Mountain Town

The days were long but the nights were longer. The days were filled with the usual drudgery- sweeping the floor, fetching the water from the well, looking after the twins, making the trek into town to buy supplies. But the nights were filled only with my thoughts, and they stretched out endlessly. I’d lie in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, listening to the soft breathing of the twins in their crib, and wonder where my husband was.

Three weeks ago I’d said goodbye to him. It was early, you could just see the sky beginning to brighten through the warped glass of the window in the bedroom.

“Are you leaving now?” I whispered, not wanting to disturb the twins.

“Jeb says there’s a herd near Flathead, but we’d better leave soon if we want to get there before those Rocky Mountain bastards. Won’t be more’n a couple weeks.” He said softly, his voice raspy with sleep.

“It’ll take you that long just to get to Flathead!”

“Jeb’s got a horse, it’ll cut the time in half.” I stared at him blankly, disbelieving. The silence stretched until finally he spoke again. “Look, I don’t want to go, Liz, but I don’t know how else we’re going to get through winter.”

I glanced over at the twins, bundled in furs even though it was still autumn, the nights already bitter with the promise of snow. The winters came quickly up here. “Well, I don’t know how I’m going to get through winter without a husband.”

“I’ll be back before November, or else you can marry someone else.” He smiled, grabbed my hand for a moment. “Goodbye, Elizabeth.”

“Be safe, all right?”
Then he piled his things on his back and left.

It was not yet dawn, but I was awake and one of the twins was whimpering so I got up anyway. I walked across the uneven floor to the crib and picked up Laurie. I felt the weight of my daughter in my arms, the satisfying pressure of her small, solid body pressed against me. She squirmed, warm and alive. I stood there, holding her, staring out the window. The night was still thick outside our small cabin, the meadow lit only by moonlight.

The window was expensive, a luxury that we had been able to afford after Henry had a particularly good season. I was pregnant with the twins at the time and Henry thought that seeing the sunlight in the morning might be good for my health. Maybe the warmth and light would counter all the times that we’d been woken up in the night by my pain and a thick, sticky liquid soaking the bed, all the times we’d scrubbed the sheets in silence, returned to our dark quiet bedroom and stared at the ceiling together, unable to find sleep.

In any case, the window worked, or else it was luck or prayers that brought me and the twins through the pregnancy alive. After months of waiting and several hazy hours of pain, the midwife shouting, Henry lingering nervously, I held the twins in my arms and marveled. Henry cried when he held the girls. It seemed like a miracle, two tiny perfect little girls, alive and warm and breathing.

Winter descended quickly in the weeks after the birth, but Henry was home and we had enough wood to keep the cabin warm. In the spring, though, the money ran out and Henry had to go up North. I was alone with the twins for a week or two at a time, tired from being awoken every other hour and sore from chopping the firewood. When he came back, I thought he was back for good but it was a lean year and he had to keep leaving. Only a few years ago Henry
came back from the mountains with enough pelts to last us the whole year. But bison were scarcer these days, and furs weren’t selling for so much anymore.

I wanted him to get a different job, work at the general store with his brother, or else we could leave, go somewhere else. But Henry said that he couldn’t leave the mountains, they were part of him. The sort of thing people up here liked to say. I never understood it.

It wasn’t as if I wasn’t used to him being gone. But he’d never been gone this long, not when he said the trip would only be a week or two. I thought of every exception, every contingency. Maybe he’d underestimated the journey- he hadn’t been to Flathead in a while. Maybe the horse had gotten injured or died. I would lie in the dark at night or stare at the fire in the evening and hope that it was the horse lying dead and broken in the mountains and not my husband.

When dawn finally emerged, I got up and ate some gruel and when the twins woke up I fed it to them too. I changed their diapers and got water from the well and started to heat water for a bath. There was a queasiness in my stomach, had been more or less every day since Henry left. It was worse today and I wondered if I would throw up. I didn’t have time to rest, though. I had to go into town.

