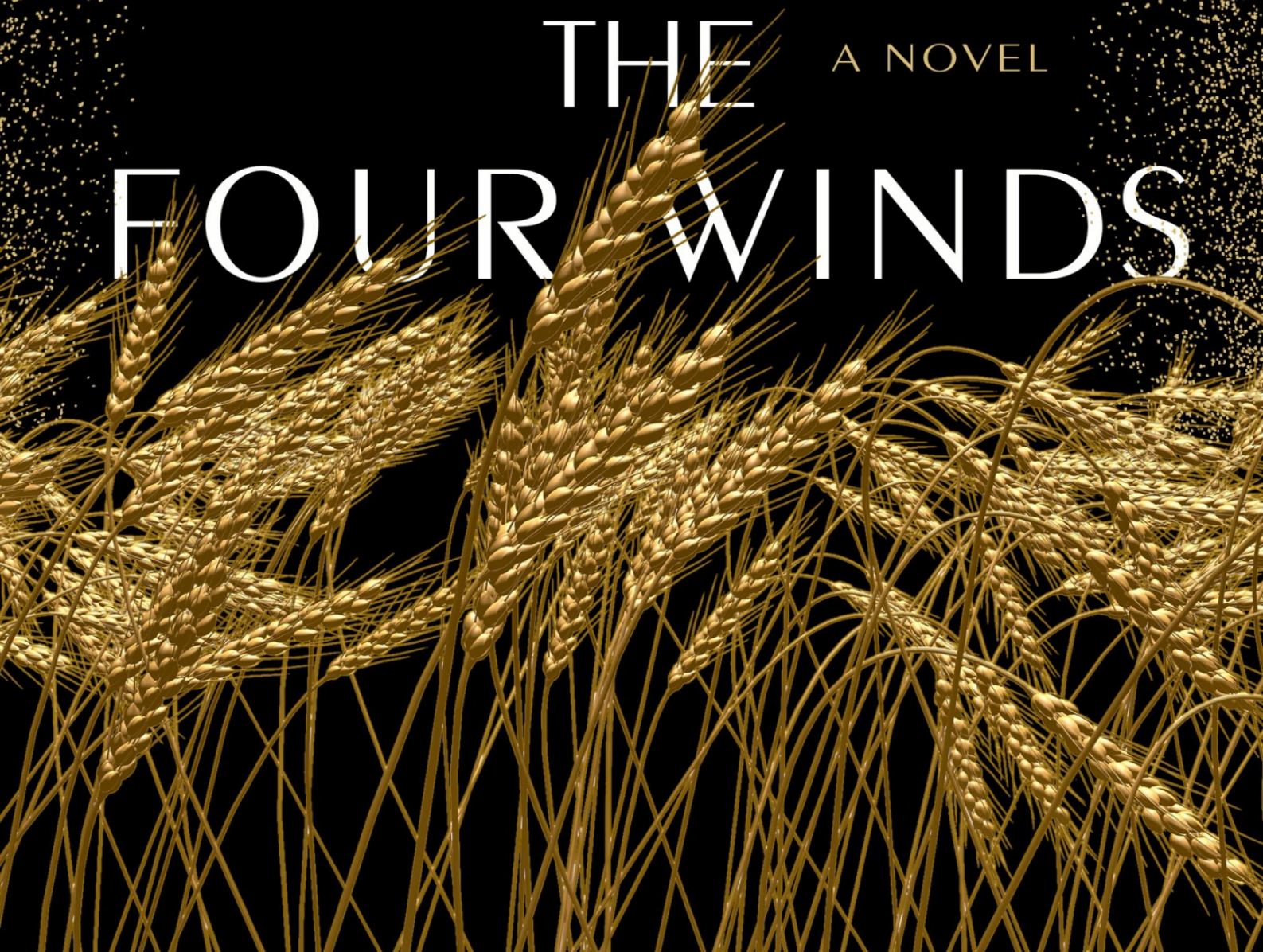


#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Nightingale*

KRISTIN
HANNAH

THE A NOVEL
FOUR WINDS



THE FOUR WINDS



KRISTIN HANNAH



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Dad, this one's for you.

