

Back to Alice

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It had been months, if not close to a year, since Alice and Nate had departed, but her words and her kiss lingered with him all throughout his time away. He kept himself busy with other things in his life, like breeding his few horses and his ten-head cattle herd. Save for his little trips into town for supplies, Nate kept to himself. There had been plenty of game in the woods, and his little property was looking more like an actual home.

If he hadn't been an outlaw, he probably would have continued ranching. He loved the work and the solitary time that came along with him. He had laid fence around the majority of his land and it was beginning to look like a small farm. But, it was empty. After leaving Alice back in Flint, Nate didn't realize how much he missed her companionship. Mostly, he never expected himself to miss her as much as he did. He stepped out onto the dog run of his home, rolling a cigarette and viewing the little herd of cattle. The cows were heavy with calves, looking about ready to drop any day now. Charlie, his only bull, was mean but earned his keep this year.

Since he was trying to avoid being recognized, Nate looked rather different than he had before. No longer did he have the clean-shaven face and long hair that he had when he left Durango. Instead, his black hair was cropped short against his head, hardly leaving any curls at all. His sun-beaten face was covered with a full beard that was kept neatly trimmed against his skin. The old outlaw definitely didn't need to look any more rugged than he already did.

The cuts and bruises had long healed up since the fight with the brute at the bar, but they still didn't take away from his long scar across his face. He was still Nate, and quite recognizable if someone actually took the time to do it. Nate exhaled, letting the smoke free into the air. He was hurting for some much needed supplies, like nails, medical things, oil, coffee, and sugar. And liquor. Being out here all alone left Nate quite a bit of free time. During this free time, and even his working time, he had thought about Alice. He also drank to drown his memories. Alice always seemed to be in the back of his mind.

It was odd, really. He never thought she would, especially after their whole adventure. He had stolen her, and that wasn't exactly the ideal way to woo a lady. He was rethinking about his whole lifestyle. This quiet life was enjoyable. He hadn't killed a man (save for one Indian buck he caught trying to steal his horses) in some time. Nate was doing well for a notorious gunslinger. Maybe she was what he needed: a woman to tame this wild man. The thought of it made him nervous. Nate went back inside, crushing out the little flame underneath his boot.

He surprised himself when he packed and mounted one of his horses and began heading her way. Nate needed to console himself. In his gut he knew that she most likely hated him for running off with her like he did. He had stolen a couple months of her life away, knowing that a rancher's daughter would bring him a pretty penny. Any woman would be insane to fall for a man of his type. While Nate was a handsome man, he had nothing else to offer but his loyalty and attempt at a new, honest life.

The palomino mare was quick, and in a short four weeks Nate was in Flint. The town was still quiet, very much like the day when the old outlaw rode in a year before. Suppressing his natural instinct to head for the saloon, Nate dismounted and hitched his animal at a cafe called Jubal's. While Jubal's did have a bar and a wide array of dusty cowhands that blew in every now and then, it was a safer bet than the saloon. Alice might be a waitress . . . or she could be dining with her new husband. Nate dismissed his hopes and settled into a table in the far back. A waitress came and attended to him promptly, but she was no Alice. Pretty and young, the redheaded waitress was perky and very friendly. She reminded Nate much of the women he used to chase after. Sighing, Nate sipped his coffee, his blue eyes scoping the small café for any recognizable face.

An hour passed and still there wasn't any Alice. He felt his stomach sink but knew he was foolish to think he would ever see her again. Besides, only fools fell in love. Nate was a western man and Alice was far too delicate for him. She had spunk and spoke her mind, but when it came to other things, she wasn't cut out for it, especially life on a trail. But this was perhaps why he had settled into his home. Never had Nate stayed longer at that place on Sioux Ridge for much longer than a few weeks, but he had settled and made a home out of it. Maybe this time he would ask her to come away with him . . .

His thoughts were cut off by the sight his eyes were catching. There was Alice, beautiful as ever. Her long blonde curls were pinned aside, her green eyes sparkled against her pale skin, and her cheeks were even rosy, just as he remembered. But she was on the arm of some man. A broad-shouldered young buck with some of the cleanest duds he had ever seen. This man was wealthy and didn't look like he had worked a day in his life. Nate scoffed, sipping his coffee. It had gone cold long ago. Nate pulled down the brim of his hat low on his brow, watching the couple talk with each other and laugh and smile. Alice looked so happy. He knew that he couldn't make her happy like she was now. Nate was poor and dirty, with nothing to offer.

"That gal at that table told me to hand this to ya," the sharp voice of the redhead almost startled Nate. It was an envelope with his name written in perfect manuscript. Nate was shocked. Certainly she had no idea he had been coming. "Sