

SHE LOVED THE MAN SHE
HATED

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“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love...”

— 1 JOHN 4:18

SHE LOVED THE MAN SHE HATED

Utah Territory

October, 1851

The door creaked open, destroying beautiful silence, stealing away the cabin's warmth. He didn't say anything at first, only brushed away the dust and lifted his hat to the peg.

Then he turned. Firelight caught in his eyes, mingled with emotions she didn't recognize. "We're leaving. Get your things."

The inside of her chest caved. *No.*

"Don't just stand there." He crossed the room and groped for the things on the mantel. Her doilies, his pipe, the only tintype ever taken of their child. His gaze lingered on the portrait before he tossed the things aside. "We're leaving the wagon behind. Anything you can't stuff in your saddlebag stays."

She wished she had a voice, but she didn't. If she had any strength at all, she'd beg him not to rip her away again. As if he'd listen. He never did. He hadn't listened when she'd wept at the tiny grave, with her fingers in the dirt, with the child's marker still green and fresh.

"I'll get the things myself." He swore and slammed himself

into their bedroom. Banging, knocking, destroying things inside. Just like always.

When he came back out, a bulging sack was draped across his shoulder. “Now get your shawl and come on.”

“I don’t want to.”

He was halfway to the door when she spoke. He spun around, dropped the sack. “What did you say?”

“Don’t make me go.” A whisper of a sound. Couldn’t see past the blur. “Come back for me when you’re finished, but don’t make me go.”

Rage tightened his lips, his cheeks. “You’re my wife.”

“Please, Jude—”

“Please nothing.” He flew toward her, catching her shoulders. His fingers dug into her skin, but she hardly felt the pain. Not anymore. “I’d drag you by my horse before I’d leave you here.”

A sob caught in her throat. “You could come back for me.”

“You’re not listening.” His hands moved upward. Caught her neck, her jaw. “I said you’re going.”

“Another poster? Who is it this time, Jude? Are you going to shoot him in the back too?”

The back of his hand smacked her mouth. She ripped from his hold and stumbled backwards, cupping another sob.

He cornered her into a wall. Didn’t raise his hand, though. Only looked at her—looked long and hard, until she finally saw his tremble. He pulled a folded paper from his pocket. “Open it.”

She didn’t care. Didn’t matter who he was after this time. Another bounty, another faceless victim, another heap over her husband’s saddle.

Even so, she pried open the crinkled paper and read. “Jude.” Panic replaced the grief. “Jude, what is this?”

“You ought to know.”

“Murder?” The question hung. “You killed someone?”

“Don’t act so surprised.”

“But outside of the law—”

“It was an accident.” Sweat formed along his brow, sliding

down his temples. “I don’t suppose you’d believe that, but it happens to be the truth.”

Believe him? She’d stopped doing that with the first reward money he’d planted in her lap.

“I shot back in self-defense, but a jury’s not going to see it that way.” He took ahold of her arm. “None of that matters now, anyway. We’re getting out of here.” He pulled her to the door, but she flung loose before he could drag her across the threshold.

She hurried for the tintype still lying on the floor. *God, have mercy.* Then, with one last glance at the cabin, she hurried into the night with another goodbye on her breath.



THE NIGHT MELTED INTO DAY, THE DAY INTO DUSK, THE DUSK into night all over again. She never took the hardtack he offered. Never even took a drink when he twisted open the canteen lid and held it toward her.

She wanted nothing from him. Not anymore. She only sat on the other side of the fire, watching as he unfolded his bedroll and turned his saddle upside down.

Murder. The word again, the one she couldn’t escape. Before, she might have justified what he did. She might have lied to herself enough times that she could have believed he wasn’t a killer—not like the ones he shot down.

But she couldn’t lie about this. Not when the poster was tucked inside of her coat pocket, folded against the portrait of their child.

It is of God’s mercies. Heat burned across her soul. *I would rather my son be dead than to become the man his father is.*

Something cracked in the sky.

