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*Call Her*  
**Liberty**

THE KINGDOM SERIES

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*Dedicated to my sister-cousin, Akeisha.  
Your encouragement made me believe this story  
was worth finishing and sharing.  
I love you forever, Granny.*





## CHAPTER ONE

*Belle Mount, 1870*

Excitement bubbled up in Ella, making her too fidgety to pay attention in her history class. Only one hour and five minutes remained before she could leave school and finally unite with what would become her most prized wardrobe piece. *My very own pants*, she thought and the image pulled her lips into a wide smile.

Bent on teaching her the ways of a *proper woman*, her mother, Mary, refused the idea of her wearing or engaging in anything deemed to be masculine. Traditional Belle Mount women were delicate flowers; the most feminine when compared to their neighboring kingdoms. Marriage was an

expectation, and it was customary to follow the female's eighteenth birthday. Her mother followed the traditions and raised Ella to do the same. However, Ella resented the Belle Mount way because that meant no pants, no dirty-donkey racing games, no farming, no fun, and no freedom.

Now sixteen, it wouldn't be long before the pressures of marriage and honoring traditions would become more unbearable. Regardless, she was set on finding her own path and living her own life without the dictations of others. But now wasn't the time to dwell on stupid traditions or her mother's expectations. Nothing would break her spirit as the thought of her new pants returned to mind.

Ella reached over and tapped Peter on the shoulder with the pencil she held between her thumb and index finger.

"Do you think the pants will fit?" asked Ella.

Peter kept his focus on their teacher, who was busy writing on the board. He nodded.

Ella tapped him again.

"What color is it? Do they have pockets like the ones you wear?"



Mr. Bent, their grim-faced form teacher, settled his hollow eyes on her. The coldness of his stare caused fear in his students.

“Miss Thomas?”

She returned his stare with a sweet smile. “Yes, Mr. Bent?”

A gentle nudge from Peter encouraged her to apologize instead of antagonizing the man.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll pay attention.”

Satisfied that his icy stare brought Ella into submission, Mr. Bent returned his attention to the board. Ella held her tongue as she watched the clock painstakingly tick to three o’clock. *Come on*, she chanted, wishing that sheer willpower would hurry the time. Then, a distraction from her inner monologue arrived in the form of her principal, who was being followed by a tall, young fellow. The wooden desks and chairs scratched the worn floorboards as the students stood.

“Good afternoon, Principal Cook,” they said.

The principal nodded. He lowered his right hand, and with it, the students returned to their seats.

“Class, today a new student will be joining you. His name is Eric Charles. Please make him feel welcome.”

An eruption of applause sounded in the classroom as Eric stepped forward. When his eyes rested on Ella, a sparkle shone through. A smile lit his face, and he winked in her direction.

A permanent scowl settled on Ella’s heart-shaped face. *The nerve of this Eric.*

“Peter, did you see that? The new guy winked at me.”

Peter didn’t answer. Instead, he kept his eyes glued to the front of the room.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” asked Ella.

Peter then turned to her with a hearty laugh. Ella swore she saw a look of relief grace his face, but maybe she imagined it. His large, dark brown eyes pierced her smaller hazel ones. The two had been best friends since they met in the second grade. Though he was the only constant male in her life with the exception of her brothers and father, her mother never suggested she marry Peter. However, she already knew the reason—money.





“You don’t like the new guy’s advances? I’m shocked.”

“No, and I don’t like him.”

Peter gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and it was enough to soothe her soul and return her focus to her new pair of pants. *Nothing will break my spirit*, she reminded herself. The rest of the day dragged on until school was finally dismissed. In her haste, she held onto Peter, dragging him with her. His chuckle reached her ears, but she didn’t slow until he placed his hand on her arm. She turned to him, acknowledging his touch.

“Where is your school bag, Ella?”

“It’s on my...Oh. What would I do without you, Peter?”

“Get into even more trouble. Stay here. I’ll grab our bags.”

She admired his confident stride from a distance. Peter’s six-foot stature towered over her five feet four height. Only a few summers ago they were standing eye to eye, but now he was a giant.

*Peter, my protective and gentle giant*, she thought as she admired his beautiful mocha colored skin and farm-strong physique.



The clearing of someone's throat forced Ella to shift her focus.

"Yes?" asked Ella.

"Hello, my name is Eric."

Eric stretched his chalky colored hand to her. A bright smile on his face defined his bone structure. Some of his brown locks fell into his eyes, and he swept them away, revealing gray eyes. *Look at him... he probably thinks he's God's gift.* Ella ignored his hand.

"Lovely, I heard when Principal Cook introduced you," said Ella.

"I would love to take you out sometime, Ella, and show you around."

"Show me around? I'm not new to Belle Mount. I know my way around just fine."

Eric slipped his hands into his pocket, trying to appear poised, but Ella saw through him.

"I'd still like to take you out."

Peter returned to her side and offered Ella her bag.

"Nice meeting you, Eric, but Peter and I have a date."



Ella held onto Peter's hand as she led the way outside the classroom and beyond their school campus.

"Ella, how do you expect to get married when you're harsh with every young man who's interested in you?"

Ella released Peter's hand at the mention of the 'm' word. Her face broke into another scowl.

"I told you that I never want to get married. Never."

"Ella—"

"No. I don't want to hear it."

Peter approached her with wary steps. He covered her hand with his when she didn't side-step his invasion of her personal space.

"I'm sorry. You do know that I support whatever decision you make, Ella?"

She nodded, and her curly hair bounced in time with the rhythmic movement.

"Good. Now stop scowling."

The folds in her forehead smoothed, and the bulging vein in her neck disappeared. She wiggled out of his gentle hold as a wave of thrill and

excitement overcame her. A mischievous smile crossed her full, rosy lips.

“No, no,” said Peter.

His lips stretched into a thin line while his index finger waggled, emphasizing his lack of enthusiasm.

“Ella, I’m not playing. Not today...Ella. I’m serious this time.”

“Okay, *dirty donkey*.”

Ella took off with her long, black hair whipping wildly in the wind. The scent of her vanilla shampoo diffused into the air and reached Peter’s nose. He ran after her, but her speed was unmatched and left him trailing behind. Ella reached Peter’s house first, making Peter the defeated dirty donkey. His mother, Paula, was waiting outside in anticipation of their arrival.

“Hey, Miss Paula,” said Ella between breaths.

“Hello, my dear.” She gazed down the dirt road, her hands shielding her eyes from the brilliant evening rays. “Where is my little dirty donkey?”

Ella turned and watched Peter sprint over to them; his mouth was shaped into an ‘o’. His cheeks



would swell, then quickly deflate as he thirsted for air.

“Hey...Mom,” he said before he dropped to the balls of his feet.

“Hello, dirty donkey,” said Paula.

Ella burst into a fit of giggles. Suddenly, she stopped and turned to Paula.

“Miss Paula, the pants. Please tell me you finished the pants.”

Paula’s eyes expanded. “Pants? What pants?”

“Miss Paula, please, please.”

“I have it in the house. Come. You too, dirty donkey.”

Paula led them through the small wood-framed house. A narrow hallway led to two bedrooms on the right, and a kitchen and bathroom on the left. At the end of the hall was Paula’s sewing room. The door opened, and Ella’s eyes went to the little, brown, cotton pants hanging in the middle of the room. Ella ran to it and held it up to her bottom half.

“My first pair of pants. Miss Paula, it is beautiful. Thank you.”

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Peter snapped his fingers in front of her, breaking her out of her state of awe.

“Ella, remember they are just pants.”

“Yes, but you won’t look as good in them as I will,” said Ella.

Ella hurried them out of the small room and closed the door. In the privacy of Paula’s sewing room, she fiddled with the buttons that lined the back of her dress. With her tongue lolling at the side of her mouth, she tugged and pulled at the pesky buttons.

“Come on, come on,” she said, but her fingers kept slipping. “Oh for the love of—”

A knock came at the door.

“Ella, I found a shirt for you,” said Peter.

She opened the door and pulled him in.

“Could you please unbutton my dress?”

Without waiting for his response, she gathered her hair to the right then turned her back to him.

“Ella, I’ll get Mom.”

“Peter, you can do it. I asked you.”



She heard him exhale before closing the distance between them. His sweaty palms grazed her spine, and he was quick to apologize.

“Ella, I should really get Mom. Wait right here.”

Ella turned and stopped him from making a mad dash to Paula. Ella held his moist hands in hers, keeping his gaze focused on her.

“Peter, I trust you with my life. Now unbutton my dress.”

After taking a moment to steady his hands, he undid the remaining buttons.

She faced him again. “See? Was that hard?”

“Remember the shirt, Ella.” He walked out in a hurry, closing the door behind him.

*Peter, the noble.*

She bit her lip, and then smiled.

Ella’s dress crumpled into a pile on the floor and after kicking it to the side, she reached for her pants and pulled them on. The material was cool and light. She could move freely. Ella shrugged on the shirt and began bending, folding and tucking the excess material until it was comfortable. She

exited the room and followed the whispering voices, which led her to the kitchen. She poked her head in.

“Who’s ready to farm?” she asked.

“Come in, Ella, so I...I mean, so we can look at the pants,” said Peter.

Ella stepped forward.

Paula laughed as her gaze settled on the ill-fitting shirt Peter had given Ella.

“If I had known better, I would have made a shirt that could fit, Ella. Peter, why didn’t you give her one of your old shirts?”

Ella smoothed out the wrinkles in the front of the shirt with her hands.

“Thanks, Miss Paula. I really love the pants, and thanks, Peter, for the shirt; it’s comfortable. Big, but comfortable. Anything is better than my dress.”

Each carried an empty pale as they made their way to the vegetable farm behind the house. They forgot about the time as they chatted and watered the plants. The sun began to set, and it was then Ella realized she was late for family dinner. She lowered her pale, placing it in the damp earth beneath her.

“Miss Paula, I have to leave.”





## CHAPTER ONE

“Alright, my dear. It was nice having you over. I’ll see you tomorrow. Are you going to take the pants with you?”

A frown settled on Ella’s face. She reached into the pockets of her pants and then sighed.

“I’d rather it stay here with you two.”

The thought of her mother burning her pants caused Ella to shudder. *It’s safer here.*

After she changed into her dress, Peter escorted her home. A long stretch of stifling silence prevailed until the awkwardness drove Ella to speak.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or do I have to force it out of you, Peter?”

He scratched his head, sinking the pads of his fingers deep within his tightly coiled hair.

“It was just something Mom said.”

“Peter, Miss Paula said something bad to you?”

“It wasn’t bad. It was...”

“Was it true?” she asked.

“It wasn’t a lie.” He shrugged.

“I know your mom wouldn’t lie to you. What did she tell you?”



## CHAPTER ONE

Ella wondered if that was why she caught Miss Paula and Peter whispering in the kitchen.

They approached Ella's front gate and Peter opened it for her.

"We're here. I won't keep you out any longer, but I'll tell you one day."

He kissed her forehead.

"You promise?" Ella asked, golden specks shining in her eyes.

"I promise. Enjoy your dinner and tell your family I said *good day*."

"I will. See you tomorrow, Peter."

Ella watched until Peter disappeared around the corner.

As she walked to her house, she touched the spot on her forehead where Peter's warm lips had been. She smiled. *Peter, the sweet*. By the time she made it into the house, her family had already said grace. Four pairs of eyes shifted to her when she stepped into the dining room.

"Good day. Peter also sends his greetings," said Ella.

Her father, John, gave her a curt nod.



“You already know the rules of this house. Everyone should present themselves for dinner on time,” said her mother.

“Mother, forgive me. I simply lost track of time. I’m sorry. May I sit?”

Mary huffed but allowed Ella to take a seat between her older brother, Joseph, and her younger brother, David.

In a sing-song voice, David whispered in her ear. “You’re in trouble.”

“Shut up,” said Ella.

“Ella, don’t tell your brother to shut up. That is impolite of you and very unladylike. Apologize, now,” said Mary.

Ella lifted her soup-filled spoon to her lips, but before she could blow away the steam, her older brother, Joseph, slapped it out of her hand.

“Didn’t you hear Mother speak to you?” he asked.

She reached over and punched him in the arm.

“Mother?” Joseph hollered as he rubbed the length of his arm.

“Ella, are you mad? I don’t believe what I’m seeing,” said Mary.

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Ella pulled her chair from the table and stood to her feet. Her hands balled into fists as she spoke.

“I am so tired of this family,” said Ella with tears clouding her vision.

“You mind your mouth in this house, young lady. I will not allow it. You will come straight home after school,” said Mary.

“Father?” Ella directed her wet eyes to him.

“Ella, listen to your mother.”

In a fit of rage and frustration, Ella stormed off and locked herself in her room.

*I hate it here,* she thought.





## CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Ella rushed downstairs, hoping that she would be out of the house before her parents came down. Halfway down the stairs, she heard her mother's voice as she spoke to her father.

“John, Ella is quite an unruly child, and I’m not sure what else to do with her.”

Her father remained silent.

“She turns eighteen in two years,” Mary said, “and I’m sorry to say, but that date will bring me joy when she marries and is out of this house.”

“Mary, that girl is not the marrying type. You have said it yourself; she is too unruly. Maybe

she needs to find her own place in the world instead of—”

“She will follow traditions. We married when I was eighteen, and she will do the same. What other choice does she have?”

With a heavy heart and eyes wet with tears, Ella waited until she heard her parents leave the kitchen before sneaking out the back door. This was the reality she dreaded; the countdown to her eighteenth birthday. The uncertainty of her future overwhelmed her as she walked the stone pathway to her gate to wait for Peter. When she saw him, she ran out to meet him.

“Peter, I heard my mother and father talking and...My mother can't wait until I turn eighteen to get rid of me. She's desperate for me to marry.”

Fresh tears clouded her vision. Peter dropped his book bag and held her in his embrace. His coarse hands smoothed her hair.

“Be brave Ella. I'm with you.”

Ella lifted her eyes to him.

“Promise me that you won't allow them to do this, Peter. Please.”



“Ella—”

“No, Peter, promise me.”

He inhaled deeply and then released a gush of air through his nostrils.

“I promise.”

She wiped away her tears before she bent and took up his book bag.

“Thanks, Peter.”

On their way to school, Peter filled their walk with funny stories, making her laugh and, for a moment, she forgot her worries. She always forgot her worries when she was with Peter. While his focus drifted to the scenery before them, she took the time to admire his features. It appeared he grew more beautiful with each passing day. *Peter, the handsome.*

They neared the entrance of the school and that was when Ella spotted Eric, surrounded by a sea of giggling girls. She reached for Peter’s hand and after a slight hesitation on his part followed by his questioning look, he finally relaxed. Eric broke free from the crowd and approached them.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Hello Ella, you look lovely today. May I walk you to class?” asked Eric.

“Ella, I will meet you in class,” said Peter as he broke out of her hold and walked away before she could protest.

“Peter!” she called after him, but he didn’t look back.

“Are you promised to him, Ella?” asked Eric, pulling her attention.

“That’s not your business.”

He stepped closer. His hand reached to touch her cheek.

“Ella, you are so beautiful. The most beautiful girl I’ve ever met.”

Ella stepped away from him, disgusted by his unwanted contact. “Don’t touch me.”

He pulled his hands to his sides. “I’m sorry. Just give me a chance. Are you promised to Peter?”

“I’m going to class,” she said, then pushed past him.







Before dismissal, Mr. Bent shuffled to the front of the classroom. His crooked glasses, wrinkled clothing and pointed elf shoes made him the prime target of private ridicule among the students. He smiled at them, revealing pale, yellow teeth.

“Our class dance is next Friday, and I expect to see you all in attendance. This year, we will do things differently and the boys will pair up with the girls.”

Ella looked around the classroom before her right arm shot up.

“Do we get to pick our own partners?”

“No. I have decided on the pairings. I have the list right here.”

He removed a folded paper from his pocket, then smoothed it out before rattling off pairs. Finally, he got to Ella’s and she prayed that Peter’s name would follow.

“Ella, you will be paired with Eric.”

Ella spun around in her seat and stared at Eric who winked at her. Ella turned to her teacher.

“May I have another partner? Sir, I don’t want to partner up with Eric.”

“My decision is made.”

She slumped in her seat, with lips protruding. Ella scurried out the door when they were dismissed, not wanting to talk to Eric. Peter remained close behind her until he caught up with her.

