

By Sherry Skye Stuart

Mayfield paused a moment and bit her bottom lip before she knocked on Matron Anderson's office door. She was unclear about the summons, knowing she had done nothing wrong, hoping nothing was amiss. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and lightly tapped.

"Please come in," Mrs. Rooney invited as she opened the door and beckoned toward the chair in front of Matron's empty desk.

"Have a seat, Mayfield. Matron will be in shortly." She swept behind the large wooden desk and began moving papers and folders, tsk-ing as she sorted and organized.

"Matron's a bit behind with her paperwork as you can see. Glad the gentlemen at the Capitol decided to add to her budget so she could hire me as her assistant to help with her duties. It's about time if you ask me. The men here have a library and classes to improve themselves, while you women don't have anything like that. Doesn't seem fair to me!" Mrs. Rooney bustled about the room filing papers in drawers. "Bless Lizzie for teaching reading to the ladies. If only we had more than tattered McGuffey's Readers and ragged old Bibles..."

Before she finished speaking, Matron Anderson swept into the room. She was a tall and striking woman, auburn hair piled on top of her head, pearl earbobs dangling from her ears, and a wide smile on her lips, which soothed Mayfield's taut nerves.

"Thank you for bringing order to my desk, Mrs. Rooney. I'll see to Mayfield now. Please check with Cook about the weekly menus. The Presbyterian women just brought us two hams, a crate of apples, and..." She turned expectantly to Mayfield, "a length of the most exquisite blue wool."

"That does sound lovely," Mayfield agreed, her sewing interests piqued.

Matron sat heavily in her chair and touched the only piece of paper remaining on her desk. Mayfield looked at



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her anxiously, biting her bottom lip while her hands curled in her lap.

"Mayfield, you've been approved for parole."

Her mouth went dry, and her sweaty hands continued to twist her skirt.

"Warden Tynan submitted your name to the State Parole Board. In light of your good record and the length of time you've served, they believe you have reformed, and your parole has been approved." Matron Anderson's eyes shone as she pushed the paper towards Mayfield. "Go ahead and read it, then we have some things to attend to."

Mayfield's hands trembled as she picked up the official paper. She stopped reading twice to wipe tears from her eyes. Her day of freedom had finally come, just as Father James had promised her; she held the paper in her hands!

"Do you have any questions?" Matron inquired.

"I'm not sure..." Mayfield's voice faltered.

"That's all right. If you have questions later, please speak with Mrs. Rooney, and we'll sort things out. For now, let's proceed with the details." Matron took the paper back then pulled open a desk drawer, a frown creasing her forehead as she riffled through the papers. She lifted her head. "Excuse me a moment, I'll just look over here for your release checklist." She walked over to the basket on top of the tall file cabinet. "Ah, here it is. Thank goodness for Mrs. Rooney's organization." After she moved back to her chair, she perused the paper in her hands.

"First, do you know where you want to go after you're released? A family member perhaps? I see that you listed your sister Olive as kin on your intake sheet, and you wrote

a letter to her after you first came here. Did she answer your letter?"

"She didn't write back." Mayfield hesitated. "I think she might be ashamed of me... I never wrote again."

"Do you have other kin?" Matron probed. "You'll need somewhere to go, somewhere you can start over, somewhere you'll be safe. Is there anyone else?"

"My son William died in a mining accident in Trinidad years ago, he was only sixteen. And my daughter Sarah, her husband took her and the babies to Leadville a few months before I came here, and I haven't heard from her. I don't even know if she still lives there." Mayfield's green eyes pooled with tears, and she continued.

"I do have a sister, Olive. We were close when we were younger. Then I moved away to Colorado when Jess and I married, and she stayed in Kansas City. She married Jim and took care of our parents before they both died. We used to write to each other a few times a year."

"What if you write to your sister again," Matron suggested, "and we'll hope she writes back. Or she can reply through a telegram to the Warden. We'll figure this out."

"Yes, ma'am, I can write another letter to Olive." Mayfield's chin lifted as she wondered again why Olive never wrote back. She was probably ashamed of her sister, a felon. Thank goodness their parents had passed and were spared the humiliation of knowing one of their daughters was in prison.

