The Radical Republicans of the time strongly opposed the South and anyone who came from it. James Bass looks like an average white man that could be found in the North – average height, green eyes, very short blond hair, lightly tanned skin, lean body, broad shoulders – but the Southern drawl that reflects the gentleman in his heart made the recruiters believe he was a spy or worse, a Democrat.

After we cleared up the matter, my three friends and I sat around in our little home outside a small city in New York and planned for our new future out West.

“That’s crazy talk!” My female friend, Angelica Lake, exclaimed. She was a tiny woman, only five feet and five inches. Being an independent, hard working, fun loving woman was one of the reasons for our necessary fleeing of the South. Her father was about to marry her to a rich plantation owner, who was known for being brutal to his one hundred and fifty slaves. Her family didn't like her life style of being “free” and wanted her tied down.

I scoffed. “Would you rather live back home and be married to a terrible man, or here where we are discriminated against for having Southern drawls?”

Angelica stayed silent, looking at her bare toes beneath her. Her long brown hair hung in front of her face.

Scott Chasez, Angelica’s true love (I say this because they always had a fancy for each other since we were children) slid down behind her and stretched his legs out on either side of her, wrapping his arms around her curvy waist. “We could be horse ranchers. I have an uncle who makes a living raising and selling horses out in Kentucky.”

“Being in Kentucky would still tie us up with these weird radicals, North and South,” James said, tapping his fingers on his knee. “I wish I could have punched them men who accused me of being a spy.”

“Calm down James,” Angelica soothed. She rested her hand on his shoulder. “It is over and done with. You will never see them men again.” She snuggled back into Scott.

“I know...” James sighed. “So where do we head out to Levi?”

They all turned their heads to me. While James had sat in jail as Scott was out at the bank to pull out the bail money, I had sat down and began writing a letter to the one family member who shared my morals and would do anything to help me and my friends – my brother that is ten years my elder.

“Well, while you were sitting in your little cell with Angelica reading you her newly written poems,” I pointed at James, who frowned, “I was writing my brother about our situation – in my own unique way, of course.”

“You whined and complained, using confusing words that he doesn't understand, then you begged him for the rest of the five pages to give us money?” Scott asked.

I frowned. Angelica giggled, bending at the waste slightly. James wasn't paying attention – probably still pondering the events from earlier that day.

“No I wasn't Scott. I asked him if I could take two stallions and two mares out to the Southwest Dakota Territories. Thanks to the Homestead Act, signed by the great President Lincoln, we can each file for 160 acres of land out there. That totals up to 640 acres of land.”

“Do you think your brother would do it?” Angelica asked yearningly, leaning forward. “Could I, as a woman, own land?”

“Even freed slaves can do it. We just have to work the land and stay for five years.”

“When should your brother respond?” Scott pulled Angelica back against him, resting his chin on her shoulder. “The sooner, the better.”

“I hope I can hear from him in a week or so. Can we all manage?” I look at every one.

James nodded his head and stood, leaving the room. Angelica nodded her head quickly and grinned at Scott. Scott smiled and held onto Angelica tighter, whispering something into her ear that made her smile and nod her head more.

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The letter arrived one week and three days later, promising the two mares and two stallions. My brother explained he saw Scott's uncle visiting his sister

and brother-in-law. We had to promise to meet up with him for instructions on how to care and raise these horses.

I read the letter off to my friends. Angelica was ecstatic. She hugged Scott tightly around the neck and he spun her around.

James looked over the letter. “Oh man, we can get away from all this darn political mess and just be free!” He hugged me tightly. “Dude, us four out West. This will be amazing.”

“I know. I really can't wait for this new place. All we have to get is a covered wagon and supplies, and then off we go!”

“We have to build a home, don't we?” Scott asked. The mood quickly dissipated. “This will take a lot of planning and money.”

Angelica let go of Scott's neck. “I heard that these settlers built a ranch out in this area Levi talked about, but they left it and moved to California for the Gold Rush.”

