

GEORGIANA'S HIGH-SOCIETY UPBRINGING
IS NO MATCH FOR A WILD WEST ROMANCE

the Kissing Tree

A NOVEL

PRUDENCE BICE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WIDOWER'S WIFE

the
Kissing
tree



 PRUDENCE BICE

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Coming Home

THE stagecoach slowed, turned the corner, and began descending the last low, rolling hill just as the mountains were beginning to cradle the summer sun. The town was awash in the sun's glowing warmth when Miss Georgiana McLaughlin caught her first, long-awaited glimpse. She felt that warmth now envelope her whole body as she recalled the happy memories she had left behind in the dry Colorado air five years ago, memories which now swirled around in her pretty head and turned up the corners of her perfect, heart-shaped lips. The closer the stage drew to town, the fuller her smile became, until finally her face was alight with a look of sheer joy.

She had been away so very long. Georgiana had expected the town to look different. But though she could see a few new additions to the familiar buildings that lined the old boardwalk, the place still looked like it held the same homey quality and feel you could only get from a small town—a town where everyone knows each other intimately, whether you want them to or not. Nonetheless, their knowing is a small price to pay for the acute sense of belonging.

Georgiana had been only thirteen years old when her mother had uprooted the family and moved them to live with her aunt in New York. Aunt Cecelia's house never held any warmth whatsoever, nor did it foster any sense of attachment.

Despite her distress at their move, Georgiana had never been angry with her mother. She understood her mother's need to escape the memories and constant reminders of the love she'd lost. Georgiana's father had been her mother's whole world, and though she possessed a genuine love for her

children, she could not bring herself to get past her grief in order to see the hope and promises the future still offered.

Georgiana and her brothers harbored their own heartache concerning their father's death, in addition to missing their home and grandparents. Nevertheless, they had borne the incivility and abuse from Aunt Cecelia for their mother's sake. Georgiana had witnessed enough of her mother's tears during that first year after their father was taken to realize the move might be her mother's only hope of finding peace.

However, that which had bruised Georgiana's heart most of all was the loss of her two closest friends. She hadn't been able to say good-bye when at the last minute their traveling plans were altered. But because at the time Georgiana thought they were only vacationing with their aunt for a month, she hadn't brooded long at not bidding her friends a fond farewell. It was later, when their mother sat all three of them down and told them they would not be returning to Crystal Creek but would instead live with their aunt permanently that her heart had felt the sickening shock of it all.

At first, she questioned whether she had heard her mother's words correctly. Why couldn't she see what a terrible mistake it would be for them to continue at their aunt's home? There was nothing for them there ... no admiration or favorable sentiment, and certainly no love. The ostentatious house was an empty shell. Staying would feel like they were being sentenced for some reprehensible crime and imprisoned in a dark, cold place that would slowly eat away their souls until they were as empty as the house itself.

For days Georgiana had cried and pled relentlessly to be allowed to return. Grandad and Nana needed her, and it wasn't *fair* to leave them alone. But alas, even the incessant begging from William and Aden, Georgiana's brothers, could not change their mother's mind. She was resolute in her decision. Besides her mother's need to be away from the memories haunting her, Aunt Cecelia had convinced their mother that she could offer them so much more if they stayed in New York. Georgiana and her brothers would attend the best schools and have many more opportunities than they would ever have living on a poorly managed and shabbily outfitted cattle ranch out west. This, Aunt Cecelia had proclaimed in front of Georgiana and her brothers, taking no thought or care as to their tender feelings concerning the matter.

Such harsh and unfounded insults had chafed sorely at Georgiana's pride in her grandparents' livelihood and thus fueled her anger. She had scarcely been able to hide the dismay caused by her aunt's unjustifiable statements. Impertinent and caustic words in defense of her grandparents peppered her young tongue and fought to be set free. They were barely bridled. Georgiana's restraint was only maintained because she hoped she could change her mother's mind if she did not aggravate the situation further. She would yet attempt to make her mother see the disadvantages of such an arrangement.

Finally, after days and weeks of pleading, Georgiana had given up. Despairingly, she accepted her fate. She would one day return, she'd promised herself. She would find a way back to the place where her heart belonged.