“Ella,” said Peter.

She slowed.

“I’m sorry, Peter, I just wanted to hurry and leave before Eric said anything to me.”

“Why do you get so bothered by him? Do you like him?”

Peter’s gaze failed to meet hers.

“Peter, you know me better than anyone. If I liked Eric, you would have known. I’ve never kept a secret from you. I wouldn’t start now.”

*Lies.* She was an open book except for how she truly felt about Peter.

His eyes met hers. “Then why do you behave that way whenever his name is mentioned or whenever he comes around?”



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“Because I don’t like his spirit. Now you know.”

“You don’t like his spirit? Ella, I’m confused,” said Peter, his forehead wrinkled.

“Peter, everyone has a spirit, and it turns out that I don’t like his. That boy isn’t any good. I can’t prove it yet, but I just feel it. There is something about him that isn’t right.”

“Ella, you can’t judge people like that. I don’t think it’s fair.”

“Well, my way has been working just fine for me. See, that’s why we are friends.” She held him around the waist, pulling him closer to her. “You have a beautiful spirit, Peter.”

“And you also have a great...spirit. The best Belle Mount has ever...no, the best the world has ever seen. Are you coming over today? Mom has been asking about you?”

“Yes, but I’ll have to reach home before dinner.”

“Get Ella home before dinner. Mission accepted,” said Peter.

They spent no more than thirty minutes visiting with Paula before Peter offered to walk Ella home.

“Let’s go, Ella,” Peter said.

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“But I’m not ready to leave. Miss Paula is teaching me more about farming.”

“My mission was to get you home before dinner, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

He hoisted her up from his mother’s bed and carried her to the door.

“Bye, Miss Paula,” said Ella over Peter’s shoulder.

“Bye, my dear. Peter, please be careful with Ella.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Peter’s muscles contracted as he continued walking with Ella in his arms. When they made it onto the dirt road, Ella dropped her head on his shoulder, enjoying the journey. *Peter, the strong.*

“Ella, I’m not carrying you in my arms forever.”

“But why not?”

Peter put her down, only letting her go when both her feet touched the ground.

“It’s too early to break my back carrying heavy weight.”

She nudged him. “I’m ignoring you.”

Moments later, they reached her gate.

“Would you like something to drink, Peter?”

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Peter looked down at his dirt-covered boots and his stained pants. “Not today, Ella. I’m not properly dressed.”

“Nonsense.” Ella dragged him inside the house and straight into the kitchen.

Mary greeted the two with a huge smile and came over and hugged Peter.

“Peter, I haven’t seen you in a while. You have grown so tall and handsome.”

Suddenly, Eric entered into the kitchen.

“Oh, look Ella and Peter...look at who stopped by for dinner,” said Mary.

“Eric, what the hell are you doing here?” asked Ella.

Her mother grabbed her by the arm.

“Ella, that is no way to speak to a guest in our home and your classmate at that.”

“That’s okay, Mrs. Thomas, that’s just Ella being humorous,” said Eric.

Her mother released her, while giving her a death stare. “Oh, she does have such a colorful sense of humor.”

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“Please say you are staying, Peter,” Ella whispered.

“I’m sorry, Ella, but I can’t. I have to help Mom on the farm.” He ran his finger down her straight, pointy nose. “I have to leave now.”

“I’ll follow you out.”

Outside, Ella tarried with Peter until Eric joined them. Once Ella realized Eric was walking towards them, she rolled her eyes, causing Peter to laugh.

“Behave yourself, Ella. I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Peter.

“I shouldn’t even be talking to you because you are leaving me to have dinner with the worst dinner guest ever. But, I’ll try to behave. I’ll see you tomorrow, Peter.”

Eric stood beside her, observing as she watched Peter leave.

“Your mother told me I have nothing to worry about because Peter is just your childhood *friend*. I told your parents of my intentions.”

“What exactly is your intention?”

“I want to marry you when you turn eighteen.”

He reached to touch her shoulders, but Ella stepped away.



“That will never happen. Never.”

“I’ll be happy to prove you wrong, Ella.”

She huffed then walked back into the house. When it came time to endure the awkward family dinner, she sat and ate in silence. Eric seemed to capture the attention of the entire family with his boasting of wealth and family’s prestige.

“We’ll have to have you and your family come to visit with us sometime soon, Eric,” said Mary.

“My parents would adore your family, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, and I’m very certain you would enjoy their company,” said Eric.

Ella rolled her eyes then stabbed a green pea with her fork. She didn’t put it into her mouth but pushed it around her plate.

“Ella, are you all right?” asked Eric.

*Don’t pretend like you care about me, Eric,* she thought, but all that came out of her mouth was, “I’m okay.”

Satisfied, he smiled then returned his attention to the rest of the family.

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“Ella and I were paired for the class dance by our teacher, however, I came because I wanted your blessing.”

Ella sent wide, pleading eyes to her parents.  
*Please say no. Please say—*

Mary clapped her hands together. “What a gentleman you are, Eric. You have my blessing.”

John nodded.

Eric looked over at Ella, but she quickly focused on her dinner plate. She refused to bear witness to his conceited smile. Dinner ended and her father took Eric and his boys outside to show them the additional piece of land he had purchased. Meanwhile, Ella and her mother stayed behind cleaning up.

“I don’t understand why we always get stuck cleaning up after everyone,” said Ella.

“Ella, please understand that this is a woman’s duty. It is a privilege to serve the men.”

“How do you see that as a privilege? The men get to have all the fun while we are left behind. I wanted to see the new piece of land that Father had purchased too. Do we not have eyes?”





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Her mother shook her head.

“Ella, you are looking at things from the wrong perspective. When you become a wife and have children, then you will understand.”

Ella ended the argument knowing she would never get through to her mother. This was what her mother grew up believing was right. Who was she to force her into the light?

The men returned home. The sounds of their laughter and conversation preceded them into the house. Ella stood from her seat and gripped her stomach, her face contorting in pain.

“Mother, may I be excused? I am not feeling well.”

“Oh, alright my dear. Go on, I’ll see Eric out.”

“Thank you, Mother. Goodnight.”

Once Ella was out of her mother’s sight, she hurried up the stairs and ran into her bedroom. Lying was a sin, and she knew all of this. However, no other alternative presented itself. She would much rather ask for God’s forgiveness than continue interacting with Eric.

“Lord, I’m begging. Please give me another partner for the class dance. Give me Peter. I promise

## CHAPTER TWO

that I'll be a good young lady and attend church every Sunday if you do."

She fell on her bed and threw her sheet over her shoulders to shut out the chill the night usually brought.





## CHAPTER THREE

Sunday came, and Ella dragged herself out of bed early. If God was going to change her partner for the class dance, then she would have to hold up her end of the bargain. She reluctantly pulled on her bright yellow dress and went downstairs. Her mother was already up and dressed, cooking breakfast in the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, Ella. Do you feel better?”

Ella nodded, remembering her lie. “Much better.”

She smiled and took a seat at the kitchen counter, watching her mother move from the wooden icebox to the cast iron stove.

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“You seem to be in a good mood, and I even see that you are ready for church. Should I assume you won’t be creating a story about how ill you are today to escape God’s house?”

Ella laughed then covered her mouth when she snorted.

“How did you know, Mother?”

“I’m one smart cookie, young lady.”

Ella swung her legs, and her mother caught sight of the black flats that adorned her feet.

“Ella, where are the heels I bought for you to wear?”

“They hurt my feet.”

“Ella, you are a beautiful young lady. Everyone in Belle Mount knows this. However, you are shorter than most girls, which means you don’t stand out. If you are looking for a good suitor for marriage, then you must stand out, Ella. You must.”

Ella rolled her eyes while her mother’s attention was fixed on the scrambled eggs.

“I don’t want to stand out because I don’t want to get married. Not now. Not ever.”



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“Ella, you are young and this is just a silly phase. What girl in Belle Mount doesn’t want to get married and follow the traditions of our people?”

Ella raised her hand and cocked her head to the right. “This girl right here.”

Her mother stirred the yellow and white coagulated protein in the hot skillet. Perhaps harder than necessary.

“I believe you are only speaking like that because you are afraid that you might not get a suitor. I assure you that you will.” Her mother turned and smiled at her. “Your classmate, Eric, seems perfect. Very handsome, articulate and well off. You would be well taken care of as you deserve, sweetheart.”