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PROLOGUE

Hope is a coin I carry: an American penny, given to me by a man I came to love. There were times in my journey when it felt as if that penny and the hope it represented were the only things that kept me going.

I came west in search of a better life, but my American dream was turned into a nightmare by poverty and hardship and greed. These past few years have been a time of things lost: Jobs. Homes. Food.

The land we loved turned on us, broke us all, even the stubborn old men who used to talk about the weather and congratulate each other on the season's bumper wheat crop. *A man's got to fight out here to make a living*, they'd say to each other.

A man.

It was always about the men. They seemed to think it meant nothing to cook and clean and bear children and tend gardens. But we women of the Great Plains worked from sunup to sundown, too, toiled on wheat farms until we were as dry and baked as the land we loved.

Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I swear I can still taste the dust ...

1921



To damage the earth is to damage your children.

—WENDELL BERRY, FARMER AND POET

ONE

Elsa Wolcott had spent years in enforced solitude, reading fictional adventures and imagining other lives. In her lonely bedroom, surrounded by the novels that had become her friends, she sometimes dared to dream of an adventure of her own, but not often. Her family repeatedly told her that it was the illness she'd survived in childhood that had transformed her life and left it fragile and solitary, and on good days, she believed it.

On bad days, like today, she knew that she had always been an outsider in her own family. They had sensed the lack in her early on, seen that she didn't fit in.

There was a pain that came with constant disapproval; a sense of having lost something unnamed, unknown. Elsa had survived it by being quiet, by not demanding or seeking attention, by accepting that she was loved, but unliked. The hurt had become so commonplace, she rarely noticed it. She knew it had nothing to do with the illness to which her rejection was usually ascribed.

But now, as she sat in the parlor, in her favorite chair, she closed the book in her lap and thought about it. *The Age of Innocence* had awakened something in her, reminded her keenly of the passage of time.

Tomorrow was her birthday.

Twenty-five.

Young by most accounts. An age when men drank bathtub gin and drove recklessly and listened to ragtime music and danced with women who wore headbands and fringed dresses.

For women, it was different.

Hope began to dim for a woman when she turned twenty. By twenty-two, the whispers in town and at church would have begun, the long, sad

looks. By twenty-five, the die was cast. An unmarried woman was a spinster. “On the shelf,” they called her, shaking heads and *tsking* at her lost opportunities. Usually people wondered *why*, what had turned a perfectly ordinary woman from a good family into a spinster. But in Elsa’s case, everyone knew. They must think she was deaf, the way they talked about her. *Poor thing. Skinny as a rake handle. Not nearly as pretty as her sisters.*

Prettiness. Elsa knew that was the crux of it. She was not an attractive woman. On her best day, in her best dress, a stranger might say she was handsome, but never more. She was “too” everything—too tall, too thin, too pale, too unsure of herself.

Elsa had attended both of her sisters’ weddings. Neither had asked her to stand with them at the altar, and Elsa understood. At nearly six feet, she was taller than the grooms; she would ruin the photographs, and image was everything to the Wolcotts. Her parents prized it above all else.

It didn’t take a genius to look down the road of Elsa’s life and see her future. She would stay here, in her parents’ house on Rock Road, being cared for by Maria, the maid who’d managed the household forever. Someday, when Maria retired, Elsa would be left to care for her parents, and then, when they were gone, she would be alone.

And what would she have to show for her life? How would her time on this earth be marked? Who would remember her, and for what?

She closed her eyes and let a familiar, long-held dream tiptoe in: She imagined herself living somewhere else. In her own home. She could hear children’s laughter. *Her* children.

A life, not merely an existence. That was her dream: a world in which her life and her choices were not defined by the rheumatic fever she’d contracted at fourteen, a life where she uncovered strengths heretofore unknown, where she was judged on more than her appearance.

The front door banged open and her family came stomping into the house. They moved as they always did, in a chattering, laughing knot, her portly father in the lead, red-faced from drink, her two beautiful younger sisters, Charlotte and Suzanna, fanned out like swan wings on either side of him, her elegant mother bringing up the rear, talking to her handsome sons-in-law.

Her father stopped. “Elsa,” he said. “Why are you still up?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“At this hour?” her mother said. “You look flushed. Do you have a fever?”