I had to bring the twins with me, of course, so I put them in the wagon next to the clothes, nestled in furs to keep warm. I worried about them being outside in the cold but I couldn’t leave them alone in the cabin, alone, with no one besides deer and wolves around for miles. Mary and Laurie looked up at the bushes and trees with wide eyes. They were probably relieved to escape the suffocating walls of the cabin, the walls that more or less trapped us during the long winter months.
I dragged the wagon behind me over the dirt, the wheels turning reluctantly. It was barely a road, narrow and littered with rocks. Trees pressed in on either side, moist with dew, the needles green and sharp. The mountains would take you by surprise, stun you with a harsh beauty just when you would trade the whole damn state for a day in civilization.

The mountains were like that. Everything good about them came with something terrible, and everything terrible came with something beautiful. You couldn’t figure them out. Even the people who’d been born in this town couldn’t predict the storms with much accuracy.

A few months after we were married, Henry took me up one of the mountains. He was worried that I wouldn’t be able to make it all the way up and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to love them as much as he did. We hiked up quickly, our breath short. I’d lived almost my entire life on the frontier and I’d never been this far up a mountain. We stopped in a meadow partway up and ate a packed lunch of bread and cheese. Some elk wandered through the meadow, and we watched them dreamily. I closed my eyes for a moment and felt the sun warm my skin. Suddenly, Henry’s grip on my hand tightened.


There were four of them, sauntering towards the clearing. They spotted a smaller elk, near the edge of the group and surrounded it, snapping at it, trapping it against the cliff. The elk bucked and let loose a terrible high pitched wail. One of the wolves lunged at it and it stumbled, and then it was over for the elk. The wolves tore at it, their muzzles soaked with blood, until the elk stopped screaming or moving and lay still.

Henry thought I might cry but I felt energized. After the wolves left I walked over to the corpse to see for myself the damage they had done. The body of the elk was disfigured, its flesh tattered. Beads of blood clung to the blades of grass around the body.
Henry squeezed my hand and asked if I was all right. I laughed. I’d been raised on the frontier, in the shadow of mountains. Blood wasn’t an unfamiliar sight. Neither was death.

Henry looked at me differently after that. He knew I didn’t love the mountains but I could handle them. I knew what was out there.

Yet I hadn’t been up a mountain since. Maybe I’d just been too busy keeping house and looking after the girls. I thought about that elk a lot, though. I thought about it that night, lying awake wondering what it thought as the other elk fled, leaving it to die.

* * * * *

I’d taken in some mending and washing to make money. It was mostly men out here, and none of them could sew. But I could, and we made just enough to get by. I walked in the cold to deliver the mending and thought of a place where the air doesn’t sting the moment you leave the house.

It almost didn’t matter where, it was the winter I wanted to escape. I yearned for long hot summers, days so humid you didn’t want to move. The summers up here were quick and dry, stunning with beauty but so brief that they barely made an impression.

I knew there were other places, I’d lived in Missouri until I was six, when my father moved the family to Montana to seek his fortune. But I didn’t remember it very well. And now, in this small town surrounded by trees and mountains, it seemed impossible that other places existed. Bitterroot was tiny, a collection of a few stores, a church, a saloon and a lot of men who wanted to strike it rich. It looked pathetic compared to the grand scale of the mountains that stretched over it.
I didn’t understand why people loved the mountains so much up here. They said things like “the glory of God’s creation” or “the majesty of nature”, but they just seemed to me like a fence, looming over our small valley. They were gray, snowy all year round. It was impossible to forget about the mountains because they cast a shadow even in summer, and in winter sometimes the sunlight would barely reach us. Storms could descend quickly, within minutes, and even in the relative shelter of the valley winds could fell a tree, and people who didn’t make it inside in time froze to death. The mountains could kill you in a second, like a fly.

I remember the early days after moving to Montana, wondering why people had settled here at all. It seemed sometimes like the mountains were trying to get rid of the settlers, flush us out like we were a rat infestation. My sister Louise and I hated it, and we complained about it together until the day she left for California.

I remembered the day of my sister’s wedding. I braided Louise’s hair, clumsy because I couldn’t focus. I was more nervous than she was, chattering and losing hairpins and sweating. I finished her hair and handed her the dress, white fabric bought from the general store with his money, nights of sewing in front of the fire together. Louise stepped in it, and I buttoned the dress up her back, my hands shaking slightly. I was scared for her, scared for me.