“When we go to apply for this land, we can ask them about this. We might have our luck cut out for us.” I smiled. “We should get ready. The sooner, the better.”

The four of us quickly got ourselves together and went to apply for our land out West. Turned out that Angelica was right. A piece of land – exactly 640 acres – was left out in the Southeast area of the Dakota Territories. Since they didn't meet the full five years of living on the land to claim it, it was open to be taken. We quickly applied for the land and were accepted.

Three days later, we were on a train and heading south to see my brother and Scott's uncle. As I dealt with getting the horses, Scott went to his uncle to

explain our plan. He was willing to help, but Scott's parents opposed our plan. They relayed the news to Angelica's parents, who were still trying to arrange her marriage with the plantation owner.

As James and I went into town to buy our supplies for the trek, Angelica's parents called her to their home. She agreed, believing that they wanted to wish us luck on our journey. When she arrived, her parents, and the plantation owner her parents strongly favored to become their new son-in-law, were there.

A large argument quickly consumed the household. Angelica refused to stay and marry the terrible man. Her parents refused to give her any money and would disown her if she did not marry him. Angelica fled the home and back to James's house where the four of us were staying. She found Scott at the piano in the library and explained the situation to him through tears and anger.

To prove a point to their families, they went into town and eloped. Nor James and I knew of the matter until that evening when we arrived back at the home with all of the supplies. We were happy, for they would have either married then or later down the road. But what troubled us were the repercussions of the matter. What if Scott's parents became angry and convinced his uncle to stop helping us? My brother didn't like Scott and Angelica as a couple, and maybe when he learns of their elopement he will take the horses back.

We did our best to keep the news under wraps until the day we left. But in a Southern town, word spread fast of Scott and Angelica's marriage. When we were all loaded onto the covered wagon with the four horses hitched up, all ready to pull the wagon, Scott's father and Angelica's father arrived. They demanded for my brother to take the horses back and wanted Scott and Angelica to get an annulment.

No such thing happened. Angelica started the horses up to begin our long journey. Scott's uncle and my brother waved us a fare well as the other two men

stood furious. We hurried our way to Independence, Missouri and headed off on the Oregon Trail. The trek for us took about four months, and luck truly was on our side. The horses weren't injured and none of us died.

When we arrived, it was just as I dreamed; high grassy mountains, a fenced acreage with a house built on the hill, a barn built at the bottom of the hill, and a small thick forest behind the house and barn. God truly blessed us with this land. We had everything we needed. We just had to start mating the horses and clean up the land, since it had grown a little wild since the previous owners.

“This land is so beautiful!” Angelica sighed. “I'm proud to raise a baby here.”

“BABY?” Us three men exclaimed.

Scott goes pale.

“Yeah. What's wrong?” Angelica turned to us.

“When did we plan on having kids? You never wanted a family and neither did I.” Scott said, staring at Angelica's abdomen.

“I know that, but it isn't like we planned NOT to be physical. I didn't like it when I found out either, but we are gonna have a baby and I would rather be out here where it can learn to be itself.” Angelica rested a hand on her abdomen. “If I am right, I am about three months along already.”

James stumbled back and hit the wagon. “Great, our plans are ruined. Why did you have to do that stuff on the trip?”

“I ca-can't help it. People in lo-love do th-th-this stuff...” Scott stuttered, continuing to stare at Angelica's abdomen. “I'm going to be a father...”

I cleared my throat. “Well, while you ponder about this Scott, we need to get settled into this place. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can sleep in a home instead of under the stars. It gets boring after a while.” I climbed into the wagon and began to pull out our clothing trunks.

James joined me, mumbling something incoherent under his breath. His facial expression told me he was angry over the idea of a tiny baby joining our group. I wasn't shocked at this. I knew it would have happened very quickly, what with how long Angelica and Scott were holding back on their physical urges. I have some physical feelings of my own, but I was raised under the Bible, and the Bible says that men don't do those things with other men.

I peaked out of the wagon and saw Scott and Angelica sitting in the grass. His hand was on her stomach and she was smiling. They were going to be all right. This kid won't affect our plans.

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A month later, I was proven wrong. The kid was affecting our plans; Angelica became overcome by a sickness that kept her bed ridden and very weak. She could barely eat or drink. Every day Scott stayed by her side. He helped her drink and helped her eat. Sometimes he wouldn't eat himself. Even when sick, Angelica was more worried about him and how the ranch was doing. He tried to make her worry more about the baby and getting well, but I knew she knew that there was nothing anyone could do to help her.

As Scott stayed inside and dealt with his wife, James and I were busy outside dealing with the horses. One of the mares was pregnant and we had a man who wanted to buy our older stallion for ninety dollars. He was planning on heading to California and needed the horse to pull his wagon. I promised him if

he would come back when he planned to leave, which was about three days later, we would have an answer for him.

That evening, James and I sat on the outside porch. Angelica seemed to have a sudden spark of energy and wanted to be outside. Scott was in the front yard with her snuggled into his chest. They were so happy for each other. I could see them being great parents to their first-born.

“We need to figure out if selling the horse is a good idea,” James said in the middle of a long silence.

“I know. We sell the horse; we have money to buy us food and other supplies while we wait for the foal to be born. But at the same time, we have the younger male to impregnate the two females and we are taking a risk. If he dies, we have no stallions and have to buy one. We need to save our money.” I looked over at James.

“But if we don't, we have two males and a better chance at having more foals born. But we are so short on money, what with Angelica being so ill from the child, that we would starve.”

“I could get a job in the town. I can take the stallion in every day. The town is about five miles away, but they always are selling goods to traveling Oregon Trailers so there are jobs available. You would stay here and work with the horses.”

“I can't do it on my own, you know that. Scott is too caught up with Angelica. God, she needs a doctor bad.” James covered his face with his hands.

“I know... I know. I'm trying to throw ideas out. Should we talk to Scott and Angelica?”



“Angelica has enough on her mind and Scott is so emotionally compromised, his input wouldn't do us any good.”

I sat there silently, staring off into the mountains. The sky was a deep purple, the sun having set beyond the horizon only a half an hour before. The stars were bright and the moon was full. It was the most peaceful night, yet the most stressful.

“We should sell. It is our only chance. If one of us can't get a job, then we need to sell the stallion and hope God is looking over us.”

James sighs. “I hope you are right Levi. You were the one who got us out here in the first place, you can't fail us now.”

“You agreed to this as well James. It isn't just my fault that we are having issues. We all had input.”

“You already sent off the letter to your brother before we all talked about moving West. We die out here, you are to blame.”

“James, how can you say that?” I stood up and stared down at him. “No one is to blame. We are going to have issues here and there because that is just what happens. If we just had everythin' easy, our lives wouldn't be fun or nothin'.” My Southern accent came out of me then. The faster I speak, the thicker it becomes.

“I don't see Angelica's becoming pregnant very 'just what happens' Levi.” James stood up and put his face into mine. “If we sell the horse and we fail, Scott and Angelica will be looking for someone to blame. I will tell them it was your idea.”

“And if we don't, I'll let them blame you when we fail.”

“You just said we are goin' to sell them.”

“You agreed to it!”

“No I didn't. I just said I hope you are right.”

“Do we sell or do we not sell? Choose James because from your point of view, I'm going to get blamed for everything anyways. So choose! Sell or keep?”

James stares at my face for a few moments. I could see his face going red from the anger boiling in his blood. He always was a hot-tempered man. Whenever something didn't go his way, or someone made him mad, he punched things or yelled. He easily got on my nerves, but he was my closest friend. He always agreed with me on my issues and I was always there for him whenever he was hurt. When James got angry, he couldn't think clearly. I seemed to be the only one who knew how to calm him down just right so he could solve the problem.

I place my hand on his shoulder. “Take a deep breath James. Okay? Let us just sleep on this.” I rubbed my fingers between his shoulder blades and watched as he let out a deep breath and his face went back to its light tan shade.

