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## Chapter 1

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LARKSPUR VALLEY, *Wyoming February 1870.*

Christopher Bennington had often been accused of being a man who lacked sympathy. But he simply preferred to see it as someone who didn't waste tears or showcase grand displays of emotions on trivial things. At thirty years old there were, according to him, very few things in his life in which tears were an appropriate reaction as a grown man.

A broken bone. The loss of a wife. Illness.

But Christopher Bennington had never broken a bone, wasn't married, and he couldn't remember the last time he had been ill. He could remember the last time he had thought about crying when old Dr. Peterson had informed the rather large Bennington family that the matriarch, Mrs. Petunia Bennington, barely thirty-seven, had died giving birth to the seventh Bennington sibling. Baby Lily, Mrs. Bennington had named all her daughters after her favorite flowers, had come into the world screaming just as her mother had taken her last breath.

Mrs. Bennington had been ill during her entire pregnancy with Lily, but her brood had never thought she would actually die. Christopher had been just nineteen when she had died, practically a grown man who was being groomed to take over the Bennington's successful horse and cattle ranch his English great-grandfather had built from the ground up in 1800.

When Dr. Peterson had delivered the news gravely to the wide-eyed siblings and their grief-stricken father, he had allowed himself two tears to slip down his cheeks and then he stopped. For his siblings needed comfort especially Anthony and Iris who were practically babies at ten and four. And his father who looked ready to drown himself in a river even though he had seven children to take care of, one of them who was a newborn daughter.

So, Christopher Bennington didn't allow himself to cry even though he had just lost his sweet mother. The woman who always managed to make him smile, even when he was surly, and who caused joy by doing something as simple as singing a song. His siblings needed him. His father needed him. Christopher lived to serve, to feel useful.

"Are you paying attention?" Steve, the second oldest Bennington sibling, hissed at him. His shiny gold sheriff's badge caught his attention. The blue eyes all the Bennington siblings were blessed with were darting from Christopher to Pastor James who was performing the funeral services for their father.

Christopher threw Steve a dirty look as he looked, for what felt like the first time that morning, at the mourners who were accompanying them to say goodbye to the widower Paul Bennington. The majority of the town was there as the former patriarch had been jolly and a well-respected member of the community. His sudden death at forty-nine from a nasty rattlesnake bite had been a shock to

say the least. It had been said the older man had been crawling, nearly dead, when two of his workers had found him. The upside, some of the townspeople whispered, was he was finally reunited with his beloved wife whom he married when the pair of them were in their late teens.

The eldest Bennington sibling's blue eyes first went to his fraternal twin siblings, twenty-five-year-old Hugh and Poppy nicknamed "Evil Twins" affectionally based on their prickly personalities. Hugh was in his last year of medical school at a private university, a two days' journey from Larkspur Valley. Hugh had dark hair and icy blue eyes which he used to glance coldly at the crowd. Once or twice the Bennington siblings had teased him about whether or not he had an actual soul or if he was Lucifer reincarnated.

Next to him stood his twin sister, Poppy Bennington, her hair a buttery yellow instead of onyx black. Poppy had taken over the motherly role at just fourteen-years-old when their mother had passed, and while she was revered as a goddess by Anthony, Iris, and Lily whom she had practically raised, her elder brothers worried her horrid temper would land her in hot water sooner or later. Even Christopher had lost control of her and, feeling inept when it came to childrearing, their father had practically let Poppy get away with murder.

Next to Poppy stood Finn Weston, Christopher's right-hand man. He was dressed in his Sunday best suit looking at Christopher's blonde sister with big cow eyes. He was only two years older than Poppy and had fallen in love with her from the first second he saw her. Unfortunately for him, Poppy could be a little hellion and had refused his advances even though she was past marriable age. Her last beau had broken her heart when he moved back to Massachusetts two years ago.

Twenty-one-year-old Anthony Bennington stood across

from Poppy looking overly thin and lanky. Christopher made a mental note to ask him if he was all right, he had always been the most sensitive out of the four boys and he worried he spent too much time alone. He was in his third year of divinity school studying to be a pastor in Laramie, Wyoming.

Their sister, fifteen-year-old Iris, was holding his hand tightly while whispering comforting words in his ear. She was still a schoolgirl, but in some ways more mature and kind-hearted than Poppy who had been forced to grow up at a young age. She had it in her head that she was going to be a schoolteacher even though none of her brothers were fond of the idea of Iris working.