Jude’s hand groped for his gun. Then he paused, eyes flicking toward hers. “Thunder.” He sank the gun back in its holster. “It was thunder.”

She nodded, but she couldn’t speak. She half wished it wasn’t

thunder, that the sound had come from a gun somewhere in the darkness. She wished the woods were full of lawmen. She wished the trees were hidden with a force great enough to stop Jude Duhring.

He jerked his blanket from the ground. “Come on. No sense waiting for the rain.”

Mutely, with her blanket still wrapped across her shoulders, she climbed back atop her horse. She followed him through the darkness, deeper into foreign land, until the skies opened up with rain.

The downpour pelted her face.

Splish-splash. Clip-clop. Hooves stumbled through mud and rocks. Farther and farther into the expanse of black wilderness. Her fingers numbed. She kept her eyes closed, because she couldn't see anyway and she could almost rest—

Hands yanked her down.

A cry rose to her lips, but her husband's cold hand pressed her mouth. “There's an old shack up ahead. We're leaving the horses here.”

Couldn't even think. Forced another nod.

She heard him securing them to a tree, then he grabbed her elbow and led her through the darkness.

The shack was old, creaky, as if the boards were prepared to cave the moment they were safely inside.

Jude lit a candle, then a string of curse words filled the silence. “No bed.” He ripped off his wet clothes and slung them across the room. “Go on.” He motioned toward her dress. “Get it off. There's a dry one in the sack.”

She stepped out of the dripping garment and changed while he nursed a fire in the brick hearth. When he turned back around, his eyes hesitated on her face. “Cold?”

Odd, that he would ask such a thing. She shivered in answer.

“There's no dry blankets.”

She stared at him.

“No bed, either.” Did he forget he'd already said that? He moved forward and grasped her hand. “We'll lie here together,

Bethany. You'll get warm again in no time." Almost gentle, like a whisper from the past, like a man she no longer knew.

She settled next to him on the cold, gritty floorboards. Inches apart, worlds apart, but he bridged the gap between them.

"Come here." He placed her head into his shoulder and eased her arm across his middle. "Just lie still and try to get some rest."

She'd forgotten the sound of his heartbeat. Slower now than it used to be, like a murmur or a soft cry. But he smelled the same. His arms felt the same. His chest rose and fell the same.

Her eyes crammed shut before the tears could come. *But he isn't the same at all.*



"BETHANY."

She wove through layers of sleep, until the fog began to clear—

"Bethany!"

The panic jolted her awake. She raised her head from the floorboards.

Only then did she see. He stood with his back to the wall, his fingers slid onto the trigger of his gun. Fear transformed his face, made his eyes less severe, his voice less hard, "Bethany, you go out that door."

Her throat closed. *What?*

"Go on, now. There isn't time to argue." He busted a window pane with the butt of his gun. Glass shattered to the floor. "She's coming out!"

Dread took wings inside of her stomach. Still, she didn't move. "Jude..."

"They're not going to hurt you. Just walk out slow and easy."

"What if they do?"

"Do what?"

"Shoot."

His lips twitched. "Do you want me to hang?"

“No, but what good will—”

“I need the distraction, Beth.” A vein bulged in his forehead. “While you’re walking with your hands up, I’ll slip out the back to where we left the horses. Chances are they haven’t spotted them yet.”

Of course not. He knew all the tricks. He would have known to keep the horses a distance away, just in case they’d need an escape.

Only he was taking the escape himself—and leaving her behind. She should have known.

“Go on!”

Her feet stumbled forward. She paused beside him. “Jude...”

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Come with me.”

“And join a necktie party? No thanks.”

“It won’t be like that. We’ll get a lawyer, and if you’re innocent—”

“That’s just it, Bethany.” His gaze stung hers. “I’m not innocent. Now go out that door before I push you out myself.”

Ashes fluttered inside until they burst into flames. She grasped the knob, swung the door open with more force than she’d meant to.