The first year passed slowly. Her aunt was never overly generous, but her pride dictated she see her sister's children properly educated, outfitted, and introduced into society. The school they attended was definitely larger and more sophisticated than the one-room schoolhouse back in Crystal Creek, and so were the egos of the spoiled and overprivileged children who attended there. Georgiana chose to keep to herself, often fondly remembering bygone days when she was never lacking for the comfortable companionship of either of her two dearest friends.

When her fourteenth birthday arrived, she had been greatly relieved to quit her aunt's home and move into the Harriet Wilmington's School for Proper Young Ladies as was expected. The school became a haven, a place to be herself and to be free from her aunt's constant nagging and belittling. She'd enjoyed her three years under the security and refined tutelage of Ms. Wilmington's well-regarded institution. The normal length of attendance was two years, but Georgiana had been gloriously offered a position to stay on an extra term. A tutor was needed to attend to some of the more challenged students. She had eagerly accepted. It was during that year, having more free time to herself, she had discovered her love and talent for painting.

Georgiana's fingers twitched as she gazed once more at the beautiful sunset now layering strands of yellow and gold along the rooftops, reflecting a warmth that made the town seem even more inviting. Would that she could stop time this very moment so she could take out her easel

and capture this day of coming home on canvas. For surely, this town was the only place that had ever felt like home.

A sudden thought caused a tear to escape and gently trail down her soft cheek. She had not forgotten the reason she had been allowed to return to this place. The warm and loving visage of her Nana McLaughlin passed before her mind—soft gray hair wound loosely into a bun at the back of her neck and a faraway look in her warm, dove-gray eyes as she retold tale after tale of her life back in Ireland. Georgiana, even after these many years, could still remember the sweet, pleasant sound of her grandmother's voice and the music in her laughter.

Taking a deep breath, Georgiana sighed sorrowfully. Her grandmother was gone now. Georgiana had always thought she and her family would return. She had hoped beyond measure even for a short visit. But year after year, they had remained, and now she would never see her dear grandmother alive again on this earth.

Nana, Georgiana thought, choking back the emotion that threatened to overwhelm her, *I am sorry, so very sorry I didn't come home in time.* Pulling a handkerchief from a small, delicately beaded handbag, she dabbed at her wet cheeks.

When her grandfather had written her mother asking if Georgiana could come and live with him at the ranch until he could find more permanent help, her aunt had been furious, ordering her mother to send a note of refusal immediately. Georgiana had been seeing a young man quite seriously for some time, and though she had already decided she could not commit her heart to him as yet, her aunt was pushing for a speedy engagement.

Mr. Dawson Alexander was in line to inherit a great fortune and was indeed a most suitable choice in her aunt's eyes. Georgiana had to admit Dawson was a good man, and she liked him very much. Not only was he considerate and benevolent toward others, he bore no semblance to the other haughty, spoiled aristocrats who shared the selfsame elevated status. He was but one year older than she was, and they had many things in common. In the short time she had known him, she had come to care for not only him, but also the rest of his family. Their generosity and loving nature bestowed so freely upon her attested to the reason Dawson was such a gallant and amicable man.

Much to her dismay and frustration, Georgiana always had a feeling lingering in the depths of her heart and mind that kept her from loving him fully. He was most dear to her, being such the man he was, but she invariably held back. Whatever was causing her to forestall any real commitment to a formal relationship with him stemmed from this feeling ... this terribly *inconvenient* feeling hidden deep within her.

Georgiana had endeavored to discover and absolve that which troubled her heart and gave her cause to postpone Dawson's repeated attempts at courting her, but she had failed. The only thing she knew for sure was it somehow connected to the pain and loss she had suffered in her tender childhood years. So often she had longed for the home she had once known, for her grandparents she missed so deeply, for the friendships she had been torn from. She had never, in five years, truly become accustomed to living in New York. And though she had learned and experienced many wonderful things, a feeling of contentment and belonging had always eluded her. By returning to Colorado, the only place she'd ever really considered home, she hoped she would finally make peace with all she had lost and free her heart so she could marry Dawson.