The youngest Bennington sibling, eleven-year-old Lily, was sobbing into her hankie wearing a too tight black dress which had been dyed black at the last minute because she didn't have any mourning clothes. Poor Lily had lost both parents by age eleven.

Even though Pastor James was still finishing his prayer all six siblings were staring at Christopher waiting for his next move. His skin prickled as he realized he was now the head of the Bennington household, the person who was going to be responsible for all his siblings and their futures even though Lily and Iris were the only ones not of age. They were going to be looking up to him for advice and guidance not his father who was six feet underground. The idea frightened him even though he would never admit it out loud, not even to Steve and definitely not to Hugh.

Pastor James finally closed his Bible as he looked at the Bennington family. "May our brother Paul Bennington rest in peace and may our Lord and savior give strength and guidance to his family. Amen."

The rest of the afternoon went in a blur: flowers thrown over his recently buried father's casket, accepting the condolences from townspeople, Poppy and Iris running around

giving guests lemonade and a piece of Bundt cake, Christopher consoling a hysterical Lily when she threw a tantrum. By the time six o'clock in the evening rolled around Christopher was exhausted and could barely finish the dinner Poppy had served him.

He glanced wearily at Hugh and Anthony who had very different expressions on their faces. Anthony looked like he was going to be sick, and Hugh was smoking in the house in front of the younger girls which made Christopher want to smack him. Thankfully, Steve took care of that for him.

“When are you two heading back to school?”

“Saturday.” Hugh rubbed the back of his neck where Steve had smacked him. “Anthony and I will take the eight o'clock train departing from the station.”

Poppy dropped the tea tray with a loud rattle, her pink lips pursed. “That’s too soon, our father just died, and you’re worried about school.”

“Poppy,” Steve warned. Poppy simply glared back while threatening him with a butter knife. She would have made a good soldier.

Anthony looked at both of them. “Perhaps we should write to our schools—”

“No,” Christopher interrupted. “School is important. You and Hugh are almost done with schooling. Father would not want you to fall behind, even with him—” he broke off. “He would want you to go back to school.”

Anthony nodded, looking unsure as he looked at Poppy who looked like she wanted to rain terror on them all. Poppy narrowed her eyes toward him. “I can’t believe you. Our father just died, and you want us to go back to how things were? What is wrong with you, Chris? Have you forgotten we don’t have a father anymore?”

Hugh lit another cigar. “Enough of your hysterics, Pop.

Christopher is being levelheaded, something you need to work on.”

“Say that one more time and I will burn your cigar through your eyeball, Hugh.”

Hugh looked amused. “Which one?”

Lily burst into tears. “Stop fighting! Stop fighting! Daddy will be mad.”

Christopher picked up tiny Lily and rocked her as if she were a baby even though she was too old for that. But she was a girl and the baby of the family, she needed comfort most of all. Christopher turned to look at Iris. “No one is fighting, Lily. Iris put Lily to bed she’s overtired. Poppy, go with them you’re too snappish right now.”

Iris picked up Lily while Poppy threw one last evil look at them before the three girls disappeared up the stairs.

Steve handed his brother a glass of whisky. “I pity the fool who marries her. Our little Poppy is meaner than a wasp.”

Hugh snorted. “Finn, if he ever grows a—”

“Watch it,” Christopher barked as he finished off his drink. “Poppy is our sister, not to mention your twin. The pair of you will return to Laramie on Saturday and we’ll see you back in Larkspur Valley in the summer.”

“If there are no more tragedies,” Hugh mumbled under his breath. Anthony shook his head.

Meanwhile, Steve laughed as he patted his older brother on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Christopher here won’t let that happen. Right, Chris?”

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*Larkspur Valley, April 1870*

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Two months later Christopher Bennington had his hands full, and he felt like he and his beloved family were sinking to a point of no return, each member choosing to grieve in a different way. He was buried in paperwork and busy taking full reign of the ranching business, so he hardly slept. Steve was bedding a new whore at Madam Eugenia's whorehouse every night, sometimes two women at the same time. Hugh had gotten in trouble for punching two men across the face twice while drunk and the headmaster warned Christopher if he got into another fight between now and June he would not be graduating. Poppy was in an awful mood, she often shifted between fits of anger and making other people cry. Anthony's letters got more depressing each week. Iris spent all her time locked in her bedroom writing sad poetry. Little Lily had gotten so clingy with him she practically followed him to the washroom.

