

Westward Hope

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Westward Hope

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Dedication

To Rosa Davis, who didn't have to learn forgiveness.
She lived it.

1

May 1846
St. Joseph, Mo.

Why him, why here, why now?

Caroline's heart felt like it could pound its way out of her chest. The commotion from the street and the murmur of voices in the hotel lobby faded as her brain tried to absorb the shock.

"You *know* each other?" Wagon master Pace Williams blurted.

Michael Moriarty stood in front of her, bigger than life. Six feet four, shoulders straining at his checked flannel shirt, black curls springy from a recent washing. The hard planes of his face were the same, and those cobalt blue eyes stared at her in disbelief.

"Caroline?" he repeated.

She drew on the manners from her Eastern childhood, steadied her voice, and turned to Williams. "Mr. Moriarty and I knew each other back in Ohio. He was my husband's best friend. Naturally, when I applied for the cook's job, I had no idea he was your scout."

"You never told me." Michael still had a good chunk of his Irish brogue, made strong by his anger. He looked as if he wanted to grab Williams by the throat.

"You never asked—not her name, not what town

she came from. Ohio's a pretty big place, Mike. And it's full of widows. But since you know each other, I'll let you help Miz O'Leary get settled, and you can catch up on the news. I'll take care of our other folks." He beamed as though he were doing them a favor, and doffed his worn, wide-brimmed hat. "Glad you're here, ma'am. Mike'll help you find what you need." Pace retreated, his tall form absorbed into the milling crowd.

Michael's dark blue eyes that had always brimmed with fun and teasing were now as baffled as hers must look.

She could still bolt. But there was nowhere to run to and nowhere to go—except the West.

"How did you—"

"I answered Mr. Williams' advertisement for a cook. There was nothing for me in Summer Pasture, not after Dan died. So I decided to work my way West."

"I was sorry to hear about Daniel."

Not sorry enough to come to his funeral, or send a note. Not sorry enough to—No. She wouldn't feel anything. That wasn't a luxury she couldn't afford. Was that pity in his eyes? If so, she'd *walk* to the Oregon Territory.

"I'll help you get your things upstairs," he said. "The rooms are simple, but you won't be in them that long."

"Yes. That will be fine." She walked ahead, her spine straight, feeling his gaze on her back every step of the way.

~*~

Michael squeezed through the door of the room

Caroline would share with two of the Harkness girls. The room had two iron bedsteads, clothes pegs, a dresser, and plain plank floor. The girls were already there, and were bouncing and squealing on the feather mattresses.

Caroline hung up her hat, stood before the wavy mirror, and re-pinned her hair.

She wore a pale green traveling suit. Her hair was the color of old honey, her hazel eyes wide in a heart-shaped face. She had filled out some from her waiflike schoolteacher days. Caroline. Here. And more beautiful than ever.

"What do we do next, Mr. Moriarty?" Her voice was light, but he caught the underpinning of tension.

"Well...Mrs. Harkness is busy with the little ones. Ben and I must check on the wagons. Would you like to come?" he asked, and then berated himself.

Caroline considered, a world of activity going on behind her serene face. "I couldn't possibly."

And suddenly it became vastly important that she come. That he not lose her again.

"Ma said we have to take naps," Rose Harkness, the twelve-year-old, said, pausing in mid-jump. "Only Sam'll get out of it, because he's to drive the wagon."

Caroline didn't look a bit tired.

"I could read," she said, desperation tingeing her tone. "My books—"

"They're all in Pa's second wagon, under the cookware," Rose said. "And the anvil," she added helpfully.

"Is there a library in St. Joseph?"

Michael suppressed a smile

Caroline's shoulders sagged. "There are other people going to the wagon yard?"

Her expression wasn't hatred, it was fear, and it made his heart pound. Yes, she disliked him that much. "I told you," he said in an even tone. "Ben's coming, and the boy, Samuel. And there's nigh five hundred other people out there."

"I guess I could. For a little while." Sounded like she'd be taking medicine.

"Can you handle a horse?"

"You know I can." The words slipped out and she turned away from him, seemingly ashamed of even this much of a history. "I'll be down in twenty minutes."

~*~

Caroline re-pinned her hair. Dan had marveled, "So much hair for such a little woman." But he'd been not much taller than she. Not like Michael Moriarty, who'd never met a doorway he couldn't duck. Slipping behind a screen, she fumbled with the buttons on her old riding clothes.

As she folded her street clothes and stowed her carpet bag in the corner, her fingers closed around a hard, slim object on top of her Bible. She pulled out the miniature of Dan, painted by a traveling artist the year before their wedding. He'd worn his only black suit, the one she'd buried him in. And though his face was sober—nobody ever smiled on canvas—a glint of laughter hovered behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. Of course, she remembered his slender frame best in overalls. Daniel Patrick Francis O'Leary, a gift she almost hadn't opened.

On the trip down from Ohio she'd basked in the warmth and laughter of the Harkness clan. Oh, it had been good to be part of a family again.

Now Michael was here, and Dan wasn't, and she felt his loss more keenly than ever.

The children were gone, summoned by Martha. Caroline sat on the bed and put her face in her hands. Oh, what was she doing here? The West *and* Michael Moriarty. But there was no place to run to. Not back to Ohio, to be snubbed and scorned; not back to Massachusetts, a home that didn't exist anymore. *Oh, Daniel, I don't want to be here, and I'm so afraid. I didn't know what else to do. Please, please tell me this is right.*

Daniel, born in America, had only the faintest Irish lilt to his speech. His accent deepened when he was talking to his parents—or mimicking Michael.

And she knew what he'd say back to her. "Caroline, it's not me you should be asking."

~*~

Michael's hands shook as he saddled three horses, one for him, one for Ben and his son Samuel, and especially the one for Caroline. Then he waited for Caroline.

Pace joined him on the porch and lit a cigar. The smoke curled out into the bright May morning and the bustle of St. Joseph. "Sure you don't want to sign on again? Best scout I ever had."

"Thank you, kindly, Pace, but no. 'Tis the last one. If I stay on the trail too long, I'll end up like yourself, sure I will." A rootless man to whom everyone was a stranger. "Do any of the new people look promising, then? Anyone we won't have to nurse along the way?"

"Couple," Pace said. "There's the family Mrs. O'Leary rode in with, Ben and Martha Harkness, and their five kids. Ben's a tough nut, Martha's a worker, and the kids are well-trained. They shouldn't give us

any trouble. There's a man from Wisconsin, Caleb Taylor, looks as though he can handle anything. The others..."

They'd find out soon enough, sure and they would. The two-thousand-mile overland trail journey reduced each man, woman, and child to their substance. There was no way to hide what one was inside.

Except for him.

"And," Pace paused for emphasis. "You'll need a woman when you start your ranch. There's more than one of them has marriageable daughters."

Michael snorted. "That's all I need." Respectable women were trouble, and young respectable women were more trouble than any man deserved.

"Better you than me." Pace wasn't just marriage-shy; he barely acknowledged its existence.

Loneliness never quite left Michael because no woman would want him once she knew who he really was, when she'd clawed her way past the good looks and silver tongue that were his currency in this country. Better for him this way. Better for some poor girl. And better the trail, at least for now.

"People been askin' about ya up ahead. When you'd be gettin' to St. Joe, what outfit you're with. Couple Irish fellas." Pace told him.

Michael's heart hammered. Anyone but them...

"Anyone tell them anything?"

Pace's rare laugh rang out over the sunny morning. "Someone told 'em you're a teamster truckin' goods back East. They're headed toward Virginy."

Someone had bought Michael some time. Time he'd never thought he'd need again.

He'd have to thank whoever had done it, when the

threat was gone. Probably Jenny, the saloon girl who'd tried to capture his attention on previous visits. Jenny was quick.

Two nuns passed, their attention on the plank sidewalk and their hands tucked inside their sleeves. Michael hated nuns. Ironic, since he had a sister in a cloister in Dublin. But he hated priests even more. Religion was a waste of time. Except for Daniel. Daniel's faith hadn't been like that. But nothing about Daniel had been like other people.

Pace stretched a little. "Come on inside, meet the Harknesses."

