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MEGAN CHANCE

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
THE GENTLEMAN CALLER AND *THE WAY HOME*

A SEASON IN EDEN



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— part 1

*There's not a joy the world can give
like that it takes away.*

—LORD BYRON

1

I used to love this land.

It's been nearly four years since I first looked at these sagebrush-covered hills through the dream-filled eyes of the man I loved. I was sixteen then, newly married. Too young to see the pain in these acres, too young to know the tears other women had cried over this place. I'm not sure I would have believed it if I'd been told.

Now I know that what they say about this valley is true: This land is selfish and unforgiving. It takes your dreams and your hopes.

I know it's true, because that's what happened to me.

The day it happened, I'd smelled the sharp, astringent sage and the sun-baked promise of a sky as blue as my husband's eyes. I'd heard the cherry trees rustling in the wind. The morning this land took my heart, I'd still believed in it.

Its promises haunt me now. I had wanted so much. Prosperity, yes, but more than that. Security, home, the dreams women have of children swinging

on porch railings and running through the orchards, of growing old to watch grandchildren playing among the branches of the old oak in the yard—a tree planted and abandoned by someone who had lived here long before. I saw my whole life platted here, in ridges and valleys of a land so empty we could ride the entire perimeter of our claim without once seeing evidence of another living soul.

When I first came here, I saw promise glinting in the windows Eli had brought all the way from The Dalles—seven days each way—driving the wagon slow so not a single pane was broken, just because he said he wanted to see me in the house with sunshine in my hair. I spent endless hours sewing gingham curtains for them, my best tiny stitches and straight, square hems. Those windows became the empty frames for pictures I saw in my head, expectations I had that one day red-checked curtains would border a land green with realized dreams.

I wonder how it is that Eli still sees the future. I wonder how he walks the orchard every day, staring at the trees that froze during the killing winter, replanting them one by one, finding faith in new green leaves. I wonder how it is that he can talk about digging the irrigation ditch deeper, how he can see a time when it will stretch like a thick silver snake all over these acres. He sees the future in forty-dollar words, railroad brochures promising apples as big as fists and cherries the size of plums. A golden land stretching as far as his eyes can see. *Yakima*. To him, simply the word has magic.

That first spring day after the terrible winter, he

told me a story about ancient Indian paintings on rocks up near Selah Gap. Those drawings were older than time, according to the Yakimas, drawn by people not of their tribe, not the Nez Perce. "You see, Lora?" Eli had said. "I'm not the first man to see promise in these hills."

Then, I understood what he meant. I felt it, too. Now, all I know is that those people aren't here anymore, and I wonder why they left, if it was the women who made them go. I wonder if those ancient Indian women had stared out at the dry and endless acres, their fists jammed in their pockets, their eyes focused on places far away, feeling the hopelessness of this place hard in their hearts.

Perhaps it's only women who understand that. I've never met a man who could—not one who ever said so, anyway. Certainly Eli has never admitted it. I suppose it's because men need a promise to live on. For me, those promises have withered away. All that remains is the struggle against details, the never-ending battle with dust and desert. When I look out at the land, I see my garden, belts of green planted between the orchard rows, cabbages, peas, and potatoes wilting in the heat, fighting for every drop of water. My girlish hopes have come down to one simple wish: having enough food for the winter. "I am not a dreamer," my mama used to say. "There's too much to do for that."

I am not a dreamer, either. Not anymore.

It was a day in mid-June—hot in the way that makes men shake their heads and say, "The summer's set to

be a scorcher this year," as if it would be different from any other summer—when I first realized what it was Eli meant to do, and how it would change things.

I'd been out in the garden picking strawberries, ferreting through the straw mulch and the broad leaves for ones the birds had missed, the small, bright red ones starting to dry and holding their sugar close. The smell reminded me of childhood, and the green scent of growing wheat and hot weather before it really got hot. When I was a child, strawberry season had always meant shortcake for supper. When the first ones came ripe, I would run to tell my mother, and the whole afternoon my sisters and I would be giggly waiting for that first bite of sweet, crumbling biscuit and pink-stained milk.

But that was a memory from a different time, and I didn't like to think of it now. It reminded me too much of the things I'd wanted, the hopes I'd held like treasures inside me, the wish to give that same memory to someone else.

I had the sudden urge to crush those berries between my fingers, but we could not afford to waste them. When my fingers were red with juice and sticky with little hairs and seeds, and the bucket was full, I took them inside to make jam, and in spite of myself, or maybe just from habit, I set some aside and mixed up sweet biscuits and cut sugar from the cone to sprinkle over.