Christopher felt like he had aged twenty years in the span of two months. He often traveled back and forth from the main house, where his sisters continued to live, to his smaller bachelor house two miles down the road which his father had helped him build when he turned twenty-one for privacy.

"I'm awfully sorry about your daddy, Mr. Bennington," Chrissy Simon said when he answered the knock at the door. She practically threw a baked pie at his chest while her mother, Mrs. Simon, watched on with desperation as if hoping Christopher would propose right then and there. "Here, from me and Mama. Our famous blueberry pie, please share it with the rest of your siblings. Do let us know if you need anything, a bachelor with six siblings to take care of, one of them a mere child is too much to bear. I will gladly take care of Lily, I'm great with children."

"Thank you, though Poppy and Iris have Lily under control."

“Oh, of course!” Chrissy bowed slightly while giving him a toothy smile then she departed with her mother.

“Another pie, lucky you.” Steve looked up from his cards once Christopher closed the door. They had been playing poker for three hours straight after they had made sure the girls were tucked in for bed. Steve and Christopher alternated spending the night at the main house with the girls even though they both agreed Poppy could do a better job of shooting at any intruder than either of them.

Christopher had a sour expression as he put the pie no one was going to eat on the kitchen counter. “Don’t start.”

Steve shrugged. “Chrissy is cute. You could do worse. The mother is a bit of a meddling witch, I hope you’re prepared for that though.”

Christopher ignored him as he began shuffling the playing cards. He didn’t quite know how to say it, so he thought it best just to blurt it out. “I’m getting married.”

Steve raised an eyebrow; he wasn’t like Anthony who you could read like a book. “To Chrissy?”

“Don’t be an idiot. I don’t want to marry anyone in Larkspur Valley. Ever since Father died every marriageable girl between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five have been sniffing at my door with their mothers in tow.” Christopher groaned. “I don’t know how many more pies I can take.”

“Not to mention you have a few spinsters who are clinging on your every word every time you tip your hat and say, ‘good morning.’ I can understand your frustration, thankfully I’m not the sole owner of the famous, well to do Bennington ranch.”

“You’re not a poor church mouse either.” Christopher’s voice was laced with sarcasm. “Father left all of us some money. Including the girls.”

Steve smirked as he pulled out the king card and nearly shoved it at his chest. “But you’re the prize fish they want.

Not the small fry. We won't inherit half of what you will. So, what's the plan? Go to a nearby town and court someone? That could take months, you know how fussy females can be. You barely have time to sleep, how are you going to court?"

Christopher reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a newspaper titled, *The Matrimonial Market*, along with several letters. "I have placed an ad in this newspaper." There was an edge to his voice warning Steve he was not in the mood to be teased. "I will be sending for a mail-order-bride. It is the most practical choice. How it works is women across the country answer my ad and we exchange letters—"

"I know how it works." Steve looked at the dozen or so letters, some which smelled of perfume. "This is quite a gamble and very unChristopher like. What's the rush? Father died two months ago, technically we're supposed to be in mourning for another ten months. People will talk if they see you marry the first chit who responds to your desperate ad."

"Then let them talk. Being in mourning didn't stop half of the mothers from throwing their daughters at me."

Steve didn't say anything as he looked at the letters. "Why the rush? You've never cared about marriage before."

Christopher squeezed his fists until his knuckles were nearly white, a mix of embarrassment and frustration. "Because I'm thirty. It's time I grew up and start a family. Mother and Father had been married for eleven years by the time they were my age. I need someone to inherit the Bennington ranch since neither of you want to do it and Lily needs a mother figure. We can't expect Poppy to do it forever, she needs to marry and form a family of her own instead of fussing over us."

It was clear Steve didn't agree with his reasons for marriage, but he didn't say anything right away. He had always been quietly supportive like that. "It's your choice if

you want to continue with this foolish idea. Have you picked one?"

"I've narrowed it down to these three." He pointed to three letters. "Minerva Judd, Judith Condron, and Lucille Robbins. I'm telling the girls tomorrow. The sooner they find out, the better."

Steve nodded wearily. "Poppy is going to kill you. She'll be furious you know. Maybe we should sign her up for *The Matrimonial Market* to finally get her married off."

"Poor Finn, he'll have a heart attack if we do." Christopher rested his back on the hard chair wondering for the tenth time since he placed the ad in the newspaper if he was making a grave mistake.

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The next morning, after a Saturday breakfast of pancakes and eggs, Christopher dropped the news that in a few months, more than likely, his new bride was going to be arriving in Larkspur Valley. His three sisters stared back at him with round, blue eyes.