A cold, dewy morning stared back at her.

I hate him. A step forward. He’d told her to keep her hands up, but it didn’t really matter. If they were going to shoot her, nothing would stop them.

Hate. Another step. Then another. *God, I hate him so much I could die.*

“That’s far enough, ma’am.”

A man slithered from behind a tree, the star on his vest glinting as if in pride. “Silas, cover the back.”

Another man darted around the cabin.

The sheriff approached and kept his gun level. “You two alone in there?”

Who else would be with them?

His brow raised. “Can’t you speak?”

“There’s no one else.”

“Good. I want you to know, ma’am, that we’re not after you. Anything your husband did is—”

A bullet cracked.

A shiver crawled along her spine. *He’s dead.* She half hoped, half agonized. *Dear God, he’s dead.*

The sheriff’s eyes drifted past her to someone approaching. “Silas?”

“Yes, sir.”

Bethany finally turned.

The deputy flung her husband at her feet—unscathed, it seemed, but for the gun pointed at his back.

“Looks like the bounty hunter wasn’t rightly happy with his line o’ work.” A grin spread across the deputy’s face. “He done climbed to the other side o’ the fence—and there ain’t no goin’ back now.”



THERE’D ALWAYS BEEN SO MANY THINGS BETWEEN THEM. HIS drinking, the gambling, the posters—their child’s death.

But never bars. She stood in front of the cell with her fingers curled around the iron. “I want to know.”

Hooded eyes glared back at her. “Know what?”

“What happened.”

“I already told you.”

“No.” Her stomach roiled inside of her. “You didn’t.”

He sprang from the bunk, his hands thrusting into his pockets. He never looked at her. “A man named Orville Henson. I met him on a riverboat a few years back—the time I brought in that Mexican renegade.”

She remembered well. The body was returned to the sheriff with two bullets.

“Henson was in Tucson a few months ago with a deck of cards. I caught him cheating and called him on it. Raked in all the stakes.”

“Then why did you kill him?”

“Because when I was leaving, he had his two hard cases stop me in the alley and work me over. They stole everything I had—including the reward I’d just gotten from the sheriff.”

“And then?”

“I went to Henson’s room and settled the score.”

Tears stacked like tiny blocks, ready to crumble and fall.
“Jude...”

“I didn’t plan on killing him. I only wanted my money back. But he pushed me into it, and next thing I knew he was...”

She turned away before she could hear any more. She started for the door.

“Bethany.”

No, Jude.

“Bethany!”

She flung herself out and slammed him inside alone.

The sheriff glanced up from his desk.

“Loud one, ain’t he?” In a chair by the stove, the deputy met her eyes with a flicker of amusement. “Cain’t help wonderin’ if he’ll holler when that rope starts burnin’ his neck.”

“That’s enough, Silas.” The sheriff rose from his chair. “I’ll walk you to your hotel, ma’am, if you’re ready.”

“No need.” She hurried outside before either could say another word.



THE FOUR WALLS CLOSING HER IN WERE TINIER THAN ANY she’d ever known. Nothing like her cabin, with the handstitched curtains and the rocking chair and the decorated mantel.

She tried to remember the home before, then the home before that, but the memories only morphed into nightmares.

Especially one.

Quaint little house with shutters, a small garden, and a cottonwood tree in the yard. They’d almost been happy there, the three of them.

Jude was gone a lot, doing things she pretended not to notice, bringing back money she didn't ask where it came from.

He was away again when the sickness came. The first day brought a light fever. By that night, she had held the four-year-old in her arms and rocked him into slumber.

With the dawn, he was dead.

She hadn't known when Jude would return. A week? Another month? The body couldn't wait that long. She'd been forced to bury the child without him.

Bethany slipped the mourning portrait from her pocket. Her finger swept across the tiny little face, the lifeless baby eyes. She'd dressed him carefully the day after he died, and she'd even helped the photographer situate his cold body erect. So they'd always remember. So Jude would have something left of his son when he returned.

