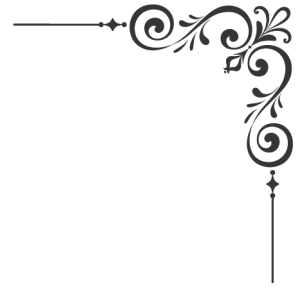


Never Too Far

Home To Osceola, Volume 0.5

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South of Columbus, Nebraska, May, 1870

The wagon lurched down one rut only to hit another. Sadie Newman clung to the side of the seat, praying desperately that she wouldn't be bucked off the seat and flung to the ground. She wanted to arrive at the Mayfields' in style, and arriving with broken bones was definitely not the way to accomplish that.

The farmer on the bench beside her grunted and half rose from his seat, using the reins to guide the team out of the worst of the ruts and to smoother ground. He said something gentle to his horses in Swedish, but not being Swedish, the words meant nothing to Sadie.

"Will we be there soon?" Sadie asked, gritting her teeth as they bounced over another bump.

The farmer shot her a sideways glance. "You are worse than a kid, yes?"

Sadie lifted her chin and refused to answer. Honestly, the man needn't be so rude. She had been very reserved in how often she asked if they were almost there, and this was only her seventh time since leaving Columbus. They had left early that morning, and now that the sun was sinking low in the west, she figured she deserved to know how much longer her agony was going to last. Mr. Lindstrom had spent more of the trip talking to his horses than to her.

No matter. Determined not let the man rile her, Sadie eased back on the seat and allowed her mind to drift. To pass the long miles, she had taken to reciting all the reasons she loved Ephraim Mayfield, daydreaming about how she would set up housekeeping in the store he was building, and—well, just thinking about him in general. The way he smiled. The sound of his laugh. The way he would look at her when she stepped down from the wagon. Sadie grinned. He would be knocked speechless.

And that is why I am here. Because I love him so much that I can't bear to be apart any longer. Sadie smiled even as she wiped at the trickle of sweat running down her temple. Belatedly, she realized that a refined lady wouldn't have used the back of her hand as she just had. She should have daintily dabbed at the sweat with her hanky.

But then, was a refined lady supposed to even sweat? Mrs. Parker, her finishing school instructor would have scolded her for even considering such a thing. She also would have looked askance at Sadie for daring to travel all the way from Tennessee without a man to escort her.

It wasn't as if Sadie had purposefully decided to travel to Nebraska on her own. Had Papa or one of her brothers—or Ephraim—had time to escort her, she would have gladly welcomed their assistance. Sweet talking strangers into hauling her trunks around for her hadn't been all that pleasant of an experience.

Ah, Ephraim. An entire year had passed since she had last seen him and they had planned out their life together. Sadie had wanted to go west with him then, but he had been adamant.

"No, Sadie love. It's going to take hard work for me and Pa to get the homestead set up, and I think you should wait here until I have a place ready for you," he had said as they sat together in her parent's parlor.

"But why?" she had argued. "Your mother and sisters are going. Why can't we be married so that I can come too?"

"Because is that truly the way you want to start this marriage? Bouncing all day in a wagon and sleeping under the stars at night? Settling in an empty land with no neighbors for company and a bare stretch of land to call home?" He shook his head. "No, Sadie. Give me some time to plan things out, to get a feel for the land and to build you a house. Then I'll come back for you and we'll be married."

Sadie hadn't had the words to argue with him then. Instead she had stood in the yard and waved goodbye as he and his family drove away, unable to express her emotions, but feeling deep inside her that what was happening was wrong. Utterly wrong.

An entire year of waiting later, Ephraim still was no closer to setting a date for when he would return and marry her. And Sadie had by now composed whole lectures on why he should have taken her with him. She didn't care what the hardships were; she only wanted Ephraim.

But according to his letters, he hadn't even started on their house yet. Hadn't even begun *planning* it.

Last summer was absorbed in getting my family situated for winter, and then once winter set in, the ground was frozen and there was so much snow that I couldn't work on our house. I hope you understand . . . maybe once the spring planting is done I'll get a chance to work on it.

