PROLOGUE

SPRING IN MONTANA was always late to arrive, but that year it came with an abruptness that left everyone giddy and unprepared. The crusted snow at the edge of the timber dissolved in sheets, baring brown stubble, and the creek beside the new cabin ran high, cloudy with silt.

It was 1922. Thirty-year-old Bo Lyons had moved his wife, Maybelle, into the place not three weeks before, proud as a man could be. He had cut the pine logs himself, notched them with hand tools, rolled and muscled them into place with help from the itinerants who wintered over on his ranch. The chinking was still white as paste, the inside so fresh it stung the nose. Bo used to sit in the corner after supper and just breathe it in, some animal part of him satisfied by the nest he had made.

It started with a cough, sharp and dry, waking him in the dark. He rolled to his elbows, blinking at the lantern glow. Maybelle sat up in bed, shoulders shivering under her nightgown, hand pressed to her breastbone.

"Cold?" he asked. She shook her head and he saw it was something deeper—a look he'd seen in cattle that had been spooked, as if her own body was foreign.

She would not be comforted. By sunrise she burned with fever, her skin blotched and shiny as lacquer, lips parched, hair pasted in whorls against her cheeks. He kept the stove stoked, then opened the window when she asked for air, then shut it again when she moaned with chills. At first he thought it was just a spring cold, a thing that would break and pass like all the others.

He tended to her hour by hour, the way his mother had taught him. He wrung out cloths in creek water, laid them over her brow,

spooned broth into her mouth and held her up to drink. She spat most of it back, or turned her head, and sometimes when her eyes cleared she'd catch his sleeve and say, "Don't fuss," her voice hoarse but gentle.

The second night, the cough deepened. She coughed until she wept, until Bo had to hold her upright in both arms and rub the spasms out of her back. He started to fear the neighbors would hear—though they were half a mile off—and think she was dying already.

He walked the floor when she slept, hands curled and restless, checking the window for dawn. When the sun came up, he rode into town, tying his horse to Doc Graham's post before the man had even finished his breakfast.

"Typhoid," the doctor said, after laying hands on Maybelle's forehead and peering into her throat with a bent spoon. "Or pneumonia. Or both." He left powders and a bottle of whiskey, saying one or the other might help, but neither would hurt.

Bo refused to let that be the end. He sent the boy from the neighboring ranch to fetch old Mrs. Borland, who knew all the herbal cures, and the preacher's wife, who had a reputation for effective prayers. The two women arrived in a flurry of skirts and petticoats, bustling through the kitchen with hot water, onion poultices, and jars of honey. Bo watched them set to work while trying to keep himself from being overcome by fear.

He sat in the next room, knuckles white on the arms of his chair, as the preacher's wife muttered supplications over the bed. He heard Maybelle whimper, a thin animal sound, and in that moment the future he'd imagined—a house full of children, a yard planted with lilac, Maybelle at the window in every season—shrank to a pinpoint and then vanished. For the first time since he'd built the cabin, he felt like an intruder inside it.

The women left at dusk, Mrs. Borland patting his arm, the preacher's wife quoting a verse Bo had never heard before. He let

the screen door slam shut behind them, and only after it did he realize how foolish it was to be angry at women who were just trying to help.

The next morning, Maybelle's fever rose so high that her skin felt brittle, as if the bones might poke straight through. Her eyes rolled, her lips moved, but words failed her. Bo, who had broken wild colts and wrestled steers to the ground—to say nothing of surviving the Great War—had never felt more helpless. He knelt by her bed and pressed his lips to her wrist, feeling the shudder of her pulse. It seemed to Bo that the world had gone silent, the creek dammed, the wind choked off, the very birds unwilling to sing.

On the fourth day, the cough gave way to a long, rattling breath that Bo knew by sound from the calving shed. He wanted to deny it, but there was no denying a thing you had heard since you were a boy. He prayed—God, he prayed, though he had never been much of a man for that. He prayed for mercy, for a miracle, for the fever to pass to him instead. He said Maybelle's name until it lost all meaning.

That night he brought the old iron bedstead into the parlor, as close as he could to the fire, and set her up with quilts and every pillow in the house. He dozed in the rocker, waking every half hour to check her breathing. He was afraid to sleep, afraid she'd slip away if he took his eyes off her for more than a minute.

On the sixth day, Doc Graham came again, this time bringing a younger man to help with the rounds. He listened to Maybelle's chest and shook his head with a slow pity that made Bo want to punch his teeth in. He whispered something to the young man, then turned to Bo and said, "Be with her if you can. She's got maybe a night."

The two men left, and Bo watched their buggy roll down the rutted road until it vanished. He shut the door and leaned against it. Then he sat beside Maybelle, taking her hand. Her fingers were thin as matchsticks and hotter than the stove.

He started to talk. He told her all the stories he could remember from their three years of marriage: the time the steer had broken through the fence and nearly gored him, the night they'd slept on the riverbank under the Northern Lights, the winter they'd nearly starved but made it through on nothing but grit and boiled potatoes. He told her how much he loved her, how sorry he was for every time he'd been short with her, how he wished he could trade places.

"Bo," she whispered, startling him. He leaned in so close their noses touched.

"I'm right here," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You gotta let me go," she said. It was barely a whisper, but she squeezed his hand.

He couldn't answer. He just sat with her, rocking her gently, as the dusk came on and the room cooled. At some point he must have drifted, because he woke to the clock on the mantle striking midnight. Maybelle's breathing was slow, a hitching, animal sound. Bo counted the intervals, waiting for each one, begging each one to come.

When she stopped, it was so quiet he almost missed it. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted. He waited, half-expecting her to start again, but she did not.

