

❖ *Sisters at Heart* • 3 ❖

Love's
SWEET
Beginning

A NOVEL

Ann Shorey


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For Ann Kathryn Roberts, with love.
You're my joy and my inspiration.

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ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
APRIL 1868

Cassie Haddon jammed a pillow over her ears, hoping to block the sound of raised voices. In the hallway outside her room, her mother and uncle shouted at each other in tones no pillow could smother.

“You’ve imposed on my hospitality far too long,” her uncle’s deep voice growled. “It’s time you and that useless daughter of yours moved on.”

Cassie cringed. Heaven knows she tried to be helpful. It wasn’t her fault that she’d reached the age of twenty-five without possessing any useful skills. Until the war, she’d always had servants to wait on her.

“If my Phillip were alive, he’d be appalled at your behavior. You’re his brother. You have an obligation to take care of us.” The thin walls did nothing to diminish her mother’s shrill pitch.

“Don’t put on airs with me, Eliza. After eleven months, I’ve more than fulfilled any obligation I may have had toward

you. You have a brother of your own drifting around somewhere. Go find him.”

At the thought of being forced to leave, Cassie dropped the pillow and ran to open the door. “Please don’t send us away. We have nowhere else to go. I promise I’ll help more—I just need someone to show me what to do. Your wife shoos me off when I try to do anything.”

Eliza Bingham lifted her chin, her hennaed curls bobbing. “Don’t beg, Cassie. It’s unbecoming to a lady.” She shifted her gaze to her brother-in-law. “We’ll be on our way first thing tomorrow. And may our fate be on your head.”

She grabbed Cassie’s arm and tugged her into their shared bedroom, slamming the door behind them.

Once inside, Cassie sank onto the edge of the bed and stared at her mother. “How can we leave? Where on earth will we go?”

“Noble Springs. The last word I had about my brother, he’s working for the railroad there, laying track for a spur line.”

In spite of her apprehension, Cassie couldn’t prevent a tinkle of excitement at the prospect of returning to the town where they’d spent a brief sojourn the previous year. Since the end of the war, Mother had ricocheted from place to place seeking someone to care for them. If she were to locate Uncle Rand and settle in his home, Cassie would finally be free to make a life of her own. She’d learn skills to take care of herself. Find work. Put down roots. She didn’t want to end up like her mother—helpless.

“I’d love to go back to Noble Springs. What a perfect idea.”

“We’ll see how perfect things are when we get there. Rand’s accommodations may be even less comfortable than this house.” She removed a paisley shawl that covered a trunk in one corner of the tiny room, then snapped open the clasps and lifted the lid. “We’ll pack tonight, and have Rudy take

us to the rail station in the morning. I'll show him he can't bully me."

From the set of her mother's jaw, Cassie knew she'd follow through with the plan. What she didn't know was how Mother proposed to find her brother once they reached Noble Springs. Cassie hadn't seen him since she was a child and remembered little of his appearance—other than the coppery hair that her mother claimed crowned her side of the family.

She opened a bureau drawer and removed a stack of underlinens. When she was halfway to the open trunk with her arms full, her mother stopped her.

"Not now. Wait until I pack our quilts and pillows. My goodness, how many times do I have to show you the correct way to fill a trunk?"

"But how will we sleep without our bedding?"

"We'll roll up in our dressing gowns. They'll be the last thing we pack in the morning. I want to be ready to leave here at daylight. I don't care if the train doesn't depart until noon or later. We're not spending one more minute than necessary in this house."

Sighing, Cassie dropped her chemises and drawers back in the bureau and lifted a quilt from the bed. Together they folded the red and green thistle pattern into a rectangle, placing the covering in the bottom of the trunk.



Cassie sat next to her mother in the swaying passenger car. If she didn't get some air, she believed she'd faint to the floor. Rain had been falling since they left St. Louis, so opening a window was out of the question. She leaned forward and put her head between her knees.

Her mother elbowed her. "What on earth are you doing? Sit up."

"I . . . I think I'm ill. Everything's spinning."

"You'll feel better once we have something to eat. We should arrive in Noble Springs within the hour." She slipped her arm around Cassie's shoulders and helped her into a sitting position. "Rest your head against me and take deep breaths."

Cassie leaned into the embrace. The rocking of the train reminded her of happier times, when as a child she snuggled next to her mother for comfort. There'd been few of those moments since her father's death.

She relaxed to the sound of rhythmic clacking as the iron wheels rolled over the tracks. The next thing she knew, the engine's long whistle signaled their approach to the station in Noble Springs.