His last letter had been even more depressing. *Last night we got together with some new folks who have moved into the area, and they said that when they were in Columbus, they heard talk that county lines are going to be plotted this summer. Just think, Sadie! That means that towns will be springing up soon! Perhaps we ought to wait on building our house and see where the towns end up. I've told you before that I want to own a store of my own someday, and this could be our chance. We could have the first store in the area. Think of the possibilities, Sadie!*

She was thinking of the possibilities, all right, and they were looking mighty slim that Ephraim was ever going to return to claim his bride.

She took action. In not time, she had packed her trunks with all of her belongings, including the quilts, doilies, embroidered pillowcases, and towels she had made in the last year to help pass the time and make her feel as if she were helping Ephraim set up their house. She hugged her family goodbye and boarded the train with a one-way ticket for Columbus, Nebraska.

Ephraim had never told her that he lived so far from the railroad. No wonder his letters had taken so long to reach her. Often she had waited weeks upon weeks, and finally they would arrive in a big bunch. The delayed communication had grated on her nerves worse than anything else.

But now those days of waiting were nearly over, and she would speak to him face to face. She shivered, partly from delight, and, in all honesty, partly because of the chilly spring evening.

"Are we almost there?" Sadie asked before stopping to think.

Mr. Lindstrom looked at her, and Sadie squirmed. "I'm sorry. Fine. I won't ask again."



Sadie was beginning to despair of ever reaching Ephraim's side when at last Mr. Lindstrom lifted a hand and pointed ahead of them to a light that glowed in the dusk. "There."

Sadie sat straighter. "The Mayfields?"

Mr. Lindstrom nodded, and Sadie squealed. She would have hugged the man if she thought he would let her get away with it. Instead, she smoothed at her skirt, trying in vain to rid it of some of its dust and wrinkles. She tucked loose strands of hair into her bonnet, and pinched her cheeks to give them some color. She was afraid her efforts did little to help her appearance, but under the circumstances, it was the best she could do.

As the wagon came closer to the house, Sadie stared at the sight. It was just as Ephraim had said. The house was made out of sod, something she hadn't been able to imagine in Tennessee. She had pictured piles of dirt when he wrote the word "soddy," but now she could see that it was actually made out of strips of sod piled one on top of another, almost like bricks.

I doubt you would like it at all, Ephraim had written.

But just now, Sadie thought the earth walls made the house look cozy, even more homey than a frame house. *Just try me, Ephraim Mayfield,* she thought smugly. *That excuse isn't going to work.*

The door opened and Sadie's heart jumped into her throat. *Ephraim!*

But then she saw that it was a woman who stood silhouetted in the doorway. Sadie's shoulder's drooped, but quickly she straightened. He would be here soon enough.

"Whoa!" Mr. Lindstrom drew the team to a stop, and without waiting for the wagon to come to a complete stop, Sadie gathered her skirts and jumped down. When she lifted her eyes to the house, the woman was already running toward her.

"Bless me, is this who I think it is?" Ephraim's mother threw her arms around Sadie and hugged her tightly. "Oh, child, you are a sight for sore eyes!"

"Mrs. Mayfield, I'm so glad to see you, too." Sadie hugged her back. Margaret Mayfield had always been like a second mother to her, and seeing her made Sadie feel as if she had just come home.

"Now. Let me get a good look at you." Mrs. Mayfield took a step back, her hands still resting on Sadie's shoulders. "You're still as beautiful as ever, Sadie Newman. Ephraim will—" She stopped. "That rascal! He never mentioned that you were coming. I would have planned for you if I had known you were on your way here."

Sadie's face suddenly felt too warm. "Um, yes. About Ephraim—"

"Sadie!" Ephraim's younger sister flew toward her, and Sadie opened her arms for her.

"Emily!" Despite the three-year difference between the two of them, Emily had always been her best friend. The two of them had been swapping quilt patterns and secrets years before Sadie became aware that Emily's brother was an incredibly nice young man.

When the two of them finally released each other, laughing, Sadie shook her head. "A whole year since we last saw each other! We're never going to get caught up from this."

"Especially not since Ephraim is going to monopolize you as soon as he gets done with the chores and realizes you're here." Emily rolled her eyes, but she was smiling.

"Just answer one quick question for me. Do you have a beau yet?"