“I haven’t had a fever in years, Mama. You know that.” Elsa got to her feet, twisted her hands together, and stared at the family.

Now, she thought. She had to do it. She couldn’t lose her nerve again.

“Papa.” At first she said it too softly to be heard, so she tried again, actually raising her voice. “Papa.”

He looked at her.

“I will be twenty-five tomorrow,” Elsa said.

Her mother appeared to be irritated by the reminder. “We know that, Elsa.”

“Yes, of course. I merely want to say that I’ve come to a decision.”

That quieted the family.

“I ... There’s a college in Chicago that teaches literature and accepts women. I want to take classes—”

“Elsinore,” her father said. “What need is there for you to be educated? You were too ill to finish school as it was. It’s a ridiculous idea.”

It was difficult to stand there, seeing her failings reflected in so many eyes. *Fight for yourself. Be brave.*

“But, Papa, I am a grown woman. I haven’t been sick since I was fourteen. I believe the doctor was ... hasty in his diagnosis. I’m fine now. Truly. I could become a teacher. Or a writer...”

“A writer?” Papa said. “Have you some hidden talent of which we are all unaware?”

His stare cut her down.

“It’s possible,” she said weakly.

Papa turned to Elsa’s mother. “Mrs. Wolcott, give her something to calm her down.”

“I’m hardly hysterical, Papa.”

Elsa knew it was over. This was not a battle she could win. She was to stay quiet and out of sight, not to go out into the world. “I’m fine. I’ll go upstairs.”

She turned away from her family, none of whom was looking at her now that the moment had passed. She had vanished from the room somehow, in that way she had of dissolving in place.

She wished she'd never read *The Age of Innocence*. What good came from all this unexpressed longing? She would never fall in love, never have a child of her own.

As she climbed the stairs, she heard music coming from below. They were listening to the new Victrola.

She paused.

Go down, pull up a chair.

She closed her bedroom door sharply, shutting out the sounds from below. She wouldn't be welcomed down there.

In the mirror above her washstand, she saw her own reflection. Her pale face looked as if it had been stretched by unkind hands into a sharp chin point. Her long, corn-silk blond hair was flyaway thin and straight in a time when waves were all the rage. Her mother hadn't allowed her to cut it in the fashion of the day, saying it would look even worse short. Everything about Elsa was colorless, washed out, except for her blue eyes.

She lit her bedside lamp and withdrew one of her most treasured novels from her nightstand.

Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.

Elsa climbed into bed and lost herself in the scandalous story, felt a frightening, sinful need to touch herself, and almost gave in. The ache that came with the words was almost unbearable; a physical pain of yearning.

She closed the book, feeling more outcast now than when she'd begun. Restless. Unsatisfied.

If she didn't do something soon, something drastic, her future would look no different from her present. She would stay in this house for all her life, defined day and night by an illness she'd had a decade ago and an unattractiveness that couldn't be changed. She would never know the thrill of a man's touch or the comfort of sharing a bed. She would never hold her own child. Never have a home of her own.

★ ★ ★

THAT NIGHT, ELSA WAS plagued by longing. By the next morning, she knew she had to do something to change her life.

But what?

Not every woman was beautiful, or even pretty. Others had suffered childhood fevers and gone on to live full lives. The damage done to her heart was all medical conjecture as far as she could tell. Not once had it failed to beat or given her cause for real alarm. She had to believe there was grit in her, even if it had never been tested or revealed. How could anyone know for sure? She had never been allowed to run or play or dance. She'd been forced to quit school at fourteen, so she'd never had a beau. She'd spent the bulk of her life in her own room, reading fictional adventures, making up stories, finishing her education on her own.

There had to be opportunities out there, but where would she find them?

The library. Books held the answer to every question.

She made her bed and went to the washstand and combed her waist-length blond hair into a deep side part and braided it, then dressed in a plain navy-blue crepe dress, silk stockings, and black heels. A cloche, kid gloves, and a handbag completed her outfit.

She went down the stairs, grateful that her mother was still asleep at this early morning hour. Mama didn't like Elsa exerting herself except for Sunday church services, at which Mama always asked the congregation to pray for Elsa's health. Elsa drank a cup of coffee and headed out into the sunshine of a mid-May morning.