After she had overheard her aunt's blatant and insistent demands concerning the matter of her returning, Georgiana had gone to her mother privately and pled her own cause. This time her mother did not deny her. Sensing her deep unrest, her mother knew Georgiana owned an intense emotional need to return to Crystal Creek, quite possibly as strong a need to return as her mother had to escape so many years before. Georgiana also suspected her mother harbored profound guilt for tearing her children away from their grandparents and friends. So, to Georgiana's delight and satisfaction, her mother had given her explicit permission to return and give aid to her grandfather.

Oh, her aunt had ranted and raved and threatened to send them all away. How could Georgiana, after living in the marrow of high society, be subjected to such deplorable living conditions as a ranch house in Colorado with a bunch of uncouth, uncivilized men no less? It was highly improper. And what of poor Mr. Alexander? Was he expected to just wait for her to return?

In the end, her mother had won, insisting it was only a visit and would not be permanent. Besides, her mother pointed out, it was her family's

responsibility, as well as Christian duty, to come to her father-in-law's assistance during his time of mourning and need. What was the purpose of teaching responsibility and good breeding if, at the first test of character, Georgiana was not encouraged to take the higher road?

Bravo for Mother, Georgiana thought. She had thrown all of Aunt Cecelia's haughtiness and pomposity back in her face, and the argument had ended. Besides, her mother knew—though she would never let on to Aunt Cecelia—that it would be far from torturous for Georgiana to return to Colorado.

It had taken five years—five long years—but here she was ... *home...* at last.

Finally, the stage pulled to a stop, and Georgiana nervously clutched her valise and handbag and stepped from the coach. Looking one by one into the faces of the few strangers that loitered about the stage depot, her heart at once leapt for joy the moment she caught sight of her grandfather. Forgetting all her well-groomed manners taught by Ms. Wilmington, she dropped her things and ran heedlessly up the wooden steps toward him, throwing herself into his open arms. Both tears of joy at seeing him again and of sadness over the deep loss she felt for losing her grandmother ran unrestrained down her cheeks.

“Grandad ... Grandad,” she managed in between her frenzy of emotions, “I missed you so!” She pulled herself back to look into his weathered yet wonderfully familiar face.

“Georgiana, me darlin’ girl,” he said, smiling and brushing an aged hand across his wrinkled cheeks to banish his own tears of joy. The sound of his voice brought with it a rush of memories both bitter and sweet. Still, her heart was lightened. “Well then, stand ye back,” he continued, “and let me be gettin’ a good look at ye, now.” But his eyes never left her face. “Aye, ’tis a splendid sight ye are, and my how ye be grown! Were it not fer that golden hair of yar mother's and yar grandmother's eyes, I might've never recognized me wee girl, grown to be a woman.” Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her. “Best ye be moppin’ up some of those tears, now. We canna be havin’ you wash us both right outta town with ’em.” He chuckled, and it made her smile and warmed her heart. She hugged him again before stepping back and dutifully drying her eyes.

When she was finished, Georgiana took a deep breath and looked around her. It was almost as if she had never left. Across the street was Whitaker's Mercantile. Through the window she could see a woman rhythmically sweeping a broom back and forth. She fancied it must be Mrs. Whitaker, cleaning up the store before closing time. A couple of old gentlemen sat out front at a feeble-looking table in a couple of mismatched chairs playing a game of checkers. It was a familiar sight.

Next to the mercantile sat the barbershop. The barber, old Mr.... she couldn't recall his name ... was outside spit-shining his windows before closing shop, just like he'd always done. She had speculated many times why a man, who had no hair whatsoever, would want to spend his days cutting and shaving the heads and faces of those who had plenty.

Mrs. Perkins's dress shop was next. There were a couple of dresses hanging in the windows assuredly meant to display the latest fashions. She would never think of telling Mrs. Perkins that the dresses on display were actually quite outdated from what was now being touted as fashionable in New York. Of course, New York was always one of the first to follow the latest styles coming from Paris. She herself was wearing a tailored traveling suit, which consisted of a pink gored skirt, white ruffled blouse, and a short, pink bolero jacket with perfectly puffed sleeves. Its design was acclaimed to be the epitome of chic among the upper-class socialites, especially when doing a bit of traveling.