The train came to a stop with a billow of steam and the clash of cars rolling together. She rubbed her eyes and peered at the station house through a fogged-over window. The small wooden building looked forlorn in the rain.

"What do we do now? How will you find Uncle Rand?"

For a moment, uncertainty crossed her mother's face. Then she straightened her shoulders and pulled her umbrella and carpetbag from the overhead rack. "We'll leave our baggage with the stationmaster, and go inquire at West & Riley's. The grocer knows everybody. He'll know where my brother is living."

When they descended onto the platform, Cassie's dizziness returned. She grasped her mother's arm to keep from falling.

"I don't know if I can walk that far."

"You'll be fine. It's only a few blocks. Once we're there, we'll have a light meal in the restaurant before we hire a buggy to take us to Rand's house."

The thought of food did little to restore Cassie's equilibrium. With deliberate steps, she moved to the shelter of the station and rested on a bench beneath the overhang while her mother arranged for storage of their baggage. The falling mist blurred the signs on the buildings across the street. Drips of moisture splashed from the roof of the station to the boardwalk at her feet.

Four blocks in this weather sounded like four miles.



Cassie and her mother shared the umbrella as they pressed through the drizzle toward the combination grocery and restaurant that served as Noble Springs' unofficial information center. If Jacob West, the owner, didn't know who was doing what, his cook, Mrs. Fielder, usually did.

As they picked their way around puddles dotting King's Highway, she felt a twinge of nostalgia at the sight of Rosemary Saxon's cottage, surrounded by its white picket fence. Her stay with Rosemary had been a blessing during the months of her mother's ill-fated marriage to Mr. Bingham.

She gave herself a mental shake. Rosemary's last name was Stewart now. She'd married the doctor, Elijah Stewart, last August, and now lived in his two-story brick home in the next block. Cassie decided she'd pay a call on her friend as soon as she and Mother were settled with Uncle Rand. Then she'd visit Rosemary's sister-in-law, Faith Saxon, at Lindberg's Mercantile. The thought tickled her insides. Imagine how surprised the two women would be to see her back in Noble Springs.

When they entered West & Riley's, the savory aroma of roast turkey wafted toward them from the entrance to the restaurant portion of the building. In the grocery, shelves were

stocked to the ceiling with boxes, bags, and cans filled with food. Her stomach rumbled. Maybe Mother was right—she needed something to eat and she'd be fine.

Mr. West hurried toward them, wiping his hands on his apron. His face creased in a smile. "Miss Haddon. Mrs. Bingham. Good to see you again. Are you in town to visit friends?"

Cassie's mother shook her head. "We've returned permanently. I'm hoping you'll be able to tell us where Rand Carter lives."

"Happens I know." Mr. West combed his fingers through his dark hair. "He's not far from here. A block up Third Street. Cottage across from Cadwell's boardinghouse." He raised a questioning eyebrow. "He's only been in town six months or so. If you don't mind my asking, how is it you know him?"

"He's my brother."

"I'd never have guessed." He flicked a glance in Cassie's direction.

Her skin prickled. Judging by Mr. West's tone, Rand Carter might not be the refuge they sought. But from the determined expression on her mother's face, Cassie knew she intended to march straight to Uncle Rand's door, no matter what reception awaited them.

Mother gave the grocer a dismissive nod. "Thank you, Mr. West. Since he's so close, we'll be on our way."

Cassie gazed with longing at the empty tables in the restaurant before turning to follow. She tried to ignore her growling stomach.

"We'll eat at Rand's house," Mother whispered after they stepped out of the building. "We don't have money to waste." She strode to the corner and turned north on Third Street. Cassie hurried to keep pace.

She felt a sense of relief when she noticed a modest brown cottage trimmed with red shutters across from the boarding-

house. A brick pathway, surrounded by patchy grass, led to the porch. The dwelling didn't look as bad as Mr. West's reaction led her to believe.

Her mother paused and drew a long breath. "Well, here we are." Her grip on Cassie's arm tightened. "Thankfully, my own brother can't turn us away."

She marched up the porch steps and rapped on the door frame. After a moment, a middle-aged man answered the summons. His graying hair was combed straight back from his forehead and he held a pair of spectacles in one hand. His workman's trousers were clean, but patched. He inclined his head in their direction.

"Yes, ladies? If you're here to collect for war relief, I don't have—"

"I'm sorry to disturb you." Mother's voice squeaked. She cleared her throat. "I was told my brother lived here. His name's Rand Carter."

"That's me."

"But . . . you're not my brother."

"Never said I was."

Cassie swayed and grabbed a porch railing for support. She'd used all of her strength to walk this far. Now where would they go?