The Texas Panhandle town of Dalhart stretched out in front of her, wakening beneath a bright sun. Up and down the wooden boardwalks, doors opened, CLOSED signs were turned around. Beyond town, beneath an immense blue sky, the flat Great Plains stretched forever, a sea of prosperous farmland.

Dalhart was the county seat, and these were booming economic times. Ever since the train had been routed through here on its way from Kansas to New Mexico, Dalhart had expanded. A new water tower dominated the skyline. The Great War had turned these acres into a gold mine of wheat and corn. *Wheat will win the war!* was a phrase that still filled the farmers with pride. They had done their part.

The tractor had come along in time to make life easier, and good crop years—rain and high prices—had allowed farmers to plow more land and grow more wheat. The drought of 1908, long talked about by old-timers, had been all but forgotten. Rain had fallen steadily for years,

making everyone in town rich, none more so than her father, who took both cash and notes for the farm equipment he sold.

Farmers gathered this morning outside the diner to talk about crop prices, and women herded their children to school. Only a few years ago, there had been horse-and-buggies in the streets; now automobiles chugged their way into the golden, glowing future, horns honking, smoke billowing. Dalhart was a town—fast becoming a city—of box suppers and square dances and Sunday morning services. Hard work and like-minded people creating good lives from the soil.

Elsa stepped up onto the boardwalk that ran alongside Main Street. The boards beneath her feet gave a little with each step, made her feel as if she were bouncing. A few flower boxes hung from stores' eaves, adding splashes of much-needed color. The town's Beautification League tended them with care. She passed the savings and loan and the new Ford dealership. It still amazed her that a person could go to a store, pick out an automobile, and drive it home the same day.

Beside her, the mercantile opened its doors and the proprietor, Mr. Hurst, stepped out, holding a broom. He was wearing shirtsleeves rolled up to expose his beefy forearms. A nose like a fire hydrant, squat and round, dominated his ruddy face. He was one of the richest men in town. He owned the mercantile, the diner, the ice-cream counter, and the apothecary. Only the Wolcotts had been in town longer. They, too, were third-generation Texans, and proud of it. Elsa's beloved grandfather, Walter, had called himself a Texas Ranger until the day he died.

"Hey, Miss Wolcott," the storekeeper said, pushing the few strands of hair he still had away from his florid face. "What a beautiful day it's looking to be. You headed to the library?"

"I am," she answered. "Where else?"

"I have some new red silk in. Tell your sisters. It would make a fine dress."

Elsa stopped.

Red silk.

She had never worn red silk. "Show me. Please."

"Ah! Of course. You could surprise them with it."

Mr. Hurst hustled her into the store. Everywhere Elsa looked, she saw color: boxes full of peas and strawberries, stacks of lavender soap, each bar wrapped in tissue paper, bags of flour and sugar, jars of pickles.

He led her past sets of china and silverware and folded multicolored tablecloths and aprons, to a stack of fabrics. He rifled through, pulled out a folded length of ruby-red silk.

Elsa took off her kid gloves, laid them aside, and reached for the silk. She had never touched anything so soft. And today *was* her birthday....

“With Charlotte’s coloring—”

“I’ll take it,” Elsa said. Had she put a slightly rude emphasis on *I’ll*? Yes. She must have. Mr. Hurst was eyeing her strangely.

Mr. Hurst wrapped the fabric in brown paper and secured it with twine and handed it to her.

Elsa was just about to leave when she saw a beaded, glittery silver headband. It was exactly the sort of thing the Countess Olenska might wear in *The Age of Innocence*.



ELSA WALKED HOME FROM the library with the brown-paper-wrapped red silk held tightly to her chest.

She opened the ornate black scrolled gate and stepped into her mother’s world—a garden that was clipped and contained and smelled of jasmine and roses. At the end of a hedged path stood the large Wolcott home, built just after the Civil War by her grandfather for the woman he loved.

Elsa still missed her grandfather every day. He had been a blustery man, given to drink and arguing, but what he’d loved, he’d loved with abandon. He’d grieved the loss of his wife for years. He’d been the only Wolcott besides Elsa who loved reading, and he’d frequently taken her side in family disagreements. *Don’t worry about dying, Elsa. Worry about not living. Be brave.*

No one had said anything like that to her since his death, and she missed him all the time. His stories about the lawless early years in Texas, in Laredo and Dallas and Austin and out on the Great Plains, were the best of her memories.