Her observations were interrupted when a bout of raucous laughter came bellowing up the street. She didn't have to look to know where it came from. The saloon was obviously still a flourishing business.

Taking in a deep breath, Georgiana let it out slowly as she took another glance up and then back down the boardwalk. She wanted to see everything at once, but it was getting late. It wouldn't be long before all the businesses were closed up for the night, with the exception of the saloon, of course.

“Oh, Grandad.” She turned back to him and hugged her arms around her middle. “It feels so good to be home.”

Thrusting her arms out, Georgiana spun herself around a couple of times in a moment of pure exhilaration, once again ignoring the assiduous and exacting lessons on how a proper young woman was expected to act in the public eye.

On her second time around, she caught a glimpse of a tall man standing in the road watching her. Startled that she had an attending audience, Georgiana lost her balance and stumbled. She let out a small scream as she started to fall backward off the steps. A look of astonishment was plastered on her grandfather's face, and he tried to grasp her outstretched hand in an attempt to keep her from falling. Almost instantly the look was replaced by a grin and a hearty laugh as Georgiana felt herself being caught from behind by a pair of long, sturdy arms.

"Whoa there, missy," she heard a deep and inherently masculine voice say. "That there is not a proper place to be dancin' and prancin' about." Georgiana gasped. She looked up into the unmistakable yet grown-up face of Ridge Carson. He smiled and continued as if he hadn't a clue who she was. "Though, if you're needin' a lesson or two, I might be willin' to give it a go with ya, but definitely somewhere..." He paused, unabashedly winked at her, and pronounced, "More private."

Georgiana fought hard to keep the heat of a blush from her face. This was definitely not the scene she had pictured were she to happen upon her old acquaintance Ridge Carson. In fact, on the off chance he still lived in Crystal Creek, she had played out in her mind an entirely different version of their first meeting. She knew how she would act and what she would say. And of course, they would both be standing a very respectable distance apart.

To her great dismay, he was not only close ... she was in his arms! His strong and disturbingly comfortable arms! That fact alone was making her aware, and admittedly a little startled, that Ridge Carson somehow had even more of an effect on her now than he'd had so long ago. Since all of her well-planned and scripted words had vanished from her head the moment she had looked into his face, Georgiana continued to silently gaze up at him.

Ridge! Her mind reeled. *It's really you!* Her eyes were drawn to his mouth, and she remembered the last time she had seen him five years ago, a look of shock engraved on his face as she stole a kiss and fled. Now here he was rescuing her from a most humiliating circumstance, and all she could think about was that kiss. *What would Ms. Wilmington say if she saw me now?* Georgiana pondered, even as she continued staring dumbfounded at his lips.

Suddenly realizing how quiet it was, and that he obviously was waiting for her to respond, Georgiana cleared her throat and pulled her attention away from his mouth, only to be captured by his heavenly eyes and the familiar mirth they held. Her heart markedly skipped a beat. She fondly recalled how often she had witnessed that look when he had teased her unrelentingly as a young girl. Again she was struck dumb as a swarm of memories flew through her head.

Without warning, a muffled sound erupted from deep within him, shaking his frame and jolting her back into the present. He was laughing at her, she realized. Not only did she now have to fight harder to keep the blush, which threatened to reveal her embarrassment, at bay, but she was also struggling to keep her temper subdued.

“Pardon me, sir,” she began, sounding as flustered as she felt, though choosing to address him formally. “Thank you for coming to my rescue, but if you would kindly ... please ... put me down. I...” *Calm down*, she told herself. *Speak fluently and with confidence*. The confidence part was difficult because he was still holding her close, and everywhere her body touched his, she felt a heightened tingling sensation. She needed to be free from this sudden rush of confusing emotions.

“Sir, I must insist for propriety's sake, you release me this minute!” she managed to request, pleased her voice finally contained the proper tone and quality expected of a woman with measurable social breeding.

When Ridge made no immediate move to grant her request, she looked over to her grandfather for assistance. Her grandfather had finally stopped laughing, and she begged with her eyes for him to intercede on her behalf.