“I'm not going to blame you Levi. You only do what is best for us.”

“And so do you, Scott, and Angelica. We are all in this together. But right now, we need to deal with this alone. Scott and Angelica need to deal with their baby.”

James nodded his head. “I need sleep. You need sleep. Fresh start tomorrow? This day has been hell.”

“Yes. Sleep is good.” I called out to Scott and Angelica, telling them we should get inside and to bed. It was late. James and Scott help Angelica into the house and I fixed up her bed. As Scott went to get her water and James headed to the bedroom him and I shared, Angelica pulled me close and whispered something to me.

“Can you keep a secret Levi?” She looked desperate.

“You know I can.” I smiled. I didn't like seeing her in so much agony.

“I'm dying.”

I snorted. “No you aren't. Your baby is just making you weak. I did the same thing to my mother.”

“No, my mother and her mother suffered the same things. My grandmother nearly died when she gave birth to my mother, but died when she gave birth to my uncle. My mother died when she gave birth to me. I'm going to die when I give birth to this child.”

I stare at her eyes. “Is that why... you didn't want children?”

“I don't want to leave Scott. But I'm going to, and I want you to help take care of him and our baby. Along with James of course.”

“Angelica, don't say things like that. You aren't going to die! If you think it, you will. Think about living, of being with Scott and your baby.” A single tear fell from my eye. “Think about the love you feel that I can't.”

“You'll be loved Levi.” She wiped my tear away. “If I do die—”

I frown, shaking my head quickly.

Angelica holds my head in place with her hands. “If I do, promise me you will stay out here on the ranch and raise the baby. Take care of Scott for me.”

“Angie...”

“Promise me!” Her voice rises slightly. She was begging me from deep in her heart.

I sighed. “I promise.” I sit up, wiping my face off. “You won't die. Not if I can help it anyways.”

“Okay, so here is the water. Fresh well water.” Scott walked in and came over to the bed. “You two okay?”

Angelica nodded. I could see the pain in her eye as she looked at Scott, but he didn't notice. It was a good thing too.

“Go to bed you two. Sleep tight.” I walked from the room and down the hall to my room. James was sound asleep already. I stripped down to my undergarments and slid under the sheets, burying my face in the pillow.

Never had I dreaded the rising sun so much.

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James and I agreed to sell the older stallion to the man when he arrived a few days later. He explained to Scott why we did it, and he simply agreed. I didn't blame him – I wouldn't want to handle financial matters when my loved one was stricken to bed rest.

As the months went on, the mare gave birth to a colt. We praised God for blessing us with a male. All we needed then was to have one of the mares have a filly and we would have another generation of horses to breed and we could sell one of the mares.

We had heard of storms out in the West were brutal, but we didn't expect them to be so harsh that they would rip trees from the grounds, roots and all, and animals would fly off the ground in the fierce winds. We receive a couple of thunderstorms and slight flooding, but not enough that we were trying to move the horses to safer grounds.

In Angelica's eighth month of pregnancy, on a windy evening, clouds began to form over the mountains. James and I did our usual evening routines of getting the horses rounded up and into the barn. One the mares seemed to reflect the symptoms of being pregnant, so James and I made sure she was nice and comfortable.

“I hope she has a filly. I really do,” James commented as we locked up the barn.

“Me too. And I hope those clouds disappear.” I was staring out at the mountains. They were thick, black clouds that seemed to be coming closer. I crossed my fingers in hope they wouldn't bring anything terrible.

“LEVI! JAMES!” Scott screamed as he ran out of the house. “HELP!”

“What is it?” James yelled, having quickly been put into a state of panic like me. He broke into a sprint up the hill. I followed close behind him.

“ANGELICA IS IN LABOR!” He continued to scream. His eyes were wild and he wouldn't stop jumping up and down. “SHE ISN'T DUE YET!”

“Calm down Scott!” I rubbed his shoulder when I caught up to him. “James, calm him down as I get to Angelica.” As I run up the hill, I look out at the mountains. The clouds were even closer than a couple of seconds ago.