The tiny church was full, everyone compelled to attend or else disappoint the groom. No one wanted to do that-Jim didn’t take disappointment well. I sat reluctantly in the front row, looking at my father limp down the aisle, clutching Louise’s arm like a cane. I bit down hard on my lip to keep from screaming.

After the wedding, at the party, Jim approached me, his breath sour with booze. He set his hand on my head, stroking my hair.
“We’re family now, Lizzy. Family.” He wore a gun in the holster on his belt.

I nodded slightly, glancing around for an escape. I never liked that nickname. Only my father or Louise ever called me Lizzy.

“I guess so.” I could smell him, the sweat under his suit, the whiskey and the beer. What the party lacked in genuine mirth it made up for with booze.

He gave my hair a tug. “Not a talker like your sister? Why ain’t you sayin’ anything? Someone shut you up? Got a secret?” He glanced at my stomach, significantly. “I been hearing rumors about you and the neighbor boy, wouldn’t surprise me if-”

“Now aren’t you two getting along fine?” Louise put a hand on my back, gently separating the two of us.

She knew I hated him. Mercifully, Jim focused his attention on her. I slid away towards the corner, shame burning my cheeks. I sat with my father, who seemed glum himself.

We watched Louise silently. Her braids had come undone, and her red hair swirled around her face as she danced. She looked happy, even though she hadn’t really wanted to marry him. She hadn’t had much of a choice, though.

I didn’t understand any of it, and the thought of Jim’s hands roaming freely over my sister made me want to take the axe for firewood and lodge it in him. I wanted to protect her but I couldn’t. That night, my father went out to the saloon as usual and if I could have I would have joined him. Instead I did my sewing by candlelight, distracted, accidentally stabbing myself with the needle several times, until I gave up and re-read a book.

She apologized to me later, said Jim wasn’t that bad, really, she was fine and I didn’t need to worry. Louise seemed to have some sort of influence over him, but then, most people
listened to her. When she talked, she looked you straight in the eye and no matter what she said it sounded good.

I didn’t get to see Louise much after that because she was always with him, or, rather, he was always with her. In one private moment she told me it wasn’t so bad, he was always drunk but he didn’t hit her. I still hated him, spent months seething whenever I saw him, laughing noisily outside the saloon or buying some unnecessarily fancy trinket at the general store.

Then one day, Louise announced that they were going to California- Jim wanted to go look for gold. I accepted the news without surprise. I knew he was going to take her away. At least he hadn’t killed her. I still cried the night she left. I felt her absence keenly, the occasional burst of news from her letters not matching the nights we would spend talking or the times we’d braid each others’ hair after the styles in the magazines.

She wrote to me three months after her departure to tell me that Jim had died right after they’d arrived in California, fell off a horse and broke his neck. I felt relieved. Louise would be okay alone, better even.

A year or so after Jim died, she married a rancher, and they’d traveled all up and down the state. She’d even seen the ocean. I was glad to hear of her newfound wealth, but I had a hard time matching the buoyant tone of her letters. I struggled to make my life in Bitterroot seem more exciting and cheerful than mere survival; I’m not sure if I succeeded.

* * * *

I entered the general store, the wagon clattering over the uneven floorboards. Henry’s brother, William, greeted me as I walked in.

“Hi, Liz.”
“Morning, William.”

There was an understanding between us. We knew we were waiting for the same news, the same person. Neither of us had heard anything.

William stepped out to see the twins. “They’re getting big, guess they’re getting enough to eat.”

He peered at them closely. Mary reached out and grabbed his nose.

“Mary! Stop that!” I pushed her hand back. “Sorry, Will. They don’t have any manners.”

“Well, they don’t need ‘em up here.” He chuckled. “What are they, a year?”

“Yeah, just a week ago. October 12th.”

“So, you want your letters? Anything else?”

“Five pounds of flour, dozen eggs, some oats if you have any.” William loaded the items in my wagon, including two candies, for the twins. It was his usual ritual.