It had only been two months since the Bennington patriarch had passed away so technically his sisters should still be dressed in black, but after a month of mourning Christopher had ordered them to put their mourning clothes away. He hated seeing females in black. It was too depressing.

Lily had happily changed back into her purple dresses she loved so much, while Iris wore her usual dresses, but kept a black ribbon in her blonde hair in remembrance. The only one who didn't follow his orders was unsurprisingly Poppy who was still dressed head to toe in black, making her look older than twenty-five.

Right now, she was clutching a butter knife in her hand

and looking like she was about to stab Christopher with it. “You’re an idiot.”

Lily squeaked.

Iris snorted a laugh but was looking at her elder brother with a reproachful gaze.

“Poppy. Language.” On more than one occasion Christopher determined his baby sister needed a good whipping and perhaps a mouth soaping. Not to mention a man to keep her in line. After his wife’s death their father had spoiled her rotten which had made Poppy bossy, arrogant, and rude.

His right-hand man, Finn had spanked her once or twice over her dress skirts when she got a bit too out of hand. Finn had always confessed to him on the rare occasion he kept his baby sister in line, but Poppy always came back with a vengeance. She was a little hellion who was not going to be stopped by just one spanking. She needed constant discipline.

Iris spread butter on a piece of toast. “Chris, why do you have to marry a stranger? There are so many pretty girls in town. To have a strange woman here will be weird, wouldn’t it?”

“Iris, that is not the point,” Poppy hissed before she turned her blue eyes toward her brother. “Our father just died, and you decide now is the best time to get married?”

“I have my priorities straight. The summer is always the busiest time for me, the sooner I get married the better. Not to mention it is easier to travel in the spring and summer with our Wyoming winters. I don’t expect you to understand, Poppy, but our father would have,” Christopher replied coolly as he stared down at his sister. “I do not wish to marry anyone from town since the majority of the women, unfortunately, are simply after our good name or the wealth associated with it.”

“And you think your little mail-order-bride will be as pious and humble as a nun? Be realistic, Christopher.

Women lie on those ads all the time. What if she has already been married? What if she had a child out of wedlock? What if she is the type of woman to open her legs to every man who will offer her money and a diamond ring?"

Lily's eyes widened.

"Poppy!" he snarled. "Enough. Nothing has been determined, but I will marry one of the three girls I mentioned sooner rather than later. I thought, as my sisters, you should have the courtesy to be aware of the situation. I have written to Anthony and Hugh as well."

"I suppose you want us to move out of the main house since Father is dead and you are to be a married man now. I'm sure your new bride won't want to share her new space with her husband's sisters."

"Now, Pop, don't be unreasonable. You girls can stay in the main house, we'll be comfortable in my bachelor quarters—"

"No, the *head* of the Bennington family deserves the main house for him and his new bride. We'll be out of your hair as soon as Finn and Steve help us move our stuff. I'm keeping Mother's jewelry box so do not even think about giving it to that little heifer you plan on marrying." She turned to Iris barking, "Get up, Iris, we need to pack so we're not in our dear brother's way."

Iris threw Christopher an apologetic smile even though she wasn't happy he was getting married either. She followed Poppy, leaving Lily behind at the breakfast table.

Christopher pinched her cheek. "You're happy for me aren't you, Lil?"

"Can I be a flower girl?" she asked worriedly. "I'm not too old, am I?"

"Of course not, pumpkin."

"What's her name?"

"Whose name?"

“Your bride.”

Christopher paused. “I’m not sure. I have three choices, but I don’t know which one I’ll pick.”

Lily bit her lower lip. “That’s easy, you just pick the lady whose name sounds good with our last name.” She was practically bouncing out of the chair. “What are their names? Tell me, then add Bennington as their last name.”

“Minerva Bennington.”

Lily shook her head. “It reminds me of Mrs. Minerva, the butcher’s wife. She’s always yelling. Minerva is an unpleasant name.”

“Fine. How about Judith Bennington?”

Lily scrunched up her nose.

Christopher laughed as he tugged on his sister’s blonde pigtails. At least Lily was happy for him. “You’re running out of options, kid. Last choice: Lucille Bennington.”

Lily rested her jaw on her little hand. “Can we call her Lucy? I like Lucy better than Lucille. Lucille is a grandmother’s name. Lucy is the name of a bride.” Christopher nearly choked on his laughter. “See Lucy Bennington sounds much better. Is Lucy going to be your wife?”