Oh, Jude. She remembered how his knees sank to the floor. The only time she'd ever heard him weep, and his hands had rocked his face and stifled his broken sounds.

The next day, he had a bottle in his hand when he told her they were leaving. She'd never seen the grave again.



A LOUD RAP LURCHED HER FROM THE BED.

"Mrs. Duhring?"

She swept disheveled hair from her face and crept to the door. She didn't open it. "Who is it?"

"Sheriff, ma'am." The voice was gruff. "It's about your husband."

"What about him?"

"I don't have time to explain. You might as well come see for yourself."

Only then did the noises penetrate her hotel room, the distant echo of shouts and cries. She rushed to the window.

Below, the streets were filled with more people than she'd

ever seen in her life. All brandishing guns. All gathered around the jailhouse.

And then she saw the rope.

“Sheriff!” She hurried out into the hall, but he had already left. He shouldn’t have come for her in the first place. He should have stayed at the jailhouse, protecting her husband, making use of his badge.

Only she doubted he cared about justice in this case. None of them did. Why should they?

If anyone deserved a hanging, it was Jude Duhring. Not just for the murder he’d committed outside of the law, but for all the ones he committed inside the law. She knew their thoughts well enough.

She hurried downstairs and crossed the street. Dusk was already settling in, deepening the cold, the nightmare.

“I say we hang ‘im!”

“Yeah,” echoed another. “Circuit judge won’t be ‘round for another three days. What’s the use?”

Bethany squeezed her way through the crowd, close enough she could see the sheriff flip up his coat collar. His breath clouded in the cold. “I say you’re all drunk. Why don’t you go home and let your wife give you a little history on the law.”

“Don’t talk to us about the law, Chisum! Ain’t nobody gonna get hurt if you just step to the side—”

“You know I don’t hold to no lynching, John.”

“Don’t you ’member that time he brought in the Mason kid? Shot in the head, he was. Right in the back of his skull!”

She shuddered, climbed the landing. “Sheriff.”

The man didn’t even turn. “Go on inside. I’ll try to hold ‘em till you’ve said your goodbyes.”

Blood froze in her veins.

When the sheriff’s eyes finally landed on her, they were almost sorry and kind. “You’d better hurry, though.”

Hot tears burned as she entered the jailhouse. Everything was warm, blurry, colors that all blended together.

Then a face stepped before her. “Vistin’ hours done been over for an hour, ma’am.”

“Let me see him.”

The deputy’s unshaven cheeks stretched with a grin. “How’d a pretty little woman like you get stuck with an ol’ bounty hunter, anyway?”

She struck his face before she could reason through. *I’m sorry.* The apology rippled through her but never left her lips. Instead, she said again, “Let me see him.”

Wordless, the deputy grabbed the keys from the desk and led her through another door. “You have five minutes.”

“Will you unlock the cell?”

“You can talk just as well through bars.” With a curse, he slammed the door behind him and left them alone.

Silence sealed her lips as she faced him.

“Bethany.” He stood with his arms limp at his sides, his forehead pressed against the bars. “You shouldn’t have come.”

Shouldn’t have come? She didn’t understand why he would say that. He always wanted her, always needed her near him, always dragged her away from another home she loved. Why shouldn’t he want her now?

“I don’t want you to see.” He lowered his eyes as if he couldn’t look at her. “You stay away when they’re doing the hanging, you hear?”

Still, she had no voice.

“Take me back to Willow Springs. I want to be buried by...” His voice caught. “By my son.”

Another grave—one she shouldn’t grieve over, one she should have known was coming. She hated him, hated him for so long. Where was the hatred now?

Only it couldn’t be mustered. He was too vulnerable, too afraid. His pain had a way of slipping through the bars and inflicting her.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?”

What was there to say?

“Bethany.” His hand slipped through and reached for her.