I glanced at the newspaper headlines, only three weeks old today. “Can’t believe they’re finding more gold in California. Seems like it should’ve dried up by now.”

“They just keep finding more. I was thinking of heading down myself, if Lewis buys out my share of the store. Lucky it’s a state now, don’t have to worry about speaking Spanish or anything.”

“Henry and I wanted to go see my sister if we ever got the money. I hear it’s real nice down there, warm even this time of year.”

I reached in my pocket, feeling the rough edges of the coins. I pulled a few out and set them on the counter but William waved his hand.
“Don’t worry about it, Liz. I put it on my brother’s credit. I know he’s good for it.” He grinned briefly.

“Thanks, Will.” It was the only store in town, so I suppose he could afford to make gestures like those, but it made me uncomfortable anyway. It was easy to like Will, his effortless charm had made him one of the more popular figures in town. I even looked forward to the times he would visit Henry and I for dinner, or come check in on me and the twins when Henry was away. But I felt like there was something a little showy about his gestures. He might’ve made a good actor, not that there was any theatre to speak of in Bitterroot. It was hard to know what William really thought, if he really liked you or if he was pretending because you were his sister-in-law.

He said goodbye to me and the twins and then we left to go drop off the mending. All the miners and trappers lived in cramped houses in on the far edge of town. Most of them wouldn’t meet my eyes when I handed them their clothes. Worried, maybe, that eye contact with the woman with a missing husband would give them bad luck on their next trip. I could hardly blame them. They couldn’t afford to take chances with bad luck in the mountains.

On the walk back, I stopped at Lucy’s. I was breathing heavily, panting, really, and feeling numb with cold. The twins were uncharacteristically quiet, and I thought a little warmth might be good for all of us.

Lucy answered the door, and I could see the pity in her eyes.

“Elizabeth! Come in, it’s freezing. I’ll make some tea.”

I left the wagon by the door and stepped inside the small cabin, Mary and Laurie in my arms. The cabin looked much like the one Henry and I shared. Hand built, sturdy, dark.
“Thanks. Not even November yet and it’s real cold out there already.”

We sat down at the table. The twins were fidgeting in my arms, wide awake after being taken out of their wagon. I set them down gently in their usual spot on the bed.

“How are you? Is Henry still up North?” Lucy was from Texas originally, and her words spilled out of her mouth in a slow drawl, so different from the quick speech of people who’d been born up here.

I nodded, and I knew she thought he was dead. There was a short pause. Lucy got up to light the stove, taking a couple logs from the pile of wood on the floor. The sight of neatly chopped firewood caused a pang of anxiety. Another thing I hadn’t done yet to prepare for winter.

“Well, John’s going up next week. I guess there’s a big herd up near Flathead?”

“Yeah, that’s what Henry said. Seems like there’s some competition for it, that’s why Henry went up so early.”

Lucy poured two cups of tea. She handed me mine. My fingers curled gratefully around the hot cup. I took a sip- not real tea, like they sold at the general store, but one of those mountain brews. Everyone had their own recipe- sassafras, pine needles, whatever non-poisonous plant that grew around these parts had been thrown into a mug at some point. Lucy’s version was better than most, but still not altogether pleasant.

I heard Mary’s began to fuss, and I walked over to pick her up before she could incite Laurie.

“Could I hold her?” Lucy looked at my daughter with tenderness. Lucy loved my twins. She had three boys, two of them out of the house already, probably sick with worry over them half the time.
“Sure, go ahead.”

Lucy plucked my daughter out of my arms, rocked her gently back and forth.

“They’re adorable, really. If you ever need any help with them just let me know. I always wanted a girl. Boys grow up so damn quick.”

“Is Tom going up North already?” Lucy’s son was only fourteen, but a lot of boys start trapping around that age. There isn’t much else to do around here.

Lucy sighed. “Yeah, his first time. Of course he’s thrilled, they both are. I hate to seem ‘em leave.”

Lucy was one of the few women in town besides me, one of the only people who knew what it was like waiting every day for a knock at the door, a telegram with bad news.

The tea was still hot, the cup almost burning my hands. I set it on the table.

“Did you think it would be like this when you came up here?”