"A beau?" Emily snorted. "Honestly, Sadie, I'm only sixteen."

"It happens. It happened to me at that age." Sadie stepped back to view Ephraim's last sibling, Sarah. "I declare, you've grown a foot since I last saw you," she said, reaching out to tug one of the girl's braids. "How old are you now? Twelve?"

"Eleven." Sarah straightened, obviously pleased that Sadie had mistaken her for older than she was.

"Well." Sadie intended to say more, but she heard men's voices coming their way. Suddenly her mouth went dry and her heart began to race. With a trembling hand, she pushed a wayward strand of hair from her face.

Emily gave her hand a squeeze and whispered, "You look lovely."

Sadie smiled her thanks, but her eyes strained to see through the gloom and make out Ephraim.

"What's this? A visitor?" Ephraim's father asked, his form emerging from the shadows.

But Sadie didn't hear Mrs. Mayfield's answer. Her gaze was caught by the young man who stepped into the light beside his father. As their eyes met, Sadie's heart sped still faster and her knees went so weak that she feared they might give way on her right there in the Mayfields' front yard. *Oh my.* She had missed him terribly.

But even as the delightful haze enveloped her, she sensed something amiss. Rather than rushing to her side as she had dreamed, his feet seemed frozen to the ground. His face reflected all the shock that she had expected, but—somehow—the delight she had expected was lacking.

The spinning inside her stopped. *Oh no.* Something had gone terribly wrong. She searched his face, hoping that she had misjudged his reaction, but those blue eyes that she loved so well were *not* dancing. Instead, she watched as his lips pressed into a tight line that told her was trying to control his temper.

Oh dear. This was *not* good.

"Miss?" Mr. Lindstrom kept a good distance between the two of them. "Your trunks are unloaded. I'm leaving now."

“Hold on, Swen.” At last, Ephraim’s feet moved, but he pivoted toward Mr. Lindstrom, not Sadie. “I think we have a bit of a problem. You see—” He paused and glanced toward his parents. “I’m not—that is, nobody told me she was coming.”

At the startled looks that Ephraim’s parents sent her, Sadie wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole. She could hardly believe her ears. Ephraim considered her coming a—*problem*? Her dreams were fast crumbling around her feet.

Mr. Lindstrom shifted and folded his arms across his chest. “Well, I’m not the one to blame for that. She asked me to deliver her here—and I did that. That’s all that could be expected of me.”

“But she can’t stay here.” Again Ephraim looked at his parents. “What do we do?”

He wasn’t even speaking to her—only about her. Sadie would have cried if she weren’t still numb with shock.

“Well—” Mrs. Mayfield nibbled on her lower lip. “I suppose it wouldn’t be proper for her to stay here. Mr. Lindstrom, could you—?”

“No,” he said before she could finish. “I am not bringing her home with me.”

“Maybe the Johnsons will let her stay the night with them,” Mr. Mayfield suggested.

“We can’t impose on them,” Ephraim broke in. “They already have enough children in their house.”

Was he implying not only that she was an imposition but also a child? Sadie couldn’t take it any longer. “Look, I’m sorry for the trouble this has caused you, but that wasn’t my goal. I’ll just—just sleep in the barn if that’s the only place available.”

The Mayfields stared at her as if she had just spoken Chinese. “There’s no hay in the loft right now,” Ephraim said.

Well, at least he had finally said something *to* her! “I’ll make do,” she said, lifting her chin.

“That wouldn’t be right.”

“Why not?” Sadie’s voice rose a pitch higher. “I’m not *trying* to make this difficult for you.”

He all but glared at her. “Then next time send a letter and ask for permission.”

“And would you have given it?”

“I would have replied as necessary. But *this*—” He motioned around him. “This is absurd.”

“Absurd? You’re calling *me* absurd?”

“All right, calm down you two.” Mr. Mayfield stepped forward to intervene. “We will get this worked out, but we all must remain polite.”

Sadie felt chastened. Tears stung at the back of her eyes and she looked away, not willing for the Mayfields to see just how badly Ephraim was hurting her. If she had known he was going to act like this, she would have stayed in Tennessee. And good riddance!

“The Olbergs,” Mrs. Mayfield said suddenly. “I’m sure they would be willing to let her stay with them.”