He would have told her to buy the red silk for sure.

Mama looked up from her roses, tipped her new sunbonnet back, and said, “Elsa. Where have you been?”

“Library.”

“You should have let Papa drive you. The walk is too much for you.”

“I’m fine, Mama.”

Honestly. It sometimes seemed they wanted her to be ill.

Elsa tightened her hold on the package of silk.

“Go lie down. It’s going to get hot. Ask Maria to make you some lemonade.” Mama went back to cutting her flowers, dropping them into her woven basket.

Elsa walked to the front door, stepping into the home’s shadowy interior. On days that promised to be hot, all the shades were drawn. In this part of the state, that meant a lot of dark-interiored days. Closing the door behind her, she heard Maria in the kitchen, singing to herself in Spanish.

Elsa slipped through the house and went up the stairs to her bedroom. There, she unwrapped the brown paper and stared down at the vibrant ruby-red silk. She couldn’t help but touch it. The softness soothed her, somehow, reminded her of the ribbon she’d held as a child when she sucked her thumb.

Could she do it, do this wild thing that was suddenly in her mind? It started with her appearance....

Be brave.

Elsa grabbed a handful of her waist-length hair and cut it off at the chin. She felt a little crazed but kept cutting until she stood with long strands of pale-blond hair scattered at her feet.

A knock at the door startled Elsa so badly that she dropped the scissors. They clattered onto the dresser.

The door opened. Her mother walked into the room, saw Elsa’s butchered hair, and stopped. “What have you done?”

“I wanted—”

“You can’t leave the house until it grows out. What would people say?”

“Young women are wearing bobs, Mother.”

“Not nice young women, Elsinore. I will bring you a hat.”

“I just wanted to be pretty,” Elsa said.

The pity in her mother’s eyes was more than Elsa could bear.

TWO

For days, Elsa stayed hidden in her room, saying that she felt unwell. In truth, she couldn't face her father with her jaggedly cut hair and the need it exposed. At first she tried to read. Books had always been her solace; novels gave her the space to be bold, brave, beautiful, if only in her own imagination.

But the red silk whispered to her, called out, until she finally put her books away and began to make a dress pattern out of newsprint. Once she'd done that, it seemed silly not to go further, so she cut out the fabric and began to sew, just to entertain herself.

As she sewed, she began to feel a remarkable sensation: *hope*.

Finally, on a Saturday evening, she held up the finished dress. It was the epitome of big-city fashion—a V-neck bodice and dropped waist, a handkerchief hemline; thoroughly, daringly modern. A dress for the kind of woman who danced all night and didn't have a care in the world. *Flappers*, they were being called. Young women who flaunted their independence, who drank hooch and smoked cigarettes, and danced in dresses that showed off their legs.

She had to at least try it on, even if she never wore it outside of these four walls.

She took a bath and shaved her legs and smoothed silk stockings up her bare skin. She coiled her damp hair into pin curls and prayed they would create *some* wave. While her hair dried, she snuck into her mother's room and borrowed some cosmetics from the vanity. From downstairs she heard the Victrola playing music.

At last, she brushed out her slightly wavy hair and fit the glamorous silver headband on her brow. She stepped into the dress; it floated into

place, airy as a cloud. The handkerchief hemline accentuated her long legs.

Leaning close to the mirror, she lined her blue eyes with black kohl and brushed a streak of pale rose powder across her sharp cheekbones. Red lipstick made her lips look fuller, just as the ladies' magazines always promised.

She looked at herself in the mirror and thought: *Oh, my Lord. I'm almost pretty.*

"You can do this," she said out loud. *Be brave.*

As she walked out of the room and went down the stairs, she felt a surprising confidence. All her life, she'd been told she was unattractive. But not now ...

Her mother was the first to notice. She smacked Papa hard enough to make him look up from his paperback *Farm Journal*.

His face creased into frown lines. "What are you wearing?"

"I—I made it," Elsa said, clasping her hands together nervously.