I got inside the house and heard a scream. I ran to Angelica's bedroom, finding her lying on the bed, her legs spread out, and her hands on her abdomen. She was biting her lower lip to keep from screaming again.

“How close are the pains? I've seen my mother give birth to babies before so I know something about it.”

“Close. Levi... help me—” Her back arches as she screamed again.

I saw a flash of light outside the window and loud rolls of thunder vibrated in my ears. “Oh no. Please, not tonight!”

“Levi, it's starting to rain!” James came running in. “I think – oh my god, blood.” He covered his eyes and leaned against the wall.

“Deal with the horses then! I will deal with her.” I pulled up my sleeves and ran to grab sheets.

James ran out of the room and out the front door. Scott paced the living room as I went to prepare Angelica. I really didn't see myself ever giving birth to a child, but I had no choice.

The storm seemed to last forever. There was a flash of light in the window almost every second and the thunder was as loud as Angelica's screams. I didn't really have to tell her to do anything, she was pushing and screaming and breathing like any other woman in labor. I was there to catch the little one.

Scott came bursting into the room in the middle of one of Angelica's pushes. "It is flooding. The water is rising up the hill fast and I don't know what happened to James!"

Thoughts flooded my mind. I pictured James drowning in the floodwaters and the horses going down with him. I could also see James getting the horses to high grounds and bursting himself through the front door heroically.

Another one of Angelica's screams and a flash of lightning knocked me back to reality. "I see the head!" I yelled. I couldn't really see it, but I felt a big bump and something slimy.

"The head?" Scott said softly.

"Hold your wife's hand. One more push Angelica!"

Scott went to Angelica and sat next to her, holding her hand. She let out one last scream as a lightning bolt hit the ground outside the window. Scott and I screamed too.

It became silent and dark as I pulled the baby free. I heard tiny little cries, which became the proof we all needed that the child was alive. A flash of lightning hit and I was able to see its body.

"It's a girl! And she is very small but alive." I began to clean her up. I didn't hear anymore thunder, but the lightning kept going. I heard the wind howling and the rain as it hit the water just down the hill. I prayed to God then, asking for James to be alive and for Angelica to live.

One of my pleas was answered.

James came stumbling in with a lantern in hand. I turned to face him.

“Our stallion drowned. The mares and the colt are alive though.” He said. He walked over and held the lantern over the baby girl that was now wrapped up in a warm sheet. “What is it?”

“A baby girl.” I smiled up at him.

“How is the mom?” James held the lantern up, illuminating Scott whose face was buried in his wife's chest. His soft cries were heard. Angelica's eyes were closed and her hand was rested on Scott's head.

She wasn't moving.

“Oh no.” James gasped, covering his mouth with his hand. “Is she...?”

“She kissed me good bye.” Scott lifted his head up and stared at us. “She said she was leaving and she would see us again.” He sniffled and choked a sob.

“Hold your child Scott.” I stood up and carried the baby girl to Scott.

Scott held out his arms and took his daughter into his arms. James held up the lantern to show her face. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing evenly, her tiny fingertips poking out from under the sheet.

“So tiny,” Scott cooed, placing his finger on her baby hands. “She looks like her mommy.”

“God works in mysterious ways,” James said.

I nodded my head in agreement.



“Can I be alone with her and my wife guys?” Scott looked up at us and pleaded with his eyes.

“Sure.” I said. James set the lantern on the table by the bed and we left the room.

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The next day, I was able to see the damage outside for myself. Trees were torn up and the barn was mostly intact. The two mares and the colt were in the fields eating grass. The stallion wasn't anywhere to be found.

James walked up and stood next to me as the sun shown down on the damp grass and wrecked landscape.

“We're lucky we survived,” James said.

“I'm glad your okay.” I looked at James. “I thought you drowned.”

“Nope... only one of us left last night.” He stared off into the mountains.

I look down at the grass beneath my feet. “Angelica told me she was dying a couple months ago.”

“What?” James looked at me.