"What about Mrs. O'Leary—"

"She's a woman. She'll be a while," Pace drawled.

Inside the lobby, pilgrims to the Oregon Territory lined up to register for their rooms. Others slumped on the mismatched furniture or stared at the flocked velvet walls. He caught snatches of their conversation. "Where you from?"

"Charleston."

"Philadelphia."

"Boston."

"Albany."

Pace paused by a shabby velvet sofa, where a couple sat almost obscured by hatboxes, suitcases, and a small trunk. A girl, maybe two years old, slept in her mother's capacious calico lap. A bright red sunbonnet hid most of her face. "You folks settlin' in all right?"

The man, sturdy in his dust-caked clothes, grinned up at Pace. "Doing well, thank you, Mr. Williams. The rooms are ready, but we didn't want to wake Hannah, so we sent the older kids on up."

"This here's Michael Moriarty, our scout. Best man on the trail today. Mike, Ben and Martha Harkness."

Pace must like this couple. He wasn't much for introductions, or for talking to the passengers more than he had to.

Ben Harkness extended a meaty paw. "Glad to know you, Moriarty. Good to know we got someone else to depend on."

"We got five kids, Mr. Moriarty." Martha Harkness's rich laugh caused the emigrants, however weary, to turn around and smile. "Hope we don't take up too much of your time."

"Children are never a waste of time," Michael said.

It was blarney, the easy flattery that rolled off his tongue. Too easy, but it worked on Mrs. Harkness, who dimpled before she turned back to her husband. "Ben, I forgot to tell ya—"

They bent their heads together, hers dark and shining, his with the brown strands already thin, shutting out the world the way couples did.

As he went back to the porch, Michael sneaked a quick backward glance. If only...

He'd had a built-in excuse as Pace's scout: one couldn't ask a woman to take on the trail life. It was all most of them could do to make it from St. Joe or Independence to Oregon, and the trip usually broke a few.

When he got to the Colorado River, built up his ranch, and stopped roaming he had plans. Ranching was a hard life and a woman—*his* woman—would make it much easier. The triumph of building a life together was what made it all matter. Having something to pass on to someone. It was what Da and Ma had had, what this Ben and his Martha possessed.

A woman to fill his hollow places, a woman to

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complete him.

But he wasn't the marrying kind.

And no woman alive could erase the scars Ireland
had carved on him.

2

Michael recognized the clothes and the wide-brimmed hat Caroline was wearing from when she, he, and Dan used to ride together, thundering over the plains on his uncle's best horses. She stepped off the porch dressed in a divided skirt, faded plaid shirtwaist, and worn boots. He held out cupped hands, but she used a mounting block to swing onto the back of the Harknesses' mare.

He, Caroline, and Ben rode single file, with Caroline in the middle, out of the dusty center of St. Joseph. When the road widened just outside of town, Caroline spurred her horse, cantering ahead of them.

Ben pulled up beside Michael. "She's a nice little woman. Too bad about her husband. She's been a big help to Martha with the kids." Ben was a compact, competent-looking man, with broad shoulders and powerful arms. He didn't seem afraid of work like so many they'd hauled West.

Michael steered the talk away from Caroline. Seeing her here was too raw, too new. "What brings you west, Mr. Harkness?"

"Heard too many stories. I had a good patch of land in Ohio, it done well by me, but too many people came back and told me what was on the other side of them mountains. I couldn't take it no more. I didn't want to die not knowing."

“Is Martha behind you on this?” Michael had seen too many women who weren’t, whose frozen silence told their husbands how they felt about leaving all they’d ever known—or worse, the ones who’d berated their husbands through all six months of the trip.

“Martha’s about as good as they get.” Ben laughed freely in the morning air. “She’ll let me know when she isn’t, don’t you worry.”

Ben’s boy, Samuel, just turned fourteen, rode pillion behind his father.

“Are you enjoying the trip, then?” Michael asked him.

Samuel’s smile lit his entire face. “I been waiting for this all my life, Mr. Moriarty. Or something like it, anyway. Me and Pa, we always wondered what was around the next bend. I’m gonna see the elephant!”