"Good, then we have a plan," Matron replied. "I'm sure you'll write a fine letter to your sister. For now, go back to your duties in the sewing room. And take a look at that exquisite blue wool. I think it's just perfect for a new skirt for you to wear when you leave." Matron smiled again. "Report to me in the morning after breakfast so you can write your letter. I'll supply you with paper and a pen. Meanwhile, I'll solicit letters from Mrs. Tynan and Mrs. Phillips about your skills with the needle. I'm certain Father James will also furnish you with a letter, as will I. You've done much good here, Mayfield."

Matron Anderson stood up from her chair, tucking in a stray lock of hair over her left ear. "I'll expect you in the morning then."

"Thank you, ma'am." Mayfield also stood and moved to the door. Please let *Olive answer my letter*, she silently prayed.

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“Well, that’s to be expected, I suppose. Take your time. Your penmanship is superb, and you have a way with words. It’s a credit to you that you’ve helped the other women with their writing and correspondence. I believe you’ll write a splendid letter to your sister. There’s no hurry. I’ll be here for a while, seeing to the paperwork, and Matron will be back after her meeting with the Warden.”

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The next morning after breakfast, Mayfield reported to Matron's office. Mrs. Rooney showed her to a small writing table by the window. There was a stack of foolscap paper, a blotter beneath, a wood-handled pen with a new nib and a pewter inkstand. After sitting down, she stared outside, not ready to begin her letter, although she had stayed awake half the night thinking about it. The tree branches were covered with snow, and the clouds were low and gray. The ugliness of winter matched her mood of uneasiness about Olive, who sometimes had a dark temper and a biting tongue. Perhaps her sister had read her letter and tossed it aside. Maybe it was best to write everything all over again, in case her first letter never got to her. Mayfield bit her lower lip and closed her eyes, realizing again that she had nowhere else to go.

"Are you needing anything else?" Mrs. Rooney asked. She was busy dusting the books and notebooks in Matron's oak bookcases.

"No, thank you, I have everything I need. I'm just nervous, is all."

"Well, that's to be expected, I suppose. Take your time. Your penmanship is superb, and you have a way with words. It's a credit to you that you've helped the other women with their writing and correspondence. I believe you'll write a splendid letter to your sister. There's no hurry. I'll be here for a while, seeing to the paperwork, and Matron will be back after her meeting with the Warden."

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Canon City, Colorado

February 24th, 1901

Dear Sister,

I don't know if you received my previous letter because I received no reply. So I'm writing again in the hopes that this letter will find you and your family well.

I have been in the Colorado State Prison in Canon City for two years. I know you must be ashamed of me, but you are the only family I have left. My parole has been approved, and I will be leaving here soon. I hope you will find it in your heart to make a place for me with you, at least for a little while.

I explained everything in my first letter, but in case you never received it, I'll tell you again.

A few weeks after Jess died of the rattlesnake bite, I went to the courthouse in Salida to look up our deed. I was shocked to see it was only in Jess's name. He had told me it was in both our names so I was greatly disappointed. I worked as hard on the ranch as he did. I was angry with him for not keeping his word, after he promised me that after we proved up, both our names were on the deed. He wasn't always good with the business side of the ranch.

The County Clerk told me I should look for Jess's will, to see if I was his heir, otherwise the ranch may no longer be mine. I was so afraid of holding onto our land that I fretted and worried all night and by morning I knew what I could do.

That night I wrote out a practice will in pencil. I was so nervous and didn't want to make any mistakes. I rewrote it twice, then went to bed. After chores and breakfast the next morning, I took out my good paper and pen, then wrote out an official will for Jess. I dated it July 18, 1896, the date we proved up. I signed Jess' name exactly the way he did. I always did have a good hand for penmanship. Remember the award I received when we were schoolgirls?

Before suppertime, Mr. Chapin, my neighbor to the north, stopped by to check on me. I had been good friends with his wife, Maude. When she died in childbirth last year I helped with the baby and children until her sister came from Denver to carry the children up there to live with her. I missed Maude. She was a kind and generous neighbor, listening to me pour out my troubles now and then and helping me with the harvest and canning.