Papa snapped his *Farm Journal* shut. "Your hair. Good God. And that harlot dress. Return to your room and do not shame yourself further."

Elsa turned to her mother for help. "This is the newest fashion—"

"Not for godly women, Elsinore. Your *knees* are showing. This isn't New York City."

"Go," Papa said. "*Now.*"

Elsa started to comply. Then she thought about what it meant to obey and she stopped. Grandpa Walt would tell her not to give in.

She forced her chin up. "I am going to the speakeasy tonight to listen to music."

"You will not." Papa rose. "I forbid it."

Elsa ran to the door, afraid that if she slowed, she'd stop. She lurched outside and kept running, ignoring the voices that called for her. She didn't stop until her ragged breathing forced it.

In town, the speakeasy was tucked in between an old livery station, now boarded up in this era of automobiles, and a bakery. Since the Eighteenth Amendment had been ratified and Prohibition had begun, she'd watched both women and men disappear behind the speakeasy's wooden door. And, contrary to her mother's opinion, many of the young women were dressed just as Elsa was.

She walked down the wooden steps to the closed door and knocked. A slit she hadn't noticed slid open; a pair of squinty eyes appeared. A jazzy piano tune and cigar smoke wafted through the opening. "Password," said a familiar voice.

"Password?"

"Miss Wolcott. You lost?"

"No, Frank. I've a hankering to hear some music," she said, proud of herself for sounding so calm.

"Your old man'd whoop my hide if I let you in here. Go on home. No need for a girl like you to walk the streets dressed like that. Only trouble comes of it."

The panel slid shut. She could still hear music behind the locked door. "Ain't We Got Fun." A whiff of cigar smoke lingered in the air.

Elsa stood there a moment, confused. She couldn't even go in? Why not? Sure, Prohibition made drinking illegal, but everyone in town wet their whistles in places like this and the cops looked the other way.

She walked aimlessly up the street, toward the county courthouse.

That was when she saw a man headed her way.

Tall and lanky, he was, with thick black hair partially tamed by glistening pomade. He wore dusty black pants that clung to his narrow hips and a white shirt buttoned to his neck under a beige sweater, with only the knot showing of his plaid tie. A leather newsboy cap sat at a jaunty angle on his head.

As he walked toward her, she saw how young he was—not more than eighteen, probably, with sun-darkened skin and brown eyes. (Bedroom eyes, according to her romantic novels.)

"Hello, ma'am." He stopped and smiled, took off his cap.

"Are you talking to m-me?"

"I don't see anyone else around here. I'm Raffaello Martinelli. You live in Dalhart?"

Italian. Good Lord. Her father wouldn't want her to look at this kid, let alone speak to him.

"I do."

"Not me. I'm from the bustling metropolis of Lonesome Tree, up toward the Oklahoma border. Don't blink or you'll miss it. What's your name?"

"Elsa Wolcott," she said.

“Like the tractor supply? Hey, I know your dad.” He smiled. “What are you doing out here all by your lonesome in that pretty dress, Elsa Wolcott?”

Be Fanny Hill. Be bold. This might be her only chance. When she got home, Papa was probably going to lock her up. “I’m ... lonely, I guess.”

Raffaello’s dark eyes widened. His Adam’s apple slid up and down in a quick swallow.

Eternity passed while she waited for him to speak.

“I’m lonely, too.”

He reached for her hand.

Elsa almost pulled away; that was how stunned she was.

When had she last been touched?

It’s just a touch, Elsa. Don’t be a ninny.

He was so handsome she felt a little sick. Would he be like the boys who’d teased and bullied her in school, called her Anyone Else behind her back? Moonlight and shadow sculpted his face—high cheekbones, a broad, flat forehead, a sharp, straight nose, and lips so full she couldn’t help thinking about the sinful novels she read.

“Come with me, Els.”

He renamed her, just like that, turned her into a different woman. She felt a shiver move through her at the intimacy of it.

He led her through a shadowy, empty alley and across the dark street. “Toot, toot, Tootsie! Goodbye” floated from the speakeasy’s open windows.

He led her past the new train depot and out of town and toward a smart new Model T Ford farm truck with a large wooden-slat- sided bed.

“Nice truck,” she said.

“Good year for wheat. You like driving at night?”