Before Ella could protest, her brothers and her father came down the stairs. After a quick greeting, they took their plates and went into the dining area to eat, leaving Ella and her mother in the kitchen.

“Mother, I want to talk to you about Eric.”

“Ella, please save that thought. I’m going to check how your father and brothers left the upstairs. Stop worrying and no more foolish talk.”

Her mother disappeared, and Ella remained alone with her thoughts. She decided to push all

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things Eric-related to the back of her mind. Today she would not get disheartened by her situation as she was sure that a change was coming her way.

After the family readied themselves, they all piled into the wooden buggy and her father drove them to church. Joseph's Worship Center boasted of a congregation saturated with notable citizens. The Thomas family walked into the church with Mr. Thomas leading the way. Ella remained close to her mother. Mr. Thomas was about to direct them to a seat five rows from the back of the church when his name was called.

"Mr. Thomas."

Ella turned to see Eric waving at them from the front row of the church. The young man sat with his family who also waved them over. Her family accepted the bait and went over. *Oh God no*, Ella thought as she refrained from rolling her eyes. Her mother grinned; this was her first time sitting at the front of the church. They exchanged greetings, and it was Mr. Charles who offered them a seat with his family. Ella was placed at the end of the wooden bench, far away from Eric. She was grateful.



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Ella had trouble concentrating during the service, but was thankful when it was over. All she wanted to do now was visit Peter, Paula, her new pair of pants, and the farm. She stood and went over to her mother, who was in deep conversation with Mrs. Charles.

“Excuse me, Mother.” Both women looked at her. “Peter and I have a class assignment to work on together. May I leave and go to his house?”

Eric came up behind her. “What assignment, Ella?”

“What is this I hear about assignments?” asked Mr. Charles. He shook his head. “There will be none of that as today is the Lord’s Day. I say we go to my home and have the ladies serve us up a fine Sunday meal.”

Ella turned to take a good look at Mr. Charles’ face as the words rolled off his fat tongue.

“Mr. Charles, I’ll have you know that a lady is—” Ella’s comment was interrupted.

“Sounds like a good idea to me, Mr. Charles. Excuse us for a moment,” said Mary.

She held onto Ella’s wrist and drew her out of the church.

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“Young lady, what do you think you are doing?”

“Standing up for you, Mrs. Charles, and myself. We aren’t slaves or handmaidens. Who the hell—”

Her mother slapped her cheek with her open palm.

“How dare you curse in my presence? Have you no respect or decency? You are in the Lord’s house.”

Ella held onto her cheek; the sting brought tears to her eyes.

“Now you will behave yourself in front of these people. You will not do anything to bring shame to our family’s name.”

When Ella heard Mr. Charles’ loud voice, she dried her tears while her mother plastered a smile on her face.

“Are we ready to go?” Mr. Charles asked.

“Yes, yes, we are,” said Mary.

“Good because I am starved,” he said before entering his white chariot.

The ride to the Charleses’ home was uncomfortable. Her mother didn’t try to fill the void with her usual meaningless chatter. Even her brothers grew aware of the mounting tension and



kept quiet. Finally, they arrived at the Charleses' house. Her mother oohed and awed at the lovely, white stone abode.

Everyone left Ella in the vehicle, and she considered leaving. Her eyes roamed around before she leaped out of her parents' buggy. She quickly hid behind it and waited for her parents to go into the house before she attempted to make her great escape.

"Hiding from me, beautiful?" asked Eric.

She jumped but managed to contain the gasp that nearly escaped her parted lips. Eric lifted his hand to smooth Ella's hair, but she swatted it.

"Stop trying to touch me."

"I just can't resist you, Ella. We make the perfect couple. I think so, and so do our parents. Soon we'll get married..."

Ella wagged her index finger in his face. It was less than an inch away from the tip of his nose.

"I will not marry you. That's final."

She spun on her heels and marched into the house. Nothing appealed to her. Not the massive space. Not the beautiful, golden chandelier. Not even

## CHAPTER THREE

the silver staircase that looked like they ascended into glory land. Nothing. She found her father, brothers, and Mr. Charles sitting and discussing business. She was about to sit down when Mr. Charles called out to her.

“This conversation is for men, sweetheart. Go help the women in the kitchen.”

Eric entered the room then and occupied the empty space beside his Father. Determined to confirm her suspicions of Eric, she asked Mr. Charles to repeat himself, feigning temporary deafness.

“You’d be much better suited for the kitchen than this conversation, sweetheart. Go and find the women.”

This man did not mince words and neither would she. Ella’s gaze drifted to Eric whose piercing gray eyes met hers and challenged her to submit. There it was, confirmation.

She straightened her back. “No.”

Mr. Charles narrowed his eyes. “Now, sweetheart, I suggest you show some respect in my house.”

“I’m not your sweetheart.”



### CHAPTER THREE

She walked out of the house, kicked off her heels, then made a run for it. Behind her, she could hear her mother and Eric calling after her but she didn't look back. With all her might and the strength in her legs, she ran to Peter's house. Heart pounding and legs weak with exhaustion, she crumbled on their concrete front steps.

"Peter...Miss Paula," she managed to breathe out; her chest was tight.

She pounded on the door until it flew open. Peter rushed out and scooped her off the ground.

"What happened to you, Ella?"

"I...was running...tired."

Peter placed her on the couch and hurried to get some water. When he returned to her, he kneeled beside her.

"Ella, drink this."

She widened her mouth, and he took his time feeding her. When she had had enough, Peter removed the cup from her lips. He accidentally brushed her sore cheek in the process, causing her to shout in pain.

"I'm sorry, Ella. Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. “Mother slapped me after church.”

“What? Why?”

She shrugged. “I swore.”

A few tears fell from her eyes before she covered her face with her hands.

“I hate Belle Mount. I don’t want to live here.”

“Talk to me, Ella.”

Ella explained to Peter, “We went over to Eric’s family’s house and his father kept insisting that a woman’s place was in the kitchen. Then he kept calling me *sweetheart*. It was so degrading, and my parents and brothers just allowed it to happen.”

Peter uncovered her face and then used his fingertips to wipe away her tears.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you, Ella. But we both know better than Eric’s father. Don’t let what he said upset you.”

“You are right.” Ella said. “Mr. Charles is an idiot, and he is raising his son to be an idiot as well.”

“I’m always right,” Peter said before walking toward the kitchen.



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Ella pulled her tired body from the couch and followed him.

“You wish.”

“You followed me in here to tell me that, Ella?”

“Yes, and to tell you that I’m hungry. I ran out before dinner.”

“I’m going around to the back to get some yams and potatoes.” Peter said. “Do you want to boil the water?”

“No,” Ella answered. “I’ll get the yams and potatoes. You can put the water on. Now where are my pants?”





## CHAPTER FOUR

“My two favorite little ones,” said Paula as she stepped into Peter’s bedroom.

Paula’s unexpected presence startled Ella, causing her to leap forward onto Peter. The two tumbled off the bed. Their giggles exploded into the air, and Paula hurried to help them get to their feet.

“Mom, you could have given Ella a heart attack,” said Peter.

Ella pounded her chest. “Nonsense. I’m blessed with a strong heart.”

Paula patted Ella’s shoulders. “You better tell him, Ella. Were you here long, my dear?”

“Been here long enough to dig yams and potatoes and watch Peter cook Sunday dinner.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Peter excused himself from the room, returning with water and his mother's plated dinner.

"Here you go, Mom."

"What am I going to do without you? Thank you, my dear, and thank you, Ella."

Ella gave Paula a half smile. She contemplated telling Paula what had happened to her just hours ago, but she bit her tongue.

"What's wrong, Ella?" asked Paula.

Ella looked up at her, and in a moment everything flooded her memory, bringing with it tears and the inability to breathe. Paula placed the food on the bed and wrapped Ella in motherly arms. Just when Ella worked up the courage to repeat all of what she had told Peter, a heavy pounding on the front door disrupted the moment.

"Ella, I know you are in there. Get out! Get out right now!"

Paula looked at Ella. "Is that your mother, Ella?"

"I'll go and speak with Mrs. Thomas," said Peter.