“You’re not running wild,” Ben said in his mild way. “You got to keep up your studies. Think I’ll see what your teacher has planned for you.”

Ben spurred his horse and caught up with Caroline.

She leaned toward the boy, starting a conversation in that easy way she had with children. Sam seemed diffident at first, but he warmed up, and Michael saw both their heads thrown back in laughter. Would she ever laugh with Michael like that?

He should have gone back for Dan’s funeral. But by then he’d burnt his bridges. And there was the whip of Ireland driving him on, keeping him running. They wouldn’t take him. Not without a fight. Still, what would it be like to touch her, to hold that heart-shaped face in his hands, to stroke that rich mane of hair and let it tumble from its pins? No. He’d given up all chances with Caroline when he’d left Summer Pasture.

But he could still talk to her. "We're coming up to the wagon lot," Michael called to Caroline.

Caroline dismounted and tethered her mare to an iron post.

Without speaking, they took in the panorama of the wagon yard, the hundreds of vessels being prepared for the Western journey. The yard stretched over acres of soil, trampled and baked in the sun to hardness. Nothing would ever grow here, nothing but dreams. The clang of the smith's anvil competed with the pounding of the carpenter's hammer, and the good-natured shouts—and curses—of men. Sawdust and dirt colored the air brown.

Caroline coughed and rubbed her eyes.

"I should not have invited you," he murmured. "'Tis no place for a woman."

"You needn't try to protect me, Michael." Her expression was defiant. But she'd passed over the chance to embarrass him. "Running the farm by myself took care of a lot of my squeamishness. And I need to know everything I can about this trip. May I see our wagon, please?" She moved ahead and stumbled over a rock.

He took her arm, and she didn't shrink away as he guided her over the rough ground. But the touch told him enough: under the new womanly figure she was thin, the brittle thinness of near starvation. He knew what hunger looked like, felt like. "Have you been getting enough to eat?"

"Mrs. Harkness made a lunch for us, for the trail. Ham sandwiches, boiled eggs." Her voice lingered over the memory. "Cookies and apples. It lasted a couple of days. Then we ate at inns. I helped her with the children, and they paid for my meals."

“Before that?”

She didn't answer. She wouldn't lie.

He silently blessed Martha Harkness for seeing to this need.

Caroline met with the carpenter who did all their work, Jimmy Dulaine. She climbed up into the wagon bed without assistance, and listened as Jimmy described how he made the tongues of oak and soaked the canopies in linseed oil to repel the rain. She asked questions, nodding seriously as Jimmy spoke of axles and oxen, of weight-bearing and endurance. She crawled around the inside, inspecting the shelves and bins Jimmy had crafted, as curious as ever.

Jimmy went back to work, clambering over the top of the wagon to secure the canopy.

Caroline turned to Michael. “It looks safe enough.”

“Jimmy's the best. I've never seen one of his wagons *not* make the journey. And he makes them a little wider. Six feet rather than four, so you can sleep inside. Barely.” He took her arm again. She stiffened, but let him guide her. “Ben will be a while—Jimmy hasn't started his wagons. And he couldn't pry Samuel away even if they were done. Do you want to ride back to the hotel, and have some dinner?” He held his breath.

“Yes.”

Caroline mounted on her own, clicked to the mare, and cantered off. Her small, slim figure sat erect in her saddle, her hat slipping off and hanging down her back. She seemed glad to be riding again. What had life been like for her alone on that farm, without Daniel? Had to be pretty bad to drive her to a trip few women made, and even fewer made alone.

He pulled up beside her.

She slowed the mount to a walk. "When do we leave, Michael?"

"End of the week. Jimmy's finished a small wagon for Pace and me, but there's others need them done and other carpenters who aren't as quick. We need to pick up the rest of our food, too."

Caroline fitted the hat back on her head. "I'll help. I'm not used to being idle, and Martha and I were planning on shopping together."

"I can tell you the best places to go. Pace and I have an account at Denton's. He's a bit less of a crook than some of the others. And I'll give you a list. You'll need six months' worth of supplies. Everything." He grew tired of pretending. "Caroline, why did you answer Pace's advertisement? What made you decide to come?"