“Ridge.” Her grandfather descended the stairs and stepped forward, taking her free hand and urging Ridge to set her down. He released her slowly, lowering her feet to the ground. “Ye be knowin’ me granddaughter, Georgiana, do ye not? Used ta live at the ranch with me and me wife ... her kin too. Left ’bout five years past and moved east to New York.” Georgiana saw a puzzled look cross Ridge's handsome face. Did he really not know who she was?

“Hmm,” he answered casually, bringing his hand to his chin while rubbing it thoughtfully. “Think I might recall ya havin’ some family livin’ with you back a spell, Angus.” He then was quiet for a moment as he looked from Georgiana to her grandfather, still rubbing his chin.

“Remember a couple of young'uns ... boys, I think. Must've been your grandsons. Were a bit younger than I was, so we never did get on much together.” He continued to look thoughtfully as if he was trying hard to remember who she was. Then dropping his hand from his chin and shaking his head, he added, “Ain't sure I remember any girls.”

Georgiana didn't know why exactly, but instantly she was angry. Although proper decorum dictated she keep the infuriated and affronted look from her face, she could not withhold the caustic tone that slipped from her tongue.

“Well, you might not remember me, *Mr. Ridge Carson*,” she spat the words, “but I surely remember you! Quite the troublemaker you were, always getting the schoolmaster in an uproar. You made it most miserable for the rest of us as *I* recall.”

She wasn't being quite truthful, but he had hurt her feelings by forgetting her so easily. He hadn't really been a troublemaker, mostly just a rascal and a tease. The other children, including her, thoroughly enjoyed the way he kept the schoolmaster hopping with his mischief and tomfoolery. Georgiana hadn't forgotten either, how he had teased her rather exclusively at times and remembered too just how well she had enjoyed it. Ridge had been her friend ... a good friend. Could he really have forgotten her so easily?

“Hmm.” He stood back, and his eyes traveled from the tip of her head down to her toes and back up again. “Maybe I remember a girl after all,” he continued. “Seems every school has one,” he remarked candidly, and Georgiana could feel her face becoming hot again. Still eyeing her, he walked around her one full circle, coming to stop directly before her. When his gaze at last came to rest upon her face, he added, “Some even have two!”

“And what, may I ask, are you implying with that remark, Mr. Carson?” she countered sarcastically. Her face was really red now. Not from embarrassment but from trying to control her temper.

“Ain't implyin' nothin', *Miss McLaughlin*.” He toned his voice to mimic her sarcasm, which did nothing to soften her anger. “Just tellin' it how it was.” Now he began walking side to side, looking her up and down again. His face appeared as though he was trying to recall some memory. Suddenly he stopped and faced her once more.

“Ah, yes ... it's comin' back ta me now. How could I forget such a sassy young thing?” He leaned forward to look deeper into her eyes. Georgiana's heart sped up. Even though she was livid with him, his nearness affected her so. “Yes ... yes,” he went on, leaning even further forward, his lips only inches from hers. She prayed he had no idea how hard she was fighting to keep from closing the gap. “I'm thinkin' she even had the same pert little nose and stormy-colored eyes,” he said slowly and then finally stood back up straight. Abruptly, Georgiana's hand came up to cover her nose but only briefly. “I believe,” he continued while rubbing an imaginary sore spot on his behind, “that she might've even been the cause of a sound lickin' I got when I played a joke once on Schoolmaster Robinson. Took me quite by surprise her bein' a tattletale an' all. Would've never pegged her for one.”

Georgiana remembered what he was referring to, and after a moment of surprise that he had known it was her who had gotten him into trouble, her anger abated and a feeling of shame welled up to replace it.

It really hadn't been her fault. She would have never purposely tattled on Ridge. The schoolmaster had tricked her into answering him during his interrogation of her. She had been so nervous and the schoolmaster so cross. When she realized she had let on to who was responsible, she had begun to cry. Schoolmaster Robinson assured her no one would be the wiser about who had “spilled the beans.” This only made her cry harder, causing him to become agitated. He then dismissed her to go home, and she had gladly obliged.

Ridge hadn't acted angry with her then, so she assumed the schoolmaster had kept his word. Had he really known all along it was she who had betrayed him?