Mr. Chapin and I sat out on the porch drinking coffee and talking about the weather, the drought, our crops. He asked me what my plans were now that Jess was gone. I told him that I was going into town the next day to record Jess's will, that I had found it in a small wooden chest under our bed. He asked if he could take a look at it so I went into the bedroom and brought out the folded paper. I stepped onto the porch and invited him into the kitchen since the sun had swung around and the porch was becoming too hot.

After Mr. Chapin read through the will twice, he told me it was no good because there was no witness. I almost wept as he explained the legal doings of a will. I sat at the table, feeling angry again at Jess, my mind spinning. I did not want to lose our land.

Mayfield smiled at Mrs. Rooney. She was a kindhearted woman, firm about the rules, efficient in her duties and with a breath of compassion that alleviated Mayfield's nervousness. With a deep breath, she turned back to the table, took a piece of paper, dipped the nib of the pen into the inkwell and began the letter to her sister.

Mayfield paused in her writing, set the pen in the inkstand, and pushed the paper away. She gazed out the window again, as puffy snowflakes lazily drifted onto the whitened grass. She still remembered what had happened that afternoon but couldn't bring herself to put it in words to her sister. She closed her eyes as the memory overtook her.

"I surely understand what you're trying to accomplish here, Mayfield." Mr. Chapin pulled his chair closer to mine and set the will down on the table. "And I can't say that I blame you one bit. There is a way Jess's will could be valid..." his voice trailed off.

"How?" I sat on the edge of my chair.

"I could say I witnessed Jess writing it."

"Why would you do that for me?"

"Because I want part of your ranch, it's as simple as that. I want the north forty acres next to my land. We'll both benefit from our agreement. No one else needs to know." He folded his arms over his chest and looked at me with steel in his eyes.

I stood up and walked around the kitchen. Mr. Chapin was a quiet and stern man, but Jess found him fair and hard-working. He kept his fences mended, tended well to his stock, went to church every Sunday and was a good husband and father. I could trust him to keep his word. It's what Jess would want me to do. Losing a fourth of my land would still give me enough. It was only scrub grass, barely good enough for the cattle to graze on. It seemed to be the only way I could keep the ranch. I turned to him with my answer.

"Mr. Chapin, I will agree to your terms if you sign my husband's will as a witness. I will deed the north forty acres of my property to you after the will is recorded and the new deed is in my name."

He stood up, dipped the pen in the inkwell still sitting on the table, and carefully signed his name as witness to Jess's will. He put his rough hand out to shake my mine, but I couldn't respond. I kept both of my trembling hands behind my back.

"Now, you live up to your promise, Mayfield." He looked me in the eye, turned, and walked out of the door. I sagged into the kitchen chair, wondering if I had sold my soul to the devil.

Mayfield blinked her eyes at the memory, how her careful plan had come to naught. She picked up the pen and began writing to her sister once more.

Mr. Chapin's idea was to sign the will as a witness. He agreed to date his signature on the same date as the will. He wanted me to deed the north forty acres to him in return. I agreed, feeling it was the only way I could keep the ranch. I took the will into the County Clerk and he said the Judge would review it and later I would receive a new deed. He said I was lucky that my husband had a will. I agreed and went home, still angry at Jess for putting me in this position, but grateful I had figured out a way to keep my land, most of it anyway.

All would have been well if Mr. Chapin had kept our agreement on a business level. He started coming around the house and talking dirty to me, usually when he was drinking. I was often afraid to go to sleep, not knowing if he was prowling around. Of course I couldn't say anything for fear he would denounce our agreement.

It took a month for Jess's will to be recorded and to have a new deed issued in my name. I knew Jess had wanted me to have the ranch and was proud of myself for figuring out a way to keep it. I would go back into town the next week to keep my word to Mr. Chapin and deed over forty acres to him.

Late one Saturday afternoon, I was on the porch cooling off from canning early apples. Mr. Chapin appeared from around the barn and jumped up on the porch with a bunch of wilted daises in his hand. He had been drinking and his breath was horrid. I was embarrassed because I was in my chemise and petticoat. I told him to get off my porch and go back home. He slumped into a chair, dropped the flowers on the floor and took a nip from his pocket flask. I reminded him of our business agreement. Now that I had the new deed, I would go into town on Monday and deed the promised property to him. I told him he best go home and sober up. But he didn't leave.