The lines that creased Mr. Mayfield’s forehead smoothed. “Yes, of course. Johan and Selma will be delighted to have her.”

Delighted. Sadie hoped he wasn’t exaggerating. Her heart couldn’t bear more rejection.

Ephraim shifted. “The trunks. What on earth do we do with them all?”

Her irritation with him flared to life again. Those trunks weren’t her way of trying to torment him—they held their future home. At least *she* had something to show that she had been thinking of him over the last year!

“We’ll stack them in the barn for now,” Mr. Mayfield said decisively.

Mr. Lindstrom grunted and turned back to his wagon. “Guess I’ll be going, then. If you want a ride, come along, Miss Newman.”

That was it? Sadie looked at Ephraim, praying that he would give her some sign that he was happy to see her. He merely stared at the ground.

Sadie hesitated, waiting so long that the silence shifted from awkward to downright embarrassing.

"I'm coming," she said shortly and spun toward Mr. Lindstrom's wagon.

"But Sadie, you've hardly had time to visit!" Emily broke in. "And after all you've gone through to come here—"

"Can't miss my ride." Sadie took advantage of her back being turned to them and swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. She reached to climb into Mr. Lindstrom's wagon, but Mrs. Mayfield laid a hand on her arm.

"Emily's right. You've had hardly any time to visit. Couldn't you stay for supper and have Ephraim drive you to the Olbergs' later?"

Sadie quickly shook her head. "I don't want to inconvenience him more than I already have." It would have been one thing if Ephraim had made the offer himself, but coming from his mother—gracious, she could hardly accept that, kind though her intentions had been.

"Well, I bet Ephraim is dying to talk to you, so why don't you just walk a little way with Sadie, Ephraim? And then tomorrow Sadie can come over and spend the whole day with us." Emily gave her older brother a shove, making him stumble forward.

Ephraim sent her a glare, but marched toward Sadie and gave his hand a flick. "Drive on, Swen. We'll be right behind you."

The wagon lurched into motion so quickly that Sadie couldn't have climbed aboard even if she had wanted to. But of course, she didn't. Surely now that she and Ephraim had a chance to talk they would be able to smooth out this awkward situation.

Ephraim started off at a fast walk, and Sadie had to run to catch up to him.

Ephraim didn't speak until they were out of earshot of his family. "What do you think you are doing here? I explicitly told you to wait for me to come for you!"

Where were all those lectures when Sadie needed them? All words seemed to have fled from her mind apart from the three words, "I missed you."

"That gave you no excuse for flying of the handle like this. I had a plan, and in order for this transition to work smoothly, I needed you to wait for me. But you couldn't do that, could you?"

Sadie lifted her chin and glared at him. "You're right, Ephraim. It was *your* plan. You wouldn't listen to me when I told you I wanted to be here with you."

Ephraim's gaze locked with hers, and she watched as just a fraction of the ice melted from his eyes. "I know you want to be with me, and I want you here just as much. But—" His voice hardened. "—how can our marriage work if you can't trust me?"

Sadie felt as if he had struck her. "Ephraim, of course I trust you. That has nothing to do with this."

"I think it has everything to do with this. You couldn't trust me enough to stick with the plan, so you plunged ahead with your own plans. You know that I said we had to wait—and now that you're here, you can see why." Ephraim motioned to the bare prairie around them. "There are few people around, and—"

"Stop it!" Sadie didn't intend to lose her temper, but as frayed as her nerves were from the long journey and the charged atmosphere between them, it was a miracle she hadn't lost it long ago. "Stop right now, Ephraim Mayfield! You never asked me if I would mind having few people around or if I would be willing to live in a sod house. You *assumed*. So let me lay it out for you." She planted her hands on her hips. "I love being around people, yes, but if doing without them means that I get you, I'm willing to make the sacrifice. The same goes for the soddy. Don't you see? Civilization and frame houses aren't necessary for my happiness. I don't want you to be slaving away out here while I sit at home in Tennessee sipping tea and waiting for you to hand me the perfect life. I want to be here helping you build our little corner of paradise. I want to be working at your side. I want to have your supper waiting for you on the table when you come home tired at the end of a long day. I want to be your helpmeet, not your spoiled princess."

Ephraim's jaw worked before he finally said, "But if you had waited—"

"I've waited a year, Ephraim! How much longer do you want me to wait?" She stopped and grabbed for his hand. "Don't you see? Our lives are slipping away. We can only spend the time God has given it, not save it. I don't want to spend even one unnecessary day away from you."

Ephraim pulled his hand out of hers. "Sadie! I'm not asking you to wait a lifetime. Maybe just one more year. I don't even have a house for you."

"Isn't there a way we can make do?" Again, tears stung at Sadie's eyes. "Aren't you tired of waiting, Ephraim?"

He remained silent for so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer her. At last, he quietly said, "Not when I think of what I'm waiting for. When I think of what I'm building for us, time passes quickly."

"But think of me! I want a chance to help, too." He simply *had* to understand how desperate she was.

His chin took on a stubborn tilt. "It's too harsh for you out here."

"Your sisters are doing just fine," Sadie countered.

"But are they doing as well as they could be? You have no idea of the dangers out here, Sadie. Indians. Fire. Blizzards. Sickness. Starvation. They are all a threat to our lives."

"Then all the more reason not to waste a single day of our lives apart." Sadie turned to coaxing. "Please, Ephraim. Just tell me how to help you, and I'll do whatever you say."

His normally laughing eyes were cold as he looked at her. "Honestly? I already told you the best way you could help was to wait, and you couldn't do that. Waiting is still the best way you can help." He ran a hand through his hair. "But now I can't just wave my hand and make you land back in Tennessee. On top of all the other spring projects I have to get done, I'm going to have to figure out what to do with you."

Sadie stopped walking and whirled to face him. "Please, Ephraim! If you truly love me, then stop acting as if I'm the biggest problem of your life!"

"Are you saying you don't think I love you?" Ephraim's eyes narrowed. "Is that what you're saying?"

Sadie forced herself to meet his gaze. "I would have liked to hear you say so. You haven't been acting like it."

For one moment, they stood staring at each other, the distance between them feeling far greater than the few feet of grass that it was.

"You shouldn't even question that," Ephraim said at last.

"And what if I am?" Sadie asked despite her inner warnings that told her not to press.

"Then consider that your impetuous journey here makes me wonder if you truly love me or if your feelings are nothing more than a youthful infatuation."

Sadie jerked back. "How can you say that?"

"Only because it's what I am wondering." Ephraim backed away from her. "Go, Sadie. Your ride is getting away from you."

"This is it?" Sadie's voice sounded high pitched to her own ears. "That's all you have to say to me?"

"I don't trust myself to say more right now. We'll talk when I have my temper under better control." He turned and began to jog away.

"I can *not* believe this!" Sadie yelled after him. "How can you—how could you—?" A sob escaped from her, and her tears broke through her resolve. In a whisper, she asked, "Couldn't you at least have said you love me?"

Turning, she fled toward Mr. Lindstrom's wagon, afraid of what his answer would have been. This was the worst disaster of her life.



Desperate for the solitude he knew he wouldn't find in the soddy, Ephraim stormed straight toward the barn. The room was too small to allow him to walk around, so instead he sat down on one of Sadie's boxes and purposefully refused to look at the rest of her trunks, as if somehow that would make them disappear along with the woman accompanying them.

This wasn't how he had planned things to turn out at all. He had wanted everything to look perfect before he brought his bride here. But typical Sadie had burst before his plans were finished, and everything was now in chaos.

He heard a rustle in the doorway, and guessing who it was, he called, "Go away, Emily."

Emily marched into the room as boldly as if his words had been an invitation. "Huh uh, Ephraim. I want to hear how your walk with Sadie went."

Ephraim glared at her. "Nosy."

She glared right back. "Stubborn."

Ephraim was the first to break the stare. "If you insist on knowing, we weren't able to make any conclusions on anything." *Instead it seems that we tore everything apart.* His heart ached as he remembered how Sadie had questioned his love for her. What had made her ask a question like that?

"It doesn't matter if you made no decisions on your future." Emily leaned against the wall, settling in for a long stay. "Did you tell her how glad you are that she's here?"