“Sure.” She climbed into the passenger seat and he started up the engine. The cab shuddered as they drove north.

In less than a mile, with Dalhart in their rearview mirror, there was nothing to see. No hills, no valleys, no trees, no rivers, just a starry sky so big it seemed to have swallowed the world.

He drove down the bumpy, divoted road and turned onto the old Steward homestead. Once famous throughout the county for the size of its barn, the place had been abandoned in the last drought, and the small house behind the barn had been boarded up for years.

He pulled up in front of the empty barn and turned off the engine, then sat there a moment, staring ahead. The silence between them was broken only by their breathing and the tick of the dying engine.

He turned off the headlights and opened his door, then came around to open hers.

She looked at him, watched him reach out and take her hand and help her out of the truck.

He could have taken a step back, but he didn't, and so she could smell the whiskey on his breath and the lavender his mother must have used in ironing or washing his shirt.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, feeling hopeful.

He spread a pair of quilts out in the wooden bed of the truck and they climbed in.

They lay side by side, staring up at the immense, star-splattered night sky.

"How old are you?" Elsa asked.

"Eighteen, but my mother treats me as if I'm a kid. I had to sneak out to be here tonight. She worries too much about what people think. You're lucky."

"Lucky?"

"You can walk around by yourself at night, in that dress, without a chaperone."

"My father is none too happy about it, I can tell you."

"But you did it. You broke away. D'ya ever think life must be bigger than what we see here, Els?"

"I do," she said.

"I mean ... somewhere people our age are drinking bathtub gin and dancing to jazz music. Women are smoking in public." He sighed. "And here we are."

"I cut my hair off," she said. "You would have thought I killed someone, the way my father reacted."

"The old are just old. My folks came here from Sicily with only a few bucks. They tell me the story all the time and show me their lucky penny. As if it's *lucky* to end up here."

"You're a man, Raffaello. You can do anything, go anywhere."

"Call me Rafe. My mom says it sounds more American, but if they cared so much about being American, they should have named me

George. Or Lincoln.” He sighed. “It sure is nice to say these things out loud, for once. You’re a good listener, Els.”

“Thank you ... Rafe.”

He rolled onto his side. She felt his gaze on her face and tried to keep breathing evenly.

“Can I kiss you, Elsa?”

She could barely nod.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. His lips softened against her skin; at the touch, she felt herself come alive.

He trailed kisses along her throat, and it made her want to touch him, but she didn’t dare. Good women almost certainly didn’t do such things.

“Can I ... do more, Elsa?”

“You mean...”

“Love you?”

Elsa had dreamed of a moment like this, prayed for it, sculpted it out of scraps from the books she’d read, but now it was here. Real. A man was asking to love her.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

He drew back, fumbled with his belt, undid it, pulled it free, and threw it. The buckle clacked against the side of the truck as he pulled off his pants.

He pushed up her red silk dress; it slid up her body, tickling, arousing her. She saw her bare legs in the moonlight as he pulled down her bloomers. Warm night air touched her, made her shiver. She held her legs together until he eased them apart and climbed on top of her.

Sweet God.

She closed her eyes and he thrust himself inside of her. It hurt so badly she cried out.

Elsa clamped her mouth shut to stay silent.

He groaned and shuddered and went limp on top of her. She felt his heavy breath in the crook of her neck.

He rolled off her but remained close. “Wowza,” he said.

It sounded as if there were a smile in his voice, but how could that be? She must have done something wrong. That couldn’t be ... it.

“You’re something special, Elsa,” he said.

“It was ... good?” she dared to ask.

“It was *great*,” he said.

She wanted to roll onto her side and study his face. Kiss him. These stars she’d seen a million times. He was something new, and he’d wanted her. The effect of that was a staggering upheaval to her world. An opportunity she’d never really imagined. *Can I love you?* he’d asked. Maybe they would fall asleep together and—

“Well, I reckon I’d best get you home, Els. My dad will tan my hide if I’m not on the tractor at dawn. We’re plowing up another hundred and twenty acres tomorrow to plant more wheat.”

“Oh,” she said. “Right. Of course.”

★ ★ ★

ELSA CLOSED THE TRUCK door and stared through the open window at Rafe, who smiled, slowly raised his hand, and then drove away.