He pressed her hand to his lips and whispered her name, once, then again, and again, each time softer. He laid his head on her chest, listened for something, anything, but the only thing he heard was the clock ticking and the wet hiss of the fire dying down.

The cabin, which had felt too small for him and Maybelle both, was suddenly cavernous. He sat with her until the sun rose, until the light crept across the pine floorboards and found them both in the stillness.

THEY BURIED MAYBELLE two days later, up on the rise past the aspen grove, where the ground was stony but the sun came earliest. Neighbors from every direction made the trip, arriving in battered Fords or on horseback, boots slick with last night's melt. They gathered in a slow-moving clot around the grave, hats low, collars turned against the north wind that kept the hilltop swept clean.

Bo had chosen the spot himself. He wanted her close, but not so close he'd see the headstone from the porch; that seemed wrong, too much like marking the border of a failed homestead. He spent the morning of the funeral chiseling the ground with a borrowed pickaxe, the iron striking rock so often it set his teeth humming. When the others arrived, he was muddy to the knees, hands raw, the grave square and deep and ugly as a wound.

The preacher was a stranger, fetched in from out of town, a man who looked uncomfortable in his own skin and more so in Bo's company. He read a psalm, voice wavering, the words snatched by gusts and flung into the ravine. The mourners bowed their heads. Bo stood apart, clutching his hat brim, his shadow stretching all the way to the pinewood box that held Maybelle's body.

He had made the coffin himself. He shaved the boards thin, lined them with a length of cotton sheeting, and hammered the lid shut after he'd combed Maybelle's hair and tucked her hands together the way she'd liked to sleep. She was so light at the end that it took nothing to carry her from the cabin to the wagon, nothing to lift her down to the hole. Bo kept expecting her to resist, to stiffen or slide, but the box rode steady as a log in current.

The ceremony was over before Bo realized it had begun. The preacher motioned to him, and he helped lower the coffin, ropes burning his palms. Somebody said a prayer, brief and unsentimental. There was no music, no singing, just the wind through dead grass and the shuffle of boots. One by one, the neighbors drifted past, laying hands on his shoulder, mumbling words he

could not process. Mrs. Borland left a bunch of daffodils wrapped in waxed paper. The young man from the general store squeezed his arm and said, "God bless you, Bo." Bo nodded, because he could not speak.

Maybelle's absence was a pressure, an inverse of presence. It worked on the lungs, made the walls bow outward, warped the light that came through the windows. Her apron still hung from the hook by the stove, checkered blue, the pocket worn white where she kept her thimble. Her brush sat on the dresser in the bedroom, a twist of her hair caught in the bristles. The quilt she'd finished the winter before lay folded at the foot of the bed, stitches tight and regular, a pattern of stars he could no longer bear to look at.

Bo stood in the threshold of every room, daring himself to touch the things she had touched. He found her slippers under the bed, her gloves in the drawer, a list she'd made in the kitchen—eggs, sugar, lamp oil—half the items crossed off, the last few left blank. He turned in circles, trying to remember how she'd moved through the cabin, what she had sung while she worked, the sound of her laugh. It all retreated from him, faster the harder he reached for it.

He did not sleep the first night, or the second. He lay on top of the covers, boots still on, staring at the dark. He listened for her footsteps, for the gentle touch of her hand at the door. He would have traded all his years to hear her cough one more time.

On the third day, when the loneliness grew sharp enough to touch, he went out and started fixing the back fence, even though there was still snow drifted in the low places. He worked until his shoulders ached, until his hands bled. When the weather softened, he broke out the colts and started halter-training them, a job that took all his focus, all his will. He took on every job the ranch demanded of him, from dragging hay bales to digging out the root cellar, from sunrise to black. Work was the only thing that dulled the ache.

The neighbors kept coming by with casseroles and jars of preserves, their faces careful, the way people look when handling something fragile and dangerous. They offered to help with the lambing, to check in on him at supper. Bo accepted the food and the company, but nothing they did seemed to reach him. He grew thinner, more weathered. The lines around his eyes dug in deep, and the beard he usually kept trimmed grew wild.

Every evening, after chores, Bo climbed the hill to Maybelle's grave. He brought a chair some days, a thermos of coffee, sometimes the Bible she had read. He would sit and watch the valley fill up with dusk, the shadows piling at the base of the foothills. He talked to her at first. He told her about the lambs, the water situation, the way the hawks nested early that year. Then he stopped talking altogether. Some nights he stayed so late he saw the stars wheel across the sky, the moon tilting from ridge to ridge. It made no difference to him whether he slept at all.

A month passed. Then another. He fell into a pattern—wake, work, eat, climb the hill, watch the sun go down. The cabin shrank to a shelter, nothing more. The pride he'd taken in the dovetailed logs, in the wide plank floor and the chimney he'd set stone by stone, was gone. The place was a box, a way to keep out the rain and snow. Sometimes, late at night, he caught the scent of pine sap or heard the groan of the timbers settling, and it would hurt him more than anything.

Bo told himself he was finished with happiness, that he had used up his ration of joy for this world. He would not love again. He would not even try. There were too many fences to mend, too many cows to feed, too many chores waiting with the patience of stone. He kept at them because that was what a man did: endured. Endured the days, the nights, the passage of seasons, the reminders of what had been lost.

One evening, at the beginning of autumn, Bo sat on the cabin's stoop, watching the golden aspens rustle in the breeze. The world

was silent except for the trickle of the creek and the faint, persistent call of a meadowlark somewhere in the fields below. He thought of Maybelle, as he always did, but this time the memory came gentle. He closed his eyes and let the sound of the water carry him, just for a moment, somewhere far from the wound of absence.

Then he stood, stretched the ache from his shoulders, and turned to go inside. Tomorrow would be another day. There would be work. There would be weather. And Bo would meet it, because that was all a man could do.