I glanced out the window to see Eli near the line of dead trees. He wouldn't be at the house for some time yet. He'd been staying away nearly until sunset, every day a little longer, and though I felt his absence and

his sadness over it, I waited for those extra minutes, too; I was thankful for them.

Tonight, the jam started its boil just as I heard his footsteps on the porch, so I couldn't talk to him right away—and I'm ashamed to admit I was grateful for it, because just like every other night, I felt his presence as an ache in my head, a strain I couldn't ease.

I kept my back to him as I nodded toward the table and said, "You'd best go ahead and eat."

But he didn't sit, and when I lifted the jam off the stove to pour into the jars I'd set on the old, scarred sideboard near the window, he came up behind me and grabbed the pot full of jam. He could have just taken it from me; instead he wrapped his arms around me so I was trapped between him and the jam, and for just a moment he held me tight enough that I could smell the sweat and dust of him.

"Lora," he whispered into my hair.

I could hardly breathe in the circle of his arms. In the last year, we'd been strangers to each other, and though I told myself it was not how a marriage should be, in a way, it was how I wanted it. I could not explain why even to myself.

When Eli loosened his hold just a little, I twisted away from him, ducking between him and the pan, burning myself trying to escape him.

"Ouch!" I said, sucking my wrist. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I'm sorry," he said. "The next time I want to touch my wife, I'll ask first."

His bitterness hurt. I wished I'd stayed quiet.

He looked at the pot in his hands. "Where do you want it?"

"Over there, by the jars."

It seemed that lately I was hurting him all the time, and I hated myself for it. Still, I was relieved when he left me alone and sat at the table.

He only toyed with his dinner. I poured the jam into the jars and sealed them with hot wax, and I took my time about it, delaying the moment when I would have to sit and eat dinner with my husband. The silence between us was strained. He might as well have said, *We need to talk, Lora*, because I felt that much anxiety waiting for those too-familiar words. I tried to concentrate on the jam, to take pleasure in a task I'd always loved, in the way the sunlight died away against the glass, how the strawberries inside glistened. Whenever I made jam, I felt rich. I almost hated to open the jars in the wintertime because they were so pretty.

But this time Eli's tension filled the room, so I was jittery and distracted, and the strawberry smell and the memories it brought with it seemed to grow bigger and fuller until it was a wall between us. When I was done, I wiped at the jars with the edge of my apron, though there wasn't anything to wipe away, and hoped that maybe he'd finish his dinner and go outside.

When I turned to glance at him, he hadn't eaten more than a bite. He'd poured milk on his shortcake, and sprinkled it with sugar, but the biscuit was growing soggy and gray, and he was staring down at the spoon between his fingers as if it held all the secrets of the world.

Finally, he said, "It's going to be a hot summer."

"It's always hot."

"It'll be hotter this year."

I tried to think of some answer to that. Before I could, he said, "The irrigation ditch is too shallow."

I had not expected those words, and so I wasn't ready for the sudden burst of anger that rose in me, the terrible grief. I looked out the window, at the lines of trees, the dead ones looking burnt and crippled, their branches reaching over that ditch like wicked little hands. *It was deep enough*, I thought bitterly. *Deep enough*. But then I looked out at the green vines and leaves of my garden, and I could almost feel their horrible thirst. I told myself it was all that mattered anymore.

"You'd best dig it deeper, then," I told him. "The garden will need the water before long, and the vegetables will have to get us through the winter, I expect."

Then he said the words I'd been waiting for, the ones I hated. "We have to talk, Lora."

"I don't want to talk." My voice sounded so small I wasn't sure he could hear it. But he had. My Eli . . . in that way, anyway, he was not like other men, not like my father. Eli was black Irish, and that legacy didn't live only in his looks, or in the way he felt connected to the land. Eli liked to talk; he liked to tell stories and to say things that embarrassed me, he was quick with *I love you's*, and he knew how to listen when I had something to say. He understood the feelings inside me the way no one else ever had.

Or at least, once he'd been able to. That under-

standing had faded until now there was only space between us. I had nothing to say to him, nothing I wanted him to say to me. I wanted silence, and if I could not have that, I wanted idle talk. Tonight, I wanted that so badly I could barely look at him.

"Lora, this is about money," he said, and that impatience was in his voice again, that angry frustration. "I was hoping there might be enough of a harvest this year to get by. But it doesn't look like there will be."

"The trees are young yet—"

"Whatever we get won't make a dent in our account at Ben Schiller's. There won't be enough to put in new trees, and we still owe the cabinetmaker, and Prentiss and Field, and . . . too many others." He paused, looking at me, and his voice grew quiet. "There's not enough money, Lora."