She never answered his touch. Instead, she shrank back and pushed her way through the creaking door.

The deputy sat in a chair, but he craned his neck back with a grin. "Bout time you finished up in there. Folks outside are gettin' mighty loud. I s'pect they'll bust in here any second."

"I want his things."

The deputy blinked. "What?"

"My husband's things. I want them."

The grin faltered. "You do know I already claimed the reward, right?"

She glared at him.

"Well." He bent over the desk, yanked open a drawer. "If'n you want his things 'fore he's even dead, what do I care?"

Bethany lunged, groping for his holster. The gun was in her fingers before he could straighten.

"What the devil." He jerked to his feet. "Give me that."

"Turn around."

"I said—"

"Turn!" She held the gun with both hands, finger slipping across the trigger. "Now."

Another curse, even as he did her bidding.

God, forgive me. Her chest throbbed. She whipped the pistol into the man's head, sending him to the ground.

Then she sprinted back to her husband's cell with the keys.

"Bethany, what are you doing?"

She swung open the door. "Come on—"

"Where'd you get that gun? Give me that."

"No." She leveled it on him. "I can't, Jude. As soon as we get you out of this town, I'm taking you in."

"You're what?"

"There'll be a hearing. You'll have your chance."

"A chance to hang on a gallows instead of a tree limb." His fingers stretched for the weapon. "Give it here."

"No, Jude."

"You'll never get us out of here. There's only one door."

"And we're going through it."

“They’ll shoot—”

“Not with the sheriff there.” She motioned him to the door. “You go first.”

The floorboards creaked under their weight. They passed through one doorway, then through another. His fingers closed around the knob. “Listen, Beth, if you give me the blasted gun—”

“Go on, Jude. Open it.”

As soon as it banged open, she leaped out behind her husband. He tackled the sheriff’s arms, even as she raised her gun to his back.

“Don’t anyone move,” she managed. “All we want is to get out of here.”

The crowd stood frozen, the guns lowering, the mouths gaping in shock.

“You’ll never get away with this.” The sheriff’s warning, but she couldn’t go back now.

“Just walk with us to the stables. You won’t be harmed, sir, and I promise I’ll turn him in as soon as we get to another—”

A bullet cracked from behind.

Silence.

Then the gun slid from her fingers. *God, no.* Her legs collapsed beneath her. Pain seared through her back, but it lasted only until the numbness spread.

“Silas.” A murmur from the sheriff.

Her eyes rolled to where he stood in the doorway, his pistol lowering. He didn’t smile, only stared at her.

Then another face. One she hated, only it brought her comfort. “Beth.” Choked, raspy word. “Beth.”

No.

His hand slipped under her neck, drawing her into his arms. His heartbeat again. How soft the sound. “Beth, dear heaven, what have you done?”

Blood filled her mouth. She tried to hold it back, but it trickled down her lips and trailed onto his shirt.

“Don’t understand.” His sob. “Don’t understand why you’d do

this...should have let me die..." Shaking, clinging to her, burying his face into her hair. "Dear heaven, why didn't you let me die?"

Jude...

Cold wind rustled through them. Must have been night already, for the streets were growing dark. Everything was dark. Couldn't see much of anything anymore.

"I'm sorry."

I know.

"I never wanted you to get hurt."

Oh, Jude...

"Why would you do it, Beth? Why would you die for me?" His warm face pressed into her cheek, his lips into her ear. "Why?"

Because I love you. Her body writhed. She wasn't certain if she had spoken the words, or if her soul had only cried them. The night grew deeper and deeper.

With her last breath, she whispered yet another goodbye.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



WILLOWY WHISPER is a Christian fiction author, graphic designer, and photographer. She lives in a beautiful place called West Virginia, nestled between mountain and field. She is the author of eleven novels, ten of which are published, and numerous short stories. She enjoys playing the piano, guitar, mandolin, and ukulele. She is also a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, an incurable romantic, and a passionate dreamer.

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