Ella stood and smoothed the wrinkles on the front of her pants. Her back was rigid, and she braced herself for a lashing. Her mother rushed

## CHAPTER FOUR

into the house; the floor squeaked under the weight of her heels.

Her mother reached for her and grabbed her arm.

“How dare you embarrass your Father and me by arguing with Mr. Charles? Are you an idiot, Ella?”

“Mother, I’m not.” Ella shrugged out of her mother’s hold and moved closer to Paula.

“Mrs. Thomas, I’m sure that whatever Ella did can be corrected without violence and name calling.”

Paula stood between the mother and daughter.

“Listen, Paula, I don’t know what you and your son have over my daughter. Every time we have a family problem, she escapes here. This is your last day here. Do you hear me, Ella?”

“Mrs. Thomas—” began Peter.

“Shut up. Shut up. I don’t want to hear from you, Peter. Let’s go, Ella.”

Her mother pushed Paula out of the way, knocking her to the floor. Once the barrier between herself and Ella was gone, she snatched Ella by the wrist and pulled her towards the front door.

“Mother, you’re hurting me. Let go of me.”





## CHAPTER FOUR

Peter blocked them from leaving the house by placing his body in front of the door. “Mrs. Thomas, let Ella go. You are hurting her.”

She twisted Ella’s wrist, causing her to cry out.

“That’s enough, Mrs. Thomas,” said Peter, advancing towards them.

“What are you going to do, Peter? I know how you feel about my daughter. I’ve seen the way you look at her. However, you and your mother will not stop her from having a better life. Now get out of my way.”

“Better life? Mother, what are you talking about?” asked Ella as she tried yanking out of her mother’s hold.

“No thanks to your antics today, but Eric and his parents want you to be the daughter-in-law of their house. Your father and I accepted their offer.”

Ella pulled harder. “You what? How could you? I hate you.”

“Sweetheart, you’ll thank me later.”

Her mother pulled her closer to the door, forcing Peter to step aside. When their feet touched the dirt

## CHAPTER FOUR

outside the house, Mrs. Thomas turned to Peter.” Stay away from my daughter,” she said.

Peter’s jaw clenched tight, but he held his tongue.

“Peter, my son, stay inside the house. Please, son,” said Paula.

Peter looked at Ella and then tore his gaze away before closing the front door.



At home, Ella watched her mother pace back and forth across the living room floor. The bulging vein in her neck was visible. Her father sat somewhere to her left while her brothers eavesdropped from the stairs.

“I’m not getting married to Eric, Mother. I will not.”

Her mother didn’t answer. Suddenly, she stopped and smiled without amusement reaching her cold eyes.

“Why are you so opposed to marriage? Haven’t your father and I set a good example of what a good marriage can be?”



## CHAPTER FOUR

She had never seen her father mistreat her mother. Certainly their marriage wasn't perfect, but they had a bond and a respect worth admiring. Searching her soul deeper, it wasn't marriage she resented, but the traditions that threatened to dictate her life: who she married, when she married, what she could wear, and the list continued. These were decisions she wanted to make on her own. To marry or not to marry should be her choice. Maybe sometime in the distant future, she'd think fondly of marriage, but not now and not to Eric Charles.

"Mother, please listen to—"

"No, Ella, this decision is final, my dear. Eric and his family are well off, for God sakes."

John stood. "Ella, your mother is right. This is for your own good. You might not be able to see it now, but soon you will."

Ella rubbed her temples with the pads of her fingers.

"Mother, Father, please. I don't trust Eric, and I don't think you two should either."

"That's enough, Ella. You will marry him and that's final," said John.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Ella sat in her little chair in front of her mirror. With gentle strokes, her mother brushed her hair. Her mother straightened her back and stood erect, marveling at her work.

“You look beautiful, my dear. Eric’s heart will melt when he sees you.”

Ella nodded but said nothing.

“Come along, Ella, we don’t want to keep him waiting.”

The two made their way down the stairs. At the first sight of Ella, Eric stood and walked over to meet her. He stopped her at the bottom of the stairs and dropped to one knee. He removed a small



## CHAPTER FIVE

box from his pocket and then opened it, revealing a sparkling diamond ring.

“Ella Elise Thomas, will you promise yourself to me until we are able to marry?”

When her ‘yes’ wasn’t immediate, her mother forcefully nudged her in the side.

“Yes,” she said.

He slid the ring onto her finger, and she tried hard not to scowl. Hand in hand, they walked down the pathway of her house leading to the chariot Eric had waiting outside. They rode in silence the entire way to their school’s compound. The chariot stopped, and Ella was the first to hop out. Eric quickly ran to her side.

“Ella, you should have waited for me to help you out.”

“I can manage on my own, thanks.”

His smile flattened, but then it returned. “Next time, I’ll do the honor. It’s my duty. Shall we?” He extended his hand to her, and for a moment, she looked down at it.

“Ella.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

She laced her hand in his and they walked to the area where the dance had already started. When they reached inside, Eric turned to her with a request.

“Ella, be a doll and fetch me some punch.”

He didn’t wait for her response and instead left her to speak to his mates. Ella spun on her heels and headed over to where the refreshments were stationed. From the corner of her eye, she watched Peter approach her.

“You look lovely, Ella,” said Peter.

She poured the red punch into a cup.

He sighed. “Aren’t we still friends, Ella? I mean we’ve been friends for as long as I remember.”

“We aren’t friends. You made that clear,” she said.

“Ella, it hasn’t been easy not speaking with you, or walking you home. But, your mother—”

“If our friendship isn’t worth fighting for, then we don’t need to be talking.”

She started to leave with the drink in her hand, but he stopped her. The liquid splashed around before some of it landed on her dress.

“Peter, why did you do that?”



## CHAPTER FIVE

“I was only trying to...I didn’t mean to, Ella. I’m sorry.”

He removed his handkerchief and tried rubbing the red stain out of her yellow dress. His eyes dropped to her ring, stopping his actions.

“You’re engaged!”

Ella’s eyes shifted to the ground.

“Ella,” said Peter, and his hand touched her arm.

“What’s going on here?” asked Eric.

Peter returned to dabbing the stain.

“That’s enough. Don’t ever touch Ella. She’s mine,” said Eric, pulling Ella away.

Peter looked at Ella.

“Leave Peter. I don’t need you,” said Ella, not meeting his gaze.

With his head hanging low, Peter walked away.

“I’ll buy you a new dress, Ella. I want to show you something. It’s outside.”

Eric interwove their fingers, then led her outside. In the dark, they walked, drifting further away from the noise and the lively band. An uncomfortable feeling settled deep within her. Ella stopped.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Where are you taking me?”

“Ella, I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

She hesitated and turned to glance once more at the school.

“Come on, Ella.”

He held her hand and pulled her with him to a reserved area. Ella could see a bright light as they walked further into the distance. She squinted, trying to make sense of where they were going. They stopped and spread out before them was a yellow blanket. Atop it was a brown basket. The bright light was revealed to be a kerosene lamp held by Eric’s driver.

“That will be all, Ford. I’ll take it from here,” said Eric.

The man gave a curt nod before he left.

“What exactly are we doing out here?”

Eric gestured for her to sit on the blanket. When she did, he followed suit.

“We are going to celebrate tonight.”

Eric reached into the basket and pulled out a bottle of scotch and two glasses. He handed a glass to her, but she refused to accept.





## CHAPTER FIVE

“I don’t drink alcohol.” She pushed the glass away.

Eric poured himself some, then threw the liquid down his throat in one smooth gulp. He released a breath then repeated the action.

“I sense that you weren’t happy when I gave you the ring?” Eric looked over at her.

“What do you want to hear?”

“The truth, Ella.”

She slapped the palm of her hand on her forehead.

“For God’s sake, I have been telling you the truth since I met you. I don’t want to marry you. Is that what you want to hear...again?”

He placed the bottle of scotch to his lips and took a long swig. The little droplets that landed at the corners of his mouth were wiped away with the sleeve of his silk, white shirt.

“I will give you anything your heart desires. Anything. When my Father dies, I will inherit everything. You don’t have to worry about money, Ella.”

“I don’t care about your money, Eric.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Then what is it? Am I that appalling? Can’t you find it in your heart to love me?”

Ella’s voice softened. “I will never love you the way you want me to.”

“Don’t say that, Ella. You will love me. You must. You will be my wife.” He reached for her hand.