“No.” Lucy sighed. “I didn’t think a place could be so damn cold. Back in Texas, it was warm. Flat, too, not a mountain in sight. And it was grassy, grass went on for miles in every direction. Up here, it’s like God’s trying to punish you for thinkin’ you could live so close to him. Too high up.”

I nodded. But we were tethered to our husbands and children, we could never leave Montana. The curse of the pioneer woman, doomed to follow her husband to whatever godforsaken scrap of Earth he’d try to make a living off of. Of course, my husband might be gone for good. The thought was always with me. I could hardly forget about Henry for a moment, even if I wanted to, especially with all the townsfolk looking at me pityingly.
I finished my tea soon after, and it seemed rude to stay too long. I said goodbye and loaded the twins back in the wagon. Lucy gave me a quick hug, told me to tell her if I needed any help. She was worried about me, alone with the babies. How long, she was wondering, could a woman survive up here without a husband?

I wondered how long I could wait. I didn’t have enough money to go far, so I had to wait at least few weeks. I didn’t think me and the twins would be able to survive the winter alone here. But I couldn’t give up on Henry just yet. I still half expected him to be waiting for me every time I arrived back at the cabin. I opened the door, revealing the empty cabin. I was ready for the rush of disappointment, but it still stung.

I made myself busy, feeding the twins, starting the fire, gathering some water from the well. Finally I ran out of tasks and sat down to read my letters. It was nothing much, mostly dull correspondence, but there was a letter from Louise. I’d written to her about the Henry’s absence, trying not to reveal how desperate I was. She had responded with reassurance. Louise didn’t know that he was okay, being thousands of miles away, but it still made me feel better to read her words. She was the older sister, and she seemed to nearly always be right.

We’d always been close, ever since our father had moved us up here, looking for gold. After Mother died I don’t think he knew what to do but he didn’t want to stay in Missouri. So we moved. It was a long journey, but I don’t remember too much as I was pretty young at the time. Louise always said it was terrible. We were relieved to get to Cooke Creek, Montana, even though it was a village compared to where we lived in Missouri, and ended up not having any gold for my father to mine.
After he didn’t find gold in Cooke Creek, we moved to Virginia City and then Butte and then Silver Bow, and then finally to Bitterroot once it was clear he wasn’t going to be mining much longer. The towns were mostly the same, all small pockets of civilizations surrounded by the uncertain wilderness. To make up for it, it seemed the townspeople had to drink and be loud, announcing their presence to nature. Bitterroot was no different, the saloon packed just about every night, the hoots and laughs and whoops echoing uselessly throughout the valley.

Father settled into life here pretty well, selling supplies to the trappers going up North. He got sicker though, and had trouble breathing. Near the end the alcohol was the only thing that helped him with the pain, and I’d hear him stumble back into our cabin at night, wheezing. Henry lived next door and sometimes he’d walk my dad back from the saloon if he happened to be around.

He didn’t pity me or make a big fuss about it like some of the other people. Both of his parents died when he was young, so he understood. We’d stand outside sometimes, after I’d put Father to bed, and talk.

One night he asked me what I liked to do. I said I liked to read, I wanted to become a teacher if I could- the usual fanciful stuff of dreams, I’d had only a few years of school because of all the moving, and even if I’d been properly trained there wasn’t a school within ten miles of Bitterroot. Henry liked to read himself, not too common in Bitterroot. We’d exchange books and talk about them sometimes. There wasn’t much to read up here. People thought it was a bit odd that the two of us carried on like that, especially since neither of us were married. I knew there were whispers but I didn’t much care, especially after Louise left and I didn’t have anyone to talk to.
Even so, I didn’t think much about getting married until after Father died. It was a few months after Louise left for California, and I was writing letters to let people know. Henry walked in halfway through my letter to Louise, and asked me if I wanted to get married, and said he had some money saved up and he would build us a new house, we could sell this old one and make one just for the two of us. I was surprised—it was always his older brother winking at me or trying to hold my hand in church. But William did that with most every girl in town, Henry was the shy one. So I’d said yes, thinking that he was nice and that I didn’t know what else to do, I couldn’t live in that old house alone. I never thought he’d die before our children learned how to walk.