What kind of goodbye was it? Would he want to see her again?

Look at him. Of course not.

Besides, he lived in Lonesome Tree. That was thirty miles away. And if she did happen to see him in Dalhart, it wouldn’t matter.

He was Italian. Catholic. Young. Nothing about him was acceptable to her family.

She opened the gate and entered her mother’s fragrant world. From now on, blooming night jasmine would always make Elsa think of him ...

At the house, she opened the front door and stepped into the shadowy parlor.

As she closed the door, she heard a creaking sound and she stopped. Moonlight bled through the window. She saw her father standing by the Victrola.

“Who are you?” he said, coming toward her.

Elsa’s beaded silver headband slipped down; she pushed it back up. “Y-your daughter.”

“Damn right. My father fought to make Texas a part of the United States. He joined the Rangers and fought in Laredo and was shot and nearly died. Our blood is in this ground.”

“Y-yes. I know, but—”

Elsa didn't see his hand come up until it was too close to duck. He cracked her across the jaw so hard she lost her balance and fell to the floor.

She scrambled back into the corner to get away. "Papa—" "You shame us. Get out of my sight."

Elsa lurched to her feet, ran up the stairs, and slammed her bedroom door shut.

With shaking hands, she lit the lamp by her bed and undressed.

There was a red mark above her breast. (Had Rafe done that?) A bruise was already discoloring her jaw, and her hair was a mess from lovemaking, if that was what it could be called.

Even so, she would do it again if she could. She would let her father hit her, yell at her, slander her, or disinherit her.

She knew now what she hadn't known before, hadn't even suspected: she would do anything, suffer anything, to be loved, even if it was just for a night.



THE NEXT MORNING, ELSA woke to sunlight streaming through the open window. The red dress hung over the closet door. The ache in her jaw reminded her of last night, as did the pain that lingered after Rafe's loving. One she wanted to forget; one she wanted to remember.

Her iron bed was piled with quilts she had made, often sewing by candlelight during the cold winter months. At the foot of her bed stood her hope chest, lovingly filled with embroidered linens and a fine white lawn nightdress and the wedding quilt Elsa had begun when she was twelve years old, before her unattractiveness had been revealed to be not a phase but a permanence. By the time Elsa started her monthlies, Mama had quietly stopped talking about Elsa's wedding and stopped beading scraps of Alençon lace. Enough for half a dress lay folded between pieces of tissue.

There was a knock at the door.

Elsa sat up. "Come in."

Mama entered the room, her fashionable day shoes making no sound on the rag rug that covered most of the wooden floor. She was a tall woman, with broad shoulders and a no-nonsense demeanor; she lived a

life above reproach, chaired church committees, ran the Beautification League, and kept her voice low even when she was angry. Nothing and no one could ruffle Minerva Wolcott. She claimed it was a family trait, inherited from ancestors who had come to Texas when no other white face could be seen for a six-day horse ride.

Mama sat down on the edge of the bed. Her hair, dyed black, was drawn back into a chignon that heightened the severity of her sharp features. She reached out and touched the tender bruise on Elsa's jaw. "My father would have done much worse to me."

"But—"

"No *buts*, Elsinore." She leaned forward, tucked a ragged lock of Elsa's shorn blond hair behind her ear. "I suspect I will hear gossip today in town. *Gossip*. About one of my daughters." She heaved a heavy sigh. "Did you get into trouble?"

"No, Mama."

"So, you're still a good girl?"

Elsa nodded, unable to say the lie aloud.

Mama's forefinger moved down, touched Elsa's chin, tilted her face up. She studied Elsa, slowly frowning, assessing. "A pretty dress doesn't make one pretty, dear."

"I just wanted—"

"We won't speak of it, and nothing like it will ever happen again."

Mama stood, smoothing her lavender crepe skirt, although no wrinkles had formed or would dare to. Distance spread between them, as solid as any fence. "You are unmarriageable, Elsinore, even with all our money and standing. No man of note wants an unattractive wife who looms over him. And if a man did come along who could overlook your weaknesses, certainly he would not dismiss a tarnished reputation. Learn to be happy with real life. Throw away your silly romantic novels."

Mama took the red silk dress on her way out.