“You wanted the truth, and I gave it to you. You have to accept it.”

His grip tightened. “I will not accept the fact that my wife will not love me.”

“I am not your wife. Let go of me.”

His eyes darkened and his breath laced with alcohol nearly suffocated Ella as he leaned closer to her, pinning her arms to the ground. He straddled her.

“Get the hell off of me, Eric.”

Her knee met his sensitive member, and he cried out in pain, holding his aching flesh. Ella used that time to pull herself from the ground and run off into the darkness.

“Ella, get back here. Don’t run away from me. Ella.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

She didn't bother to glance back. She hoped that her legs wouldn't fail her and that she would reach help before Eric caught up to her. It wasn't long before she heard Eric's heavy footsteps pounding the ground. Her heart quickened in her chest. Hands grabbed her, pulling her into the bushes.

"Peter, what are you—"

Peter wrapped his fingers around her mouth. The two peeked out and watched as Eric ran towards them.

*"Ella!... Ella!"* Eric screamed as he ran past.

Peter removed his hand from her mouth.

"I saw when the two of you walked out. I know it wasn't right to follow, but I just had to make sure you were all right."

Ella remained beside him in silence.

"Ella, did you hear me?"

"Eric tried forcing himself on me. Peter, I was so afraid."

She buried her face in Peter's chest and wept.

Peter ground his teeth. "You will not get married to that monster. I have a plan."



## CHAPTER SIX

Ella stood in the living room while Peter and Paula ran from the living room to their rooms and back. In one traveling sack, Peter stuffed clothing. The other, Paula filled with all the food items she had in the kitchen. Once the bags could hold no more, Ella took one up in hand.

“Ella, are you sure you want to do this? I can take you home and explain everything to your parents,” said Paula.

“Miss Paula, it wouldn’t do any good. It is better this way.”

Paula hugged her and kissed her forehead. A few tears dropped from her eyes.



## CHAPTER SIX

“You are like a daughter to me. I watched you grow up into a confident, intelligent and lovely young woman. I will miss you. Just know that I love you and will always support you.”

Moved to tears, Ella squeezed Paula’s middle.

Paula then walked over to her son and embraced him.

“Take good care of my Ella, and take good care of yourself, son. I love you, and I’m proud of the young man you have become.”

She kissed his cheek and wiped away the single tear that rolled from his eye.

“I love you, Mom.”

Paula removed a small, cloth sack of coins from under her bed and handed it to Peter, before another tearful farewell. Peter grabbed Ella’s free hand and walked her out into the night. They loaded their baggage into Paula’s old buggy and began their long journey away from the only place they knew as home. Ella’s eyes were focused on the road ahead.

“You think they will search for us?” Ella asked.

“I’m sure they will, Ella, but I’ll protect you.”

## CHAPTER SIX

She rested her head on his shoulder as he directed the horse-drawn buggy.

“We’ll be okay, Peter. We have each other.”

Ella held the uncertainty of the future and the excitement of freedom in her heart. Regardless of what they would face, they had each other, and the thought brought her comfort.



After miles of dirt road, Ella and Peter made it to Paula’s father’s house; the one she inherited three years after his death. The wooden property had a part of its roof sticking out and the grass, if given a few short weeks, would reach Ella’s waist. Peter grabbed the kerosene lamp and used it to guide their path. They were in Pica Valley and hoped that the distance would make it harder to find them.

“Home sweet home,” said Ella.

“Ella, stay here while I check to make sure inside is safe.”

Ella slipped her hand into his. “We go together, mister.”



## CHAPTER SIX

Peter squeezed her hand, then released. He opened the front door but kept her behind him when they entered. Ella peered out from behind him to view the dusty floors, the old, worn furniture and spider webs that had found permanent refuge high in the ceiling.

Ella touched his shoulder as she stepped beside him.

“Peter, are you alright?” she asked after seeing his deflated facial expression.

He looked into her eyes then.

“Mom and my grandfather, Teddy, never had a good relationship. When she got pregnant with me and still never got married, he forced her out. Now he is dead, and they can never fix their broken relationship. Are you sure you want to run away from your parents and stay here, Ella? Maybe you could—”

*Peter, the caring.*

“You are sweet, Peter, and that’s what I love about you. However, my parents will never understand. This is for the best. Or are you having second thoughts?”

## CHAPTER SIX

Fear clinched her heart as she waited for him to respond.

“If I weren’t here with you, then who would keep you out of trouble?”

She stood on her tiptoes and placed a light kiss on his lips; her heart was relieved. As much as she was happy that Peter was with her, she didn’t want him to be bound by obligation or their friendship.

“Thank you. Now let’s get this place cleaned up.”

“Ella, I know you are tired. Go get some rest and I’ll start the chores.”

“I’m fine. I’ll help.”

“If you start crying about aches and pains afterwards, just know that I’m going to ignore you,” Peter said.

“Please, you won’t see a single tear in these eyes of mine.”

It took them well into the morning to clean the old house. Ella sat on the floor, her face drenched with sweat and her breathing labored. Peter sat beside her.





“I can’t feel my legs anymore, Peter. I think they are dead.” She slapped her legs, trying to wake them up.

Peter got up and walked into the kitchen, ignoring her. She struggled off the floor then followed him.

“Peter, did you hear me?”

“Oh, I heard you, Ella. I told you to rest.”

He opened the overhead cupboards. Empty.

“We really need to get some meat. Are you coming with me to the merchant? Or do you need to rest, Ella?”

She straightened her back and braced herself against the wooden counters.

“I’m coming. I think my legs just need a bit of a stretch.”

“Right.” He shook his head then led her outside.

She stumbled over a stone, but he prevented her fall.

“Are you okay?”

“Peter, stop treating me like some baby. I am all right.”



## CHAPTER SIX

Peter removed his hand from her waist and dropped them into his pocket. Ella touched his arm.

“I’m sorry. Thank you. I didn’t see the stone back there.”

He nodded, and they continued on in silence. Ella struggled to keep up with Peter’s strides, but he didn’t slow. Finally, they arrived at the local grocery store with the signage at the front reading, “Green’s Grocery Store”. They were greeted with warmth by an older man named Bill. Though Bill’s smile and spirit was welcoming, Ella did not miss his sad eyes. After a haggling session, Peter and Ella walked away with enough to sustain them for a week.

Back at the house, Ella kicked off her shoes, placed her grocery bag on the floor, and fell on the couch. Every part of her hurt, and her face twisted in discomfort. When she closed her eyes, settling into the faded fabric, Peter came over and squeezed her shoulders, loosening the tension stored in her muscles.

“I know you are in need of this, so don’t be stubborn and refuse, Ella.”



## CHAPTER SIX

She didn't protest. Instead, she thanked him and sat still, enjoying the kneading of her tight muscles. After a ten-minute-long massage, Peter stopped and gazed down at her.

"What is it?" she asked, her nose and forehead wrinkled with concern.

Peter put his hands in his pockets, then shook his head.

"You can be a very strange human at times," said Ella.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

Morning came and Ella rose with determination and purpose. After throwing on her pants, shirt and boots, she took her time heading outside, careful not to wake Peter, who slept in the other room. In the light of day, she saw the rotting of the house's wooden frame, the rusted tools thrown around the back, and the weed-infested patches of land. *Potential*, she thought with a smile. The land stretched afar, and she envisioned healthy crops springing from the soil. *Someday*. This was now home, and she would make the best of it, since the alternative threatened to send her into a panic.

She stopped and gave the horse, Preston, some food and water before she continued surveying



the land. When she heard the creaking of the old front door, followed by Peter's call, she rounded back to the front.

"Good morning. You are up early," he said.

"I slept through the night. How did you sleep?"

Peter walked over to her. "It was okay. Hopefully, I'll have better sleep tomorrow night."

"I'll make you some milk tea before bed. That always helps me when I can't sleep."

His face scrunched.

"What is that face for?" she asked.

"I'm just imagining you trying to . . ."

"Trying to what?" She crossed her arms.

"Cook. No offense, Ella, but I've tasted your attempts at cooking."

"Well, milk tea isn't technically cooking, so you will survive."

He held up his hands in surrender.

"Peter, on a more serious note, I was thinking that we could both get jobs as farm hands until we could save up enough money to start our own little

farm. We could plant whatever is in season and sell in the markets or to Bill. What do you think?”