He let that sink in. *Not enough money.* He was looking at me as if he expected me to say something, but I had nothing to say; I had no real idea what he meant. Money had always been short, but we'd made ends meet. Eli had always taken care of things. He'd always told me not to worry. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I was talking to Tom Larsen a few days ago. He said they're looking for men on the Wishkah River. I think I should go for a few months. From what he says, I ought to be able to make enough there to get us through until next year."

He sighed at the end, as if he'd been waiting for days to say the words and was relieved now that they were said. He was staring at me with those fine blue eyes that had once lit a fire inside me. There was a question there that made me wonder what it was he

wanted me to say, whether he wanted me to say, *Don't go, please don't go*, or whether he was just hoping to keep his relief from showing if I let him.

And the truth was, I didn't know what I wanted. I couldn't think of a reaction yet. All I could do was say, "The Wishkah? That's so far away."

"It's just for the summer. I'll go into town tomorrow and talk to Ben. I think he'll carry you if he knows I'm good for it when I get back. And John Zimmerman will check in on you from time to time."

"He's busy with his own family."

"He's said he'll look after you, Lora."

That was when I realized Eli wasn't waiting for my agreement. He'd already made up his mind. It didn't really matter what I had to say. "So you mean to go."

"The way I see it, there's no other choice."

He looked down at his bowl and let his spoon fall with a soft plop into the milk. His dark hair fell forward to hide his face, and he felt unfamiliar to me then. I wished I knew what he was thinking, what he wanted, but I couldn't bring myself to ask, and truthfully, I supposed I was afraid to know. Instead, I asked a safe question. "When will you leave?"

The question seemed to startle him, and he looked up. Some emotion I couldn't read clouded his eyes. "I don't know. Soon. There's still plenty to take care of before then."

Eli picked up the spoon again and then let it fall once more, and I saw how soggy his dinner was, how the biscuit had melted to pink mush in his bowl. I reached for it.

"You've waited too long," I said. "Let me get you another one."

He looked at me as if I were a stranger—no, more than a stranger, someone he didn't know and couldn't understand.

"I can't eat it," he said. "How can you?"

My guilt then was overwhelming and terrible. For a moment I could not see or think; I could barely breathe. By the time I was steady enough to answer him, he was gone.

He came to bed that night after the lamp had been out nearly an hour, but I wasn't asleep. I had thought to wait for him, but when I heard his footstep on the stair, I stiffened, closed my eyes, and made my breathing come evenly and deep, as though I were already sound asleep. I heard him come into the room, a feeling more than a sound, he was so quiet. His presence filled the loft, and I felt his soft sigh moving the still-warm air.

I listened to him undress: the thud of his boots, the soft *ssshhhh* as he pulled off his socks, the snapping click of his braces. Metal and fabric dropping to the floor, and him picking them up again in the darkness, laying them neatly over the rickety old chair he kept in the corner just for that purpose. His familiar routine, something I knew about him that no one else knew. I had heard those same things over and over through the years; their constancy was reassuring. I thought of how it would be when he was gone, the silence, only the memory of these familiar sounds, and suddenly I missed him before he was

even gone, suddenly I wanted to reach for him, to touch him. I wanted to make up for hurting him today. But then he climbed into bed beside me, and I felt the sinking of the mattress, heard the creak of the rope frame, smelled his leather and clean-dirt smell, and the desire withered inside me.

I lay there in the darkness, schooling my breathing, and tried to will myself to touch him. In my head, I did touch him. I moved my arm, my hand, stretched out my fingers, but it was only a fancy. Eli had told me once about mummies they'd found in some desert somewhere, and I felt like that now, encased, wrapped in tight rags, stiff as stone beneath.

He shifted a little in bed, his long-underwear-clad leg brushed mine—soft, overwashed cotton, heat—and the sadness over what we'd had and lost came back to me.

I squeezed my eyes shut against it and kept on breathing until it went away, and I felt calm again, myself, and the darkness was only darkness, not a heavy, suffocating blanket. Eli moved beside me, easing closer, testing . . . and I wished my pretend sleeping was real, that I wasn't awake to feel those things, to regret them.

Finally, he eased away again, and after a time I heard his soft snoring. *Next time*, I promised myself. Next time, I would not feel so untouchable. This fear and longing that tightened my stomach would pass, and I would want him again. That was the thing about life; it was always changing, even when you didn't want it to. Surely everyone felt this way once or twice.

Still, as I lay there, staring into the darkness, I knew I was glad that he was going—if only for a little while. I loved Eli, but it would be better when he was gone.

When he came back, I would make up for tonight, and every other night; I would make things better for him.

But deep in my heart I wondered if that was even possible.

I wondered if I could even remember how.