Other memories crowded into Mayfield's mind and her hands began to tremble. She settled the pen back into the holder and peered out the window again, at the storm that had become a blizzard. She placed her warm hands on the icy windowpane, then touched them to her hot cheeks. How could everything have gone so wrong? She bit her lower lip and closed her eyes as more ugly recollections flooded into her mind and heart.

Mr. Chapin jumped up and started yelling something fierce. "You think you can boss me around? I know your secret, Mayfield, and I can tell the Magistrate that you forged the will after Jess died. Then where would you be?"

My heart skipped a beat. How did he know that? Was he guessing?

He moved towards me, his face dark and threatening. "Just give me some sweetness and I won't tell your secret. You owe me something for that."

"I already owe you forty acres of my property," I reminded him. "And I'll take care of that on Monday. Meet me at the courthouse at ten and I'll sign over the north forty, as we agreed on. Now go on home and sleep it off." I turned to close the screen door, but he came up from behind and grabbed my hair, pulling me back into him.

"Like hell I will," he slurred. "I'm getting me some sweetness," and he shoved me in front of him into the bedroom.

After he finished, he dressed and strode out of the house, never looking at me or saying a word. As the screen door slammed, I turned over the side of the bed and wretched into the chamber pot. I lay there bruised and ashamed, worried sick about what he might do next. My clothes were in a heap on the floor. After a while, I pulled the sheets from the bed, gathered my clothes, then wrapped myself up in the wedding ring quilt that Mama made years ago when Jess and I married.

Grabbing a box of lucifers from the kitchen, I walked out to the burn barrel with my bundle. I stuffed everything in it and set it all afire while I cried and screamed to the heavens. I held the quilt tight around me and sat on the ground until nothing was left of the bedding and my clothes but ashes. As the sun was setting, I threw hay to the horses and scattered scratch for the chickens. I went into the cool barn and gathered the barn kitties into my lap. I was still sobbing when the moon came up.

"Are you all right?" Mrs. Rooney walked over and gently touched Mayfield's left shoulder. "You've been sitting there for a while. A cuppa tea might do you good, help you catch your breath." She moved the tea kettle to the front of the woodstove and pulled down a tin of Earl Grey.

"I'm sorry to be a bother." Mayfield bit her lower lip then smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt. "Some things are difficult to write about, being better said and explained in person. And some things, well, some things I wish I could get out of my mind altogether."

"I understand, I do. I've learned there's usually more to any story than what's told. Drink your tea, my dear." Mrs.

Rooney drew up a chair next to Mayfield and together they sipped in silence while watching the blowing snowflakes. After finishing the soothing tea, Mrs. Rooney gathered the cups and saucers while Mayfield straightened her papers, dipped the pen into the inkwell and began writing again.

Olive, he forced me into the bedroom. I'll leave it to your imagination to know what happened. I burned my clothes and the sheets in the burn barrel, but I kept the wedding quilt Mama made for us. I felt so low that I gave in to him. I don't think I could have fought him off anyway. He was drunk and belligerent. And besides, he knew my secret. Please don't think less of me.

The next morning he came over and hollered at me from the porch. I went to the doorway, and he asked me to marry him. He said he would take care of all the land, and we could run it together. He stepped closer and tried to kiss me, but I slapped his face as hard as I could.

I guess you can figure out what happened next. I refused to marry him, so Mr. Chapin went into town before I got there on Monday and told the Magistrate that I forged his signature and the entire will. The sheriff came out that very day and asked me if what Mr. Chapin said was true. I was so tongue-tied that I said nothing. He told me to gather a few clothes and necessities, then he took me in to the jail.

Mr. Chapin told Judge Wharton he would look after things at the ranch until everything was all sorted out. By the time my trial came up, two months later, Mr. Chapin told a story that was nothing but lies, but the jury and the judge believed him. Again I said nothing, no one would believe me anyway, and I couldn't speak of what he had done to me. He and Mr. Adams, the rancher to the south, split my land between them, buying it for taxes that I couldn't pay. My whole world had twisted and broken, and I felt so alone.