“That’s a good idea. We could tour Pica Valley and find a farm that’s hiring. Which farm doesn’t want farm hands?”

The need for farm hands was there, but no one wanted to hire a female farm hand. This was the hard truth they had to accept, three rejections later. As Peter and Ella stood in front of the farm manager of the biggest supplier of Pica Valley’s vegetation and meats, the man laughed at the idea of a female farm hand.

“It’s cute that you think you can do this type of job, but sweetheart, we don’t pick flowers here. I need men who can work long and lift heavy.”

“I’m not your *sweetheart*. And I know what it takes to farm—”

“Listen, I’m not going to hire you on this farm. Now, Peter, if you want the job, it is yours. I could even start you working today. We pay a flat daily rate unlike our competitors.”

“Ella, can I talk to you over there?” asked Peter, pointing to a random area out of the manager’s listening ear.



Ella followed behind and after several paces, Peter turned to her.

“If you can’t work here, then I won’t either. We are a package deal, right Ella?”

“Wrong, we need to survive, Peter. It’s okay. Take the job and I’ll figure out another way to earn money.”

“No, Ella. We are in this together.”

She touched his arm and felt his tense muscles.

“Peter, it’s okay. Trust me.”

Peter was slightly hesitant as he stood trying to uncover the truth she tried to hide. The truth was, each rejection stung, and each mockery of her attempts chipped away at her confidence. After another encouraging prompt from Ella, Peter accepted the job.

While Peter started his new job, Ella and her wounded pride headed home. Peter had given her money to take the train home, but she decided to save it and walk instead. The words she spoke to Peter returned to her consciousness. This was about survival and with it a brilliant idea sparked, leading her to Green’s Grocery Store.

Similar to her first visit, Bill regarded her with warmth. However, this time, he greeted her by name.

“What can I do for you, Ella?”

“Actually, I wanted to ask you a question.”

He leaned forward with unwavering focus. “Ask away, young lady.”

“I’ve noticed that you don’t stock any bread. Why is that?”

Bill explained to her that his wife would make the best loaves and stocked the store daily with her fresh, homemade breads. However, she got sick and passed away. Shortly after, he tried recreating her recipes, but he wasn’t successful.

“Bill, I’m sorry for your loss.”

His eyes got misty. “Thank you, Ella. It’s been five years since my Margaret passed, but I still miss her every day, and so does the community.”

“How about if I baked bread every day and sold it to you so you could sell it in the store, Bill?”

“Excuse me,” said Bill before darting to the back of the store.

Frozen with shame, Ella stood contemplating her sales pitch. Here she was, pushing her selfish





motives on him when the man was still grieving. *So insensitive, Ella*, she reprimanded herself. When Bill returned to the front, Ella was quick to apologize, but he stopped her. He handed her a thick, brown leather journal with ties that kept its content secure.

“This was Margaret’s recipe journal. It has all of her bread recipes.”

Ella took the book and looked at Bill. “And you are giving this to me?”

“I trust that you will make great use of it.”

With Margaret’s recipe book under her arm and enough ingredients on loan to make ten loaves of bread, Ella walked out of Bill’s store with her determination and purpose renewed. As soon as she got home, she prepped the cast iron stove and tried her hand at bread making.

Four hours later, the floor and countertops were dusted with flour. A piece of drying flour and water mix hung in Ella’s hair as she tried to control the stream of tears rolling down her cheeks. She had followed Margaret’s recipe down to the letter, and still she had failed to make the first four batches of loaves. The first was burned; the second was flat; the third too salty, and the fourth was too sweet.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

In defeat, she laid her utensils on the counter and crumbled to the floor. Everything in her told her to get up and fight. This was freedom; though it was bitter now, she believed it would get sweeter. She just had to endure. With dried eyes and her chin tilted in defiance, she picked herself off the floor. After reevaluating her previous mistakes, she returned to making bread.

It was well into the night, and all six loaves came out golden with a glistening buttery top. She had no idea if they tasted as good as they looked. Then she had a different worry. Peter hadn't returned home. She sat on the couch waiting, but her anxieties caused her to pop up and stare out the window every few minutes. The grassland was covered in darkness, and she couldn't help but wonder if Peter was in danger.

*Peter my first love*—her thoughts were interrupted when the clip clop of a horse's hooves reached her ears.

One gaze out the window and her heart was relieved. She rushed outside with bare feet to greet Peter. The second he exited the buggy, Ella wrapped him in her embrace.



“I thought something happened to you, Peter.”

He hugged her back. “I’m sorry if I worried you. It was just a grueling day. I’m glad I’m home now.” He looked down at her bare feet and without questioning her, hoisted her up and brought her into the house. When she was safe, he quickly returned to secure Preston. While Peter was outside, Ella cut two slices of her tester loaf and placed them on a plate, waiting for him to join her in the kitchen.

“What happened here?” he asked, eyeing the messy kitchen.

“Shhhh. Just taste this bread. I made it. Be honest, okay?”

“You made bread? How long have I been gone?”

“Peter, I need you to be serious. Taste.”

She handed him the slice and watched as he took a bite, too nervous to take one of her own.

“Oh my.”

“Oh my...good or bad?” asked Ella, her eyes wide with question.

“Oh my...it’s delicious, Ella!”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Startled awake from another nightmare, Ella sat up in bed, trying to control her labored breathing and racing heart. It had been four weeks since her liberation. The start of the second week brought with it the same recurring dream. Eric would find their location, and it always ended the same way; Peter died, then she died. The dreams were depressing and she was on edge whenever Peter had to leave for work. However, she didn't have to worry today because it was Sunday and Peter used Sunday to tend to their young field.

Between the two of them they were able to pull in enough money to purchase seed potatoes from Peter's boss. He was kind enough to sell to Peter at a discounted rate, making it possible to plant on



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three-quarters of their land. Paula was an expert when it came to potatoes and yams; therefore, they were experts since they had learned everything from her. They would have to wait for about four months before harvest and profit, but with Peter's farm work and her bread baking, they would survive just fine.

Ella donned her pants and went first to the kitchen. After filling a cup with cool water, she brought it to Peter. He would be in the field for hours and lose track of time, neglecting himself.

*We are going to make it work, Ella.* He would remind her whenever her spirits got low.

*Peter, the comforter.*

When she opened the door to the back, he stopped and turned to her with a brilliant smile that caused her heart to flutter. His blinding smile made her lose her concentration, and when she was inches from him, she tripped over some of the tools lying on the ground.

"Ella."

Time seemed to slow as the cup of water flew out of her hand, and she braced herself for a nasty tumble. But Peter caught her, and she felt the

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coarseness of his hands on her skin as they steadied her. Worry caused his thick, dark brows to knit.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Steady on her feet, Ella smiled up at him. Unable to resist the temptation, she squeezed his sweaty biceps.

“You are getting stronger. I’m sure the young ladies are just praying every night that you propose, Peter.”

His smile faded, but he hid his face as he bent to grab the cup.

“I’m right where I need to be, Ella. Or are you trying to get rid of me?” he asked as he handed her the cup.

“If I got rid of you, then who would drive me around? And who would plow the field while I work to become the best baker in all of Pica Valley?”

“Remember that. You need me around, and I enjoy being around. Thank you for the water.”

“I didn’t even give you the water because of my clumsiness.”



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He kissed her forehead. “It’s the thought that counts. Thank you for being thoughtful. I’m going to head back to working on the field. I won’t be long.”

Ella nodded and watched him turn away as she built the courage to express her feelings. While marriage was not on her mind, she loved Peter with all she had. Her thoughts worked out all the reasons to tell him, but her heart quieted her in the end.

*Peter deserves the chance to marry and start a family when he is ready. I won’t take that from him. I won’t, no matter how I feel,* she thought before she walked away, unable to silence her broken heart.

“It’s better this way,” she said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Pushing aside matters of the heart to get started with her bread making, she quickly scanned Margaret’s recipe book to familiarize herself with the steps to make banana bread. In addition to completing her order of twenty loaves for Bill, she wanted to try her hand at making two loaves of banana bread. One would be a tester for Bill and the other she would keep at home, hoping Peter liked it. Sometime in the night Bill would swing

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by for pickup, saving her the trouble of traveling to the store.