Ephraim fixed her with a look. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because it would have been a lie."

"What are you talking about? She's your fiancée. You've been waiting for months to see her."

"But not like this." Ephraim felt the frustration of it all crushing in on him yet again. "I don't even have a house for her."

"Guess you'll just have to get started on it sooner than you had planned."

"But the town—we had plans—"

"Maybe Sadie wasn't all for those plans." Emily arched one eyebrow. "Come, Ephraim. You've been making her wait a whole year, and the end of that waiting isn't anywhere in sight if you stick with those plans of waiting for the town. Maybe they won't even plant a town nearby. We can't say for sure right now. But Sadie certainly loves you, and you love her. You know you want to marry each other, so why not just get the job done?"

Ephraim bowed his head and tangled his fingers in his hair, trying to think. "Guess I can't send her back to Tennessee now. Wouldn't be very economical."

"And having her so far away has been eating at you. You know that."

"I couldn't ask her to put up with a soddy."

"Pshaw." Emily waved her hand. "Listen to you. You really do underestimate her, don't you? I figure a woman will put up with a lot if she loves a man enough."

Ephraim looked up and studied her. "You really think we should get married now?"

"Indeed I do. And if you didn't have so many ideas about how things ought to be, you would too." She stepped in front of him. "Admit it, Ephraim Mayfield. You are desperately in love with Sadie Newman and don't want to wait to marry her."

Ephraim pursed his lips, but she waved her finger in his face. "I told you to say it out loud!"

"I love Sadie." The words burst out of him, and immediately he felt better for saying them. That girl could be a real pain, but yes, he loved her, orneriness and all.

"Good." Emily beamed at him as if he had just finished a difficult recitation. "Now, when does your heart say you want to marry her?"

He sighed, knowing she wasn't going to leave him alone until he answered her honestly. "As soon as possible."

"There. See? You're both feeling the same things, but the only difference is that Sadie took action." Emily laid her hand on his shoulder. "You, my dear brother, are too stubborn for your own good."

"And you stick your nose in other people's business more than you ought to," Ephraim grumbled, but secretly he appreciated her. "I should probably talk to Sadie again."

“What are you going to say?”

“I’ll tell her I love her. I think she’s doubting that.”

“And when she asks about a wedding?”

“I’ll tell her that impulsive as she is, she’ll deserve the soddy I’m going to build her.”

Emily let out a squeal. “So you are going to marry her? Soon?”

“The bride had arrived, so I guess I have no choice.”

“Ephraim!” She swatted his shoulder. “Make sure that you sugar up your words when you tell that to Sadie.”

Chuckling, Ephraim ducked around her and made his way toward the team, his heart lighter than it had been since leaving Sadie a year ago. All his carefully laid plans had been upset by Sadie’s arrival, but now he decided that perhaps that wasn’t so bad after all. The Lord had known what he needed even more than he did—and waiting another year for Sadie would have been about impossible anyways.



At first Sadie thought she had imagined the tapping sound. She lay in the Olbergs’ soddy with the quilt covers pulled up to her chin, her pillow wet with tears. She felt so guilty. She had been furious when Ephraim called her impetuous, but now she realized just how right he had been. She had thought she was making this journey for love, but now she felt selfish. If she had stayed in Tennessee, she wouldn’t have put anyone out. Not Ephraim. Not the Mayfields. Even Johan and Selma Olberg were inconvenienced because of her. They had accepted her with open arms, but the soddy had obviously been built only for two. Now Johan lay curled up on the floor in a mound of quilts while Sadie shared the bed with Selma. He had assured her that he didn’t mind, but his words couldn’t change the truth. She was a bother, and she knew it.

Lord, I’ve made a mess of this. I don’t know how to fix the problems I’ve caused by my selfishness. She pressed a fist to her mouth to muffle her sobs. *Please, help me.*

The tapping became more insistent, breaking through the haze of Sadie’s misery, and she lifted her head from the pillow to listen. A shadow moved across the front window, and Sadie’s hand flew to her throat, Ephraim’s dire words about Indians jumping into her mind.

But then she saw the brim of a hat and the shadow of a hand lifting to tap at the pane again. The man wasn’t acting sneaky; he obviously seemed to be trying to catch someone’s attention.

Ephraim. The name flitted across her mind, but she tamped the idea down. It couldn’t be him. He was still angry at her.

Still, Sadie couldn’t stop herself from slipping out of bed. She grabbed her coat from where it hung over the back of a chair, and pulling it on over her nightgown, she cracked the door open.

The tapping stopped, and a voice whispered, “Sadie?”

Her heart leaped at the sound. “Ephraim? What are you doing here?”

“Shut the door so we can stop whispering.”

She did as he said, stepping farther away from the safety of the doorway. The ground felt cold to her bare feet, and a breeze blew right through her thin nightgown. She pulled her coat more tightly around herself. “I thought you would be asleep by now.”

“Not as full as my mind is.” His hat cast shadows over his face, hiding his eyes from her. “Sadie, I know this isn’t the best hour for this, but I needed to tell you how sorry I am.”

“Sorry? For what? I’m the one who is sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you.” Sadie had thought she was done crying, but tears sprang to her eyes yet again. “I really do regret coming like I did, Ephraim.”

“I don’t.” Ephraim took a step closer, and as the moonlight fell across his face, Sadie felt the band around her heart loosen. Gone was the anger and condemnation in his eyes. All they held now was tenderness. “Having my plans disrupted made me upset, I’ll admit, but I shouldn’t have treated you like I did. I’m the one who’s sorry. Forgive me?”

“Of course I do—for whatever there is to forgive.” To Sadie’s surprise, Ephraim dropped to one knee in front of her. “What are you doing?”

“Sadie Newman,” he said, placing his hat over his heart. “Since I can’t seem to convince you to wait any longer, I’m going to build you the best sod house in the state, and I am going to marry you no later than a month’s time. Do you agree?”

Sadie hesitated. “What if I had a suggestion? Would you take what I have to say into consideration this time?”

“I can’t promise I’ll agree with it, but yes, I will definitely take it into consideration.” Ephraim’s eyes searched her face. “What is it?”

“Let’s set a real wedding date.” Sadie laid her hand on his shoulder. “Such as, the Sunday three weeks from now.”

She grinned at the relief that washed over his face. “Now *that* I can agree with. Good suggestion.”

Light suddenly appeared in the Olbergs’ window, and the door opened enough for Johan to stick his head outside. “What’s going on?” he asked, looking from Sadie to Ephraim.

Ephraim stood and pulled Sadie to his side. “Congratulate me. Sadie just agreed to become my wife in three weeks’ time.”

Johan’s eyebrows nearly disappeared into his blond hair. “But you were already engaged.”

“But we didn’t have a date and we do now.” Ephraim squeezed Sadie tight. “She promised.”

“At this hour?” Johan shook his head.

Selma appeared behind her husband. “Johan, just leave the two of them alone. Don’t you remember what it’s like to be young and in love? They might not be mindful the hour, but I can guarantee that you and I will not be able to forget it tomorrow when we are doing chores.” Flashing Sadie a grin, she grabbed her husband’s arm and pulled him inside.

As the door clicked shut behind them, Ephraim smiled down at Sadie. “If you remember anything, always keep this in mind: I love you with all my heart, Sadie Newman-soon-to-be-Mayfield. Even when you are being impulsive.”

“And I love you, Ephraim Mayfield,” she whispered, leaning against his arm. “Even when you’re being stubborn.”

“Well, here’s one thing I don’t intend to stop being stubborn about. I am never again going to let so many states stand between us again. In fact, I don’t intend to let you wander very far from me ever again.”

“And I’m going to hold you to that same promise,” Sadie said, smiling up at him in the moonlight. As cleanly as if someone had wiped a cloth across a slate, the tears, the heartache, the pain had disappeared—and all that remained was the love that wove its way through their promises and bound the two of them together.

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I did. Osceola is such a special place to me, and it was a pleasure for me to be able to write about the area even before the town was established. *Never Too Far* is a prequel to my upcoming *Home to Osceola* series, and I'm looking forward to introducing even more characters to you. Will Ephraim and Sadie be in the series? Well, you'll just have to wait and see.

To find more of my books and articles, visit my website at alenamentink.com. I would love to hear how you enjoyed the story!