Georgiana looked over at him speculatively. He appeared to be trying hard to maintain an angry and irritable persona, but the corner of his mouth kept twitching as if it was determined to break into a half grin. Was he teasing her just now? She had been able to read him almost like a book before she'd left. With so many empty years between them now, she was no longer sure.

Continuing to withhold any response to his accusation, Georgiana took the time to make a lingering observation of him as he had made of her only moments before. *My goodness, he has grown!* she thought. No longer was he the cute, freckle-faced, rascal of a boy she remembered running away

from that day so long ago. He was a full-grown man, tall and ruggedly handsome, with a sculpted face and a square jaw that boasted a slight cleft in his chin. No doubt he had been cleanly shaven that morning, but now his face showed signs of manhood. His eyes ... mmm ... were still the same warm honey color, but his hair, a deep russet brown, was neatly trimmed. She remembered that he had an unruly touse of curls as a boy and smiled to herself.

Finally, her eyes traveled to his lips. *Those lips...* thick and expressive, accentuated his grin crooked. He had indeed failed to keep it hidden, making it all the more tempting. Georgiana's chest rose and fell with a satisfied breath. Her eyes traveled lastly over his arms and torso. No doubt the muscles beneath his shirt were strong and firm, a mass of strength born of hard work and labor. She could only imagine what a sight he would be to look upon. Her cheeks colored at the thought of seeing him without a shirt. It was most improper for her to be envisioning such things.

Ridge cleared his throat, and Georgiana realized she still was staring at his chest. She was tempted to turn her head to the side to hide her embarrassment, but instead she looked him directly in the eyes, lifting her chin ever so slightly.

"Perhaps you are right about me, Mr. Carson." She noticed how all at once his face fell. He *had* been teasing and for some sentimental reason it pleased her to know he hadn't outgrown his playful manner. "I apologize for insulting you as well as for causing you undo pain in your youth." Quickly turning away from his disappointed look, Georgiana addressed her grandfather, who had been observing their exchange with an amused grin on his face. "I am feeling quite fatigued from my long journey, Grandad. Might we head for home?"

"Aye, me girl, 'tis late and best we be headin' that way now," he answered and then gave her a sympathetic look. "Well then, how 'bout ye go an' wait in the wagon while I be fetchin' yar trunk."

Georgiana nodded and turned back to Ridge once more before walking away.

"Again, I must thank you, Mr. Carson, for rescuing me from a most precarious and possibly dire circumstance. Further, I apologize for any trouble or delay I might have caused you." She nodded her head and added, "Good day to you."

Turning away from him, she gathered her belongings and walked toward her grandfather's wagon in a stately manner, with poise and grace. She had to at least try to somewhat repair the damage to her genteel image. It was a bit more difficult managing to maintain her poised perfection while climbing up into the wagon seat without anyone's help. She hadn't ridden in a wagon in five years. Her hand slipped, and she almost tumbled to the ground before she caught herself. She glanced back to see if anyone had been watching. Her grandfather and Ridge appeared to be deep in conversation while the stagecoach driver unbound the ropes that had held her trunk secure.

Georgiana sat down on the seat, relieved she hadn't been seen. Straightening her back, she sat up tall and looked directly ahead as she waited. Even when she heard her trunk being loaded into the rear of the wagon and afterward grandfather thanking Ridge, she did not glance behind her. A minute later, Grandad seated himself next to her and headed in the direction of home.

At first they rode in silence, her grandfather sensing she was still upset. It wasn't long, though, before he began to whistle. Right away, she felt her mood lighten and found herself smiling as she recognized some of the old Irish tunes.

Her grandfather had taught her how to whistle when she was only four years old. She recalled how delighted and proud he had been at her catching on so fast. With that thought in mind, Georgiana joined him as he started on another tune. The rest of the trip home was spent whistling one song after another. By the time they pulled up to the house, her lips were sore.

Her grandfather smiled at her genuinely as he came around to help her down from the wagon. "'Tis good to be havin' ye home again, darlin'."

"It's good to be home, Grandad," she said, taking his offered hand.

After helping her down, he put his arm around her, and she leaned her head on his shoulder as they walked toward the house. Someone had kept the fire going, so even from the outside, the house appeared warm and inviting.