After pulling the last batch of old fashioned loaves out of the cast iron stove, Ella got ready to start making the batter for the banana bread when she heard a buggy getting closer. A look through the window revealed her parents' buggy. Her heart almost leaped out of her chest, but she decided not to run at that moment. Not again. She walked out to join Peter and that was when she saw him embrace Paula. The next person who stepped out of the buggy was her father. Paula ran over to her and spun her in the air. Though Ella was excited for the reunion, she felt betrayed.

“What is my father doing here, Miss Paula? I’m not returning home. I won’t.”

Paula placed her on the ground. Her eyes were kind, helping to ease some of her fears.

“My dear, I wouldn’t have brought him here if I didn’t think you needed to hear this.”

John took a few cautious steps towards her. The normally unreadable man had a small smile on his face.





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“I begged Paula to help me connect to you, Ella. I am sorry. You deserve a father that will stand with you, not against you. No matter what. I let you down, Ella, and if you give me another chance, I won’t let you down again.”

“I will not marry Eric.”

“Ella, I didn’t come here to press you on this issue. I came to tell you that I am proud of you and that I will support your decisions. I told the Charleses that the proposal with Eric was off.”

“How did Mother take it?”

He shook his head. “Not well, but this is your life. Not hers and not mine. I am confident that you’ll be okay no matter what you do in life or where you go. Of all the kids, I never worry about you and hopefully, Mary will realize your resilience and strength, and stop worrying. I love you, Ella.”

The man who never spoke more than a few words at any one time, spoke to the core of her heart. Ella couldn’t help the flowing tears as she went over and embraced her father, who returned it with warmth.

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In the evening, Peter and Ella sat around the kitchen table as they shared a slice of banana bread. Their parents had left hours earlier and now everything was back to their normal. After a thorough chew, Peter hesitated, but eventually opened his mouth to speak, chasing away the awkward silence between them.

“Remember the day I walked you home, and I told you that Mom had said something to me and that someday I would tell you?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“She told me that life was short with no guarantees and that I should always be honest. Can I be honest with you, Ella?”

Ella nodded. “Of course, Peter.”

“I know you may not want to hear this...and I know this may mess up our friendship. Just know that I don’t want to ruin our friendship. If you don’t feel the same, then that’s okay... You know...uhmm. What I’m saying is that I am not trying to pressure you...I—”



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Ella buried her hand in his. “Just tell me.”

Peter exhaled and Ella watched as his nerves settled slightly for him to blurt out what he hesitated to say.

“I love you, Ella Elise Thomas. We never have to get married, and if you don’t feel the same then that’s okay too...We can just remain friends. I just wanted to be honest. You deserve honesty.” Ella leaned forward and placed a light kiss on his lips.

“I’ve waited forever for you to tell me that. I love you too, Peter Elijah Evans.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest as she pressed her forehead to his. With Peter there was safety; there was love; there was friendship. Wherever he was, that was home.

“I can’t imagine my life without you, Peter.”

“You won’t have to. Where you go, I go...as long as you’ll have me.”

Ella pulled away from him so that their gaze met.

“I’ll always want you around because who will keep me out of trouble?”

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The two chuckled and a lightness descended upon the room as they returned to enjoying the banana bread and each other's company. After another guilty slice of the sweetened bread, they separated. Ella remained in the kitchen wrapping loaves in anticipation of Bill's arrival while Peter went outside to tend to Preston.

A smile tugged on Ella's lips as she reminisced about her and Peter's declaration. Joy flooded her soul as she thought about the possibilities of her life changing. *Peter, my love.* The thought of marriage and a family crept into her mind, and for the first time she did not shun the idea. There was no angst, and no rebellion. Her new life away from Belle Mount allowed her to decide, giving her the freedom she wanted. To marry Peter would be her decision, *if he asked her to.* She hoped he asked, but if he didn't, then she was prepared to ask him. She couldn't imagine life without Peter.

A loud thud was followed by the frantic neighing of Preston. It caused Ella to make a mad dash outside.

"Peter?"



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She ran out of the house, her eyes searching in the dark for Peter. There was no Peter, and Preston was galloping down the dirt path. Something had spooked the horse.

“Peter, Preston is loose. Peter?”

Ella started chasing Preston when arms wrapped around her waist and lifted her from the ground. The constriction and the squeeze made her nauseous. Ella’s pounding heart deafened her thoughts as the warmth of Eric’s breath reached her ear.

“You think I wouldn’t find you, Ella?”

“What did you do to Peter?”

She tried dispelling the negative thoughts that swirled through her head, but deep down she knew Peter was in danger. He needed her.

He laughed. “What do you think? He ran off with my wife.”

“I’m not *your wife*.”

Ella sunk her fingernails deep into Eric’s arms. He released her, and she ran towards the shed. The moonlight and stars were her guiding light as she navigated through the darkness. There was still no sign of Peter anywhere, but she kept running.

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Suddenly, she tripped, landing hard on her hands and knees. She turned her attention to the object on the ground responsible for her fall.

“Peter.”

She crawled to him, her hands trembled as she reached for him and cradled his head in her lap. With wet eyes she scanned his head and face, trying to find where he was bleeding. She finally located the wound on the side of his head that caused blood to stain his face. His breathing was shallow, but no matter how much she begged or pleaded with him, he wouldn't wake up.

“No, no, no. Peter, wake up. Please, wake up.”

Anguish gripped her heart as she held him, forgetting about her own safety.

“I'm so sorry, Peter. I caused this...all of this. Please don't leave me. Peter, please wake up.”

She squeezed her eyelids to stop the tears that clouded her vision. Eric ran to her, and hatred darkened his gray eyes as he stared down at them.

“I didn't want to do this, Ella, but I had no choice. He stole you from me. He—”



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“I love him, and you stole him from me. You selfish idiot. I don’t love you. I’ll never love you.”

Eric moved closer to her; a mixture of betrayal and desperation hardened his face.

“You don’t mean that. Peter could never do for you what my family and I can.” Eric laughed. “Ella, for goodness sake Peter and his mother are poor. Plus, his mother is the laughing stock of Belle Mount...a whore and her bastard child. Now stop being stubborn. I’m taking you back home to your parents’ and then we’ll get married as planned. This is our tradition. Accept it.”

Eric reached for her, but she wrangled out of his hold, secretly securing a stone in her grasp. She wouldn’t go back to Belle Mount. Not with him. Not ever.

“I’d rather die than return home to marry you.”

Eric’s brown locks fell into his eyes and he brushed them away in frustration.

“Your mother warned me about you. She warned me about your stubbornness and your stupidity. You don’t know what’s good for you, but I’ll forgive you. I love you, Ella. I did this so that we could be together.”

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His love meant nothing to her; it was empty and couldn't win her heart. Like his father, Eric wanted ownership, not a partner and not an equal. Ella wanted to live life according to Ella, not according to her parents, not according to traditions and certainly not according to Eric Charles.

With all the strength Ella could muster, she hurled the stone at Eric, striking him in the face. While he hollered in pain, Ella ran, hoping to get to Bill's. He would help.

*Run, Ella. Run. You have to save Peter. Peter, the love of my life.*

The sound of Eric's pounding footsteps reached Ella's ears, and it didn't take long for him to catch up to her and tackled her from behind. Soil from the fertilized ground filled her mouth, causing her to burst into a coughing fit.

"You made me do this, Ella. All you had to do was listen to me and come home. We could have been happy. I would have made sure you were happy and wanted for nothing."

Eric rolled her over so their gaze locked, and she watched as his face wrinkled in a tortured expression.





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“I could never be happy with someone like you.” Her words came out with such raw hatred that Eric recoiled. She spat in his face, knowing that she sealed her fate and Peter’s. This was the price of liberty.

“All you had to do was love me like I love you.”

Tears fell from Eric’s eyes as he wrapped his hands around her neck.

“Why couldn’t you just love me, Ella?” he repeatedly whispered, his grip getting tighter and tighter.







## SPECIAL MESSAGE TO THE READER

**T**hank you for reading *Call Her Liberty*; the first book in the Kingdom Series. Look out for more love, friendship and adventures to come in the books that will follow. The series has just started, are you willing to journey with me? Have fun! Don't forget to leave a review of your reading experience. I would appreciate connecting and hearing from you. Until next time, grace and peace!