“She didn't want me to say anything, but I had to promise to take care of the baby and you guys while keeping this ranch together. She wanted the baby raised out here.”

James placed his hand on my shoulder.

“I don't see it happening. We lost the stallion last night, Scott is an emotional wreck, and our future lies in the sex of that one mare's baby.” I rubbed my eyes. “I can't do this. We should go back to the South.”

“Our lives are here now.” James slid his arm around my shoulder, pulling me against him. “Angelica had a talk to me too, about a month ago.”

I looked at him questioningly. “What about?”

“She told me to stop being a, well... she told me to stop being an ass to you and start expressing my true feelings. I didn't get what she meant until last night.” James looked at my face.

I stared back at him. “I won't get it until you tell me.”

He leaned forward and slightly kissed my lips. He pulled back slowly and stared at my eyes.

A small grin started to form across my face. “She told me I would be loved the way I want to be loved. I didn't think it would be you,” I mumbled.

“Well, I was raised to know that loving the same sex like I do you is a sin. Every time I felt a feeling for you, I just was angry and took it out on mostly you.” He chuckled a bit. “I guess me being a pain was me showing how much I care.”

I snorted. “Angelica was a very unique individual. You didn't take out your anger on me that much.” A tear fell down my face. “I didn't want to accept her dying, but now she is dead and I still don't believe her.” I lowered my head to hide my sobs.

James pulled me against him and held my face to his chest. I cried into him, holding his waist with my hands. I guess deep down I was attracted to

James, but I was so absorbed in everything else going on there were few times I actually thought about being with someone like Scott and Angelica were. I held onto James tighter, feeling strongly protective of the one chance I have at real love.

After what seemed like forever to me, I pulled away from James, wiping off my face. “Let us go inside. We need to help Scott.”

James nodded. “We build our relationship more tonight?”

“Yeah.” I smiled and pulled James along by his hand to the house.

As Scott's daughter, named Angie after her mother, napped away in the bassinet an elderly woman in town gave to us a few months ago, Scott, James, and I went out to the forest to bury Angelica. We wrapped her in a green sheet – her favorite color. Scott held her body as James and I dug a deep hole.

“I don't want to let you go baby.” Scott mumbled, looking at his dead wife's sheet-covered face. “Please come back.”

“Scott, she never left.” I said.

He looked at me. “What?”

“Well, yeah you can't talk to her or see her again, but you can feel her in here.” I stopped digging and patted my heart. “She will always be there and in your daughter. She looks like her for a good reason, I'm sure.”

Scott kept staring at Angelica's body as James and I continue digging. Just as we are about to stop, James and I hit something solid. We looked at each other funny and got onto our knees, using our hands to brush the dirt away.

A large gold rock reflects the sunlight into our eyes and we blinked.

“Gold?” James and I said together.

Scott looks down into the hole. “Oh my god!”

“We're saved,” I mumbled. I lifted the rock up. I had to use the strength I had left in me to lift the gold up and out of the hole.

We all stood there and stared at it for a while.

“We can get more stallions,” James said.

“We can get things for the baby,” Scott whispered.

“We have a fresh start,” I stated. I looked up at Scott. “It's time to let her go now, Scott.”

Scott looks at Angelica's body one last time before lowering her down into James's arms. He gently laid her down on the ground in the hole and slowly climbs out.

We stared down at her, said a couple of things to her, and then Scott grabbed the shovel and began to cover her body up – his way of finally letting her go. James held onto my hand as I watched her body disappear. Once I couldn't see her anymore, I grabbed a shovel and helped Scott cover her up. James went to find a rock to use as a gravestone. He finds a large, heart-shaped rock in the stream near her grave. Once we finished burying her, we helped James carry it over and place it at the head of her grave. We said a quick prayer and left her to rest in peace.

Scott carries the gold in front of James and I while we hold each other's dirty hands. We had a new life ahead of us, which involved three men raising a baby girl in the middle of grassy hills with horses.

Angie will turn out great. We've got a long road ahead of us.