But maybe he was still alive. I wrote a reply to Louise, asking her if it was a good time for a visit. I wrote another letter to captain at Flathead, asking for news about Henry. I’d give it to Lucy’s husband, and I’d wait for the response before I did anything.

The waiting was excruciating. Every sound outside the cabin made me twitch. Was it Henry, finally arriving home? More likely a raccoon, rustling around in the bushes, or our pig in the pen out back. I shivered through the nights, sleeping little and feeling hazy during the day. I still felt sick often, but the urgency of the tasks lying before me was only growing. The days were growing colder and shorter, and I spent much of the time chopping wood and stocking food and doing all the usual chores and taking care of the twins and doing the mending to make money and walking into town every other day. I was tired a lot. Even so, I was relieved the twins were happy, most of the time. They did wake me up sometimes but they were quieter than they used to be, as if they knew I needed rest. I was relieved they were alive every time I held them, even if I was worried they wouldn’t be able to make it through the winter.
My nausea didn’t get better, my stomach got bigger. I’d suspected for a while, when I hadn’t bled for a few months. But I’d missed bleeding before during the winter. I knew I should be happy, but all I could think of was three children instead of two, and still no husband. I tried to hold onto the hope that Henry was still alive but it seemed less likely with every passing day.

People looked at me funny now that I was pregnant without a husband. It wasn’t too obvious yet but news got around fast. There wasn’t much else to do for entertainment up here besides gossip. Lucy told me there’s a rumor it was William- the people in town would just love that.

It snowed for the first time in mid-November. I watched through the window as flakes streamed down thickly outside. If it snowed too heavily, we’d be stuck here all winter. The next morning, though, was bright and wet, the snow mostly melted. I walked to town, hauling the wagon behind me. The wheels caught in the ruts and squelched through the mud.

I picked up the letters and more food from the General Store. William was still putting things on Henry’s credit, a show of faith that was starting to sadden me.

On my walk home, laden down with more mending, I wondered if I would even be able to make it into town by the time I’d finished it. The wagon wouldn’t roll through more than a few inches of snow.

I killed our pig when I got back, not looking at its eyes as I brought the axe down. I didn’t enjoy it, especially not the dying squeals, but we had to eat, and she would die from the cold at some point anyway. The blood soaked into the soil beneath my feet, and the coppery smell made me feel sick- but everything did lately. I usually waited for Henry to start the arduous process of butchering and pickling, but I didn’t have that option now.
Later, in front of the fire, I looked at my letters. One of them was from Louise. The other was from Flathead. I felt a jolt in my stomach, could instantly hear the blood rushing behind my ears. I tore the envelope open with shaky hands. The letter was from John, Lucy’s husband.

*Elizabeth,*

*I wish I could write with better news. I arrived at Flathead to find your husband in the infirmary, close to death. He was grievously injured, but it is hard to tell exactly what happened as he was delirious by the time I saw him, and his companion Jeb was nowhere to be found. I sat with him for several days, and, although he was babbling mostly, he was occasionally sane, and asked about you. I assured him you and the girls were well, and this answer seemed to give him much peace. He said, many times, how he missed you and the girls, and wanted nothing more than to be with you. I tried to make him comfortable, with laudanum and whiskey, and near the end he seemed to not feel much pain. I’m sorry to tell you about his end like this, but rest assured that he was thinking about you until the very end. I will do my best to discovered the whereabouts of Jeb and the circumstances of Henry’s injuries while I am up here. I wish you the very best.*

*My Deepest Apologies,*

*John*

Finally, the waiting was over, with the answer I’d expected and feared.

  *  *  *  *

It was a few days later, when the whole town had found out, that William came by to talk to me.

  “Hi, Liz.”

“Hello.” William wasn’t the first to visit me. The weather had been unseasonably warm in the past few days, and people were out and about. Once the news had spread, everyone wanted to stop by to say a few kind words. They often brought me gifts, coffee, periodicals, dried fruit. It
was good of them, of course, but at times I could hardly restrain myself from asking everyone to go away. It took effort to restrain my tears during these meetings, and I wasn’t sure how much effort I had left in me.

“Listen, I wanted to thank you for telling me quick as you did, I know it can’t’ve been easy for you to walk back to town that same day. And I wanted to see if you’re all right.”

“I’ve been okay.” I made the mistake of looking at William’s face, which looked so much like Henry’s. I didn’t want to cry, didn’t like crying in front of other people. But I wasn’t sure I could avoid it.

“Liz, I also wanted to ask… I’m worried about you and the girls, and I want to make sure you’ll be provided for.” William was looking at his hands, spread out palms up on his knees. I nodded, not wanting to speak. Everyone was worried about us.

“I think you’ll all be safer if you move closer into town for winter. And with the new baby too… I think you should all move in with me, above the store. It’s warmer, we’d never run out of food.”

I almost laughed. All I could think of is what the town would make of me moving in with my dead husband’s brother mere days after I’d learned of his death. They would assume that I’d been waiting for the news so I could do this. That the baby really was William’s.

“I’d marry you, of course. You and the girls, you’re the only family I have left now that Henry’s gone. I want you all to be safe.”

He wasn’t wrong. The odds of us surviving out here, the twins being as young as they were, me being pregnant and all, they weren’t good. I’d had days, weeks really, to think about our situation.
“I’ll stay with you for winter.” I said finally. William’s unease collapsed into something like relief. “But I can’t stay in Biterroot forever. I don’t want my children to grow up here. There’s nothing here. And if we get married, you have to take us to California soon as the snow melts.”

William looked behind me, out the window. Maybe he hadn’t expected me to agree so soon. No matter. Dancing around what needed to be done wouldn’t bring Henry back to life. Waiting around for a miracle wouldn’t save us from the winter.

He nodded. “I guess… I was plannin’ on going down anyway. And God knows I wouldn’t mind leaving Montana… Never took to these mountains the way Henry did.”

“I’ll come and get you tomorrow, Liz. Better move before the snow gets too thick.” William reached out, grabbed my hand, squeezed it. It had been months since I’d felt the warmth of anyone beside the twins. My hand felt sweaty but I squeezed back.

That night, I sat in a chair by the fire, the mending sitting ignored beside me. I would be leaving this house tomorrow, the house that Henry built. The chairs, the bed, the table, the window- all Henry’s work. I couldn’t tell anymore if the sick feeling in my stomach was the pregnancy or guilt.

*   *   *   *

The first night at William’s I woke up hot and disoriented. William’s rooms were much warmer than our isolated cabin had been, and they were right in the middle of town. His bed was smaller, meant more for one than for two, and I couldn’t help but touch William no matter how I slept. We’d gotten married earlier that day, quickly, the townsfolk so excited they were practically frothing at the mouth, so it wasn’t technically a sin, but the feeling of it kept me awake.
The twins started crying, and I got up quickly to settle them down. William didn’t stir. They were hungry, probably, and I fed them a bit of gruel mashed with the dried apples I gotten from the minister. They were looking healthy, chubby even. Yesterday Laurie’d stood up on the dusty cabin floor and taken a few steps, looking shocked when she discovered her legs could support her. The twins, satiated, soon quieted and returned to sleep. They were good sleepers, like their father, who fell asleep the second his head hit the pillow. They would never meet him.

I suppose William would be the girl’s father. He was good with them, you could tell he loved them. I wasn’t sure why he’d never married and had kids of his own, he loved being around people so much. I wonder if he expected to have children with me. The thought, which I’d ignored before, I now began to pick at.

He wanted a son, probably, that he could teach to hunt and mine. Someone who could carry on the family name. I wonder what Louise would think. Me showing up to California married to my dead husband’s brother. Three children in tow, none of whom were my husband’s. Maybe pregnant with another by then.

I thought of Henry’s joking comment before he left. I was sure he didn’t actually mean for me to marry someone else. I don’t think he ever imagined me and the girls living with his brother. But Henry was dead, and I wasn’t going to kill myself and my children out of loyalty to a dead man. I’d do what I had to. We would survive winter, and we would leave the mountains and Montana behind forever.