Her heart-shaped face was shaded by her hat brim, and he could not see her eyes.

"I prayed about it, Michael. And the Lord told me it would be all right."

"So you're 'saved.' I can see Dan's hand in that."

"Daniel didn't 'save' me, Michael. He led me to the Lord Jesus Christ, and I accepted His sacrifice. It's made all the difference in the world." She smiled up at him.

For a moment he lost sight of everything else. "Well," he said at last. "That's good, Caroline. You'll be remembering I don't have much to do with religion. The priests and nuns back home took care of that. In my last year in the parish school, I'm guessing my knuckles got rapped twice a day."

He'd left parish school when he'd gotten big enough to punch the curate in charge. It hadn't even been for himself. He could pretty much take whatever

they threw at him. It was for his little brother, Dickie, standing gloveless in the snow because he'd misspelled a word too many times. Though the day was warm, Michael shivered. Daniel, and his faith, had been different from the curate's. But no God of Daniel's could make up for Ireland.

He had never told her, or anyone else, the truth about Ireland. He'd stuck to the funny stories, true and fanciful, and he'd dined out on those stories for years. He'd run to Mexico for a while, and then crisscrossed this country for two years. But he'd never been able to outrun Ireland. Hawthorne had connections, money, and patience. Hawthorne's reach could span an ocean, and half a continent.

Michael had to get on the trail as soon as possible. He'd go out to the wagon yard and hammer boards himself if it would make this trip come more quickly. He was running again. No, nothing had changed. He glanced over at the delicate features of the woman he'd never expected to see again, the woman who was now under his protection. As if *he* could protect anyone.

I never lied to you, Caroline. I just didn't tell you everything.

3

They gathered that night on the hotel porch. Pace held court from a rocking chair as people crowded around to ask questions.

Michael leaned against a pillar, his arms folded and his lips about to quirk into a grin. Caroline had seen that look in Ohio, the look that said he'd heard it all before.

Under her red sunbonnet Baby Hannah looked out, wide-eyed, from Martha's lap. Though it was already late, no one was in a hurry to leave the soft May evening.

Caroline tried to keep awake. The hotel dinner hadn't been especially well-cooked, but there was plenty of it and she'd taken a second helping. It was good to be able to eat again. When the buyer came to pay her for the farm, she had been down to her last pound of flour. Her Lord had taken her that far, and He would take her through this.

Michael Moriarty had the look in his blue eyes that said, "You're exactly who I want to be talking to right now." Even if one wasn't. Oh, Michael was a charmer, still.

But there was something under the charm, something she had sensed in their Summer Pasture days, the stories he wasn't telling. He'd covered for them with chatter. He was regaling the men with a story from the trail, even now. She could only pick out

the words “ambush” and “too much blood.”

Several of the older girls, the ones ready to start their own establishments, stole covert glances at Michael. Were they wondering what it would be like to be held by him, to hear endearments in that rich, Irish brogue? She could have told them not to bother. It would end badly. It always did with Michael.

She wasn't stupid enough to get mixed up with Michael. Just lonely enough.

“I like her bonnet,” she said to Martha.

Martha smoothed the tomato-red cloth. “Thank you. I made it so's we wouldn't lose her out there. Hannah's a wanderer. But anyone can spot a red hat.” She looked at the toddler. “Do you want to sit with Miss Caroline?”

Hannah held out her arms, and Caroline welcomed the warm little bundle into her lap.

Tom Potter and his wife, Sarah, came into the light. A large paisley shawl could not disguise her distended belly or the splay-footed way she walked. She was pretty, with big, dark eyes and long lashes, her glossy brown hair still in a girlish braid. She couldn't be older than sixteen. Tom looked at Sarah as though she were made of crystal.

Pace jumped up and Tom guided his wife to the vacant rocker beside Caroline.

The girl gave Caroline a shy smile. “‘Evenin’, Miz O’Leary.”

Tom joined the cluster of men as they continued to talk of their plans, to thumb their dog-eared guidebooks and swap ideas.

Pace drew a map in the sawdust on the porch floor, and a group of men huddled over it.

“Good evening to *you*,” Caroline said a shade too