Immediately upon entering the parlor, a rush of feelings nearly overcame Georgiana, and she stepped away from her grandfather. Her eyes went to the Irish lace curtains that adorned the windows. They then moved to the mantle over the fireplace. There, upon heavily starched, handmade

doilies, were scattered photographs, along with mementos and figurines her grandmother had brought over from the Old Country. Homemade quilts, some she supposed she may have put a childish stitch or two in herself, were draped over the couch and the worn, comfortable-looking parlor chairs.

Home, she thought. I am truly home.

Georgiana walked over to one of the chairs, the one her grandmother had always occupied when the family would gather in the parlor on cold evenings to talk and play together while warming themselves by a fire in the great stone hearth. Absentmindedly, she ran her hand back and forth over the Irish rose pattern of the quilt and greedily breathed in the memories, looking around the room.

In a corner sat a small table upon which lay her father's old chess set. The pieces were posed as if someone was still in the middle of a game and had merely stood up and walked away briefly. The only sign that a significant amount of time had passed was the thick layer of dust that had settled on the marble figurines and board. Her father had been teaching her to play before he had been killed. She wondered if the game had been sitting that way since he died. They had lived in the house nearly a year after they had lost him. She suspected her mother would have insisted it not be touched. Grandad and Nana must have decided to leave it that way after they'd left.

Sighing, she walked over to the mantle and picked up a family photograph that had been taken a year before her father's death. They all looked so happy. She ran her finger along the faces in the glass. She remembered that day when the traveling photographer had come to town. Her mother had been overjoyed and insistent about needing a family photo done. Her father hadn't shared her mother's sentiment. Yet he had willingly dressed in his Sunday best and drove them into town. Drawing her finger back over her father's face, she chuckled softly. She recalled the argument he had gotten in with the photographer. Father wanted his arm around their mother's shoulder for the photograph, but the photographer insisted everyone's hands be neatly folded in their lap. They were told they had to remain very still while the photograph was being taken or it wouldn't turn out. Three times Father had moved and put his arm around Mother before the exposure was finished, ruining the picture each time. Finally, the

frustrated little man had given up and taken the picture the way Father wanted. Georgiana was glad. The photograph was evidence of how much her father had adored her mother. She could only hope the man she married would adore her half as much.

Georgiana lovingly placed the old photograph back on the mantle and turned to gaze contentedly about the room once more. *Home*, she thought again. She couldn't think it enough. Though the furniture was perhaps old and worn, the decorations out-dated and unfashionable, the room emitted a feeling of welcoming, of belonging. It was as if while standing there she was being wrapped in a soft, loving embrace.

Everything was so different from the parlor in her aunt's home in New York, with its brocaded draperies, mohair settee, and Queen Ann chairs, stuffed hard and uncomfortable with horse hair. It was fashionable, to be sure ... fashionable and *sterile* !

Georgiana sighed deeply once again. It had taken so long for her to return, but finally here she stood. Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms around herself and breathed slowly in and out, allowing the feeling of contentment to wash over her in waves.

Grandfather cleared his throat softly, breaking her from her reverie.

"Are ye wantin' a bite to eat before ya turn in?" he asked thoughtfully. She was too tired to eat and too full of both memories and regrets, so she shook her head no, her eyes still closed. "Would ya like me to bring yar trunk in fer ya then?" he added as he walked to stand beside her.

"Don't trouble yourself, Grandad. I'll make do for tonight," she answered wearily, opening her eyes and leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you for picking me up from town." She brought her hand in front of her mouth to hide a yawn. "It was a long trip, and I fear I'm quite fatigued," she added, slightly embarrassed.

"Awk! Don't ye worry yar pretty little head, now. A good night's sleep and plenty of this blessed Colorado air will have ye as right as rain in no time at all." His eyes were alight as he looked at her.

She suspected he was right. Some sleep and a little time and her heart was sure to settle. "Good night then, Grandad." She gave him another kiss.

"Good night, Georgie," he answered, "and sweet dreams ye be havin'. I'll expect nothin' less." He grinned and winked before she turned and went to her room.

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