I've been in the prison at Canon City for two years and will be getting out soon. I've become an excellent seamstress, managing the other women in the female sewing department and doing fancy work for the wives of the warden and deputy warden. Both of them wrote letters

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about my work. Even the matron wrote a letter stating how hard I've worked, never complaining or mingling with the troublesome women here. I've gone to church every Sunday and confessed my sins to Father James. I completed my penance, and he assured me that my transgressions have been forgiven.

Olive, please let me come stay with you for a while. I have nowhere else to go. Matron said I would get a train ticket, and I need to know if I can come to Kansas City. I won't be a burden to you. I'll find a job, I'm sure of it, so I will only be there for a short time. The ranch is gone, and I have nothing left. Oh Olive, please take pity on me. I want to start fresh.

Please write back as soon as possible or send a telegram to Warden Tynan at the Colorado State Prison in Canon City, Colorado. Please Olive, you're all I have left in the world.

*Your loving sister,
Mayfield*

Mayfield gazed at the cold shadowy world outside the window. The snow had stopped falling and the outlines of the trees were dark and heavy with snow. The sounds and scents of supper brought her back to the present: beef stew, buttered biscuits, apple pies, plates clanking on the table, muted women's voices. She gathered the pages of her letter into a neat pile and turned to Mrs. Rooney.

"I'm finished with my letter. You'll find my sister's address in my folder, under my number, #4849. Please thank Matron for the use of paper and pen. And for her kindness."

"You're welcome, Mayfield. I'll find your number easy enough. I'm glad Matron doesn't agree with calling you women by your prison numbers like the guards do with the men. She expects you to act like women and to better yourselves, which you have certainly done." Mrs. Rooney drew closer and lightly touched Mayfield's shoulder. "Things will turn out all right for you, I'm sure of it."

Weeks later, Mrs. Rooney found Mayfield in the sewing room, pinning the hem of the soft blue wool skirt, humming the sweet words of "Amazing Grace" to herself. She stood in the doorway a moment, unnoticed. Mayfield's sewing skills were a boon to all the female inmates. She was a thoughtful, well-mannered woman, was a patient sewing teacher, attended Bible study and church services, and never complained. If there was ever a woman who deserved a fresh start, it was Mayfield. Poor woman, she had only done the best she could to try and keep her land. It was hard for a woman to make her way in the

world without a husband, as she well knew from her own experience. Who's to say if Mayfield really did wrong or not?

"Mayfield, if you've a moment, Matron would like to see you." Mrs. Rooney spoke up.

The unfinished skirt slid from Mayfield's hands as she stood, pins and measuring tape joining the skirt on the floor. She took a deep breath and asked, "Did the letter come from my sister?"

"Here, let's put the tape and pins in the sewing box to keep the room tidy." Mrs. Rooney took them from Mayfield then helped her fold the skirt and place it on a shelf. "Let's go to the washroom and put a cold cloth on your face for a moment. You've plenty of time to compose yourself before you see Matron."

Smoothing her hair one more time, Mayfield paused a moment, bit her bottom lip, then squared her shoulders before she knocked on Matron Anderson's office door. Anxiety rushed over her as she remembered the last time she was called to her office.

"Please come in." Matron answered. She stood up from her desk, a folded slip of paper in her hand. "Mayfield, have a seat." She pointed to the chair in front of her desk. Mayfield sat down heavily; her knees weak while her fingers twisted the fabric of her skirt.

"Mrs. Rooney, would you please make us some Earl Grey?"

"Of course," she replied and bustled over to the tea kettle on the woodstove.

"This telegram is for you, Mayfield, from your sister." Matron handed the paper into her trembling hands.

Mayfield read silently, tears rolling down her face, as she read the words:

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

May 3rd, 1901

To: Warden Tynan, Canon City, Colorado

"Please send my beloved sister Mayfield to Kansas City when she is released from Prison."

From: Olive Springer, Kansas City, Kansas.

AUTHOR

SHERRY SKYE STUART



Sherry Skye Stuart is an author, writer, artist, and yoga teacher. She's authored five books on Local Colorado History, written numerous newspaper columns and produced over a dozen historical programs. Skye's current work in progress "Forgotten Female Felons" is about the early women incarcerated in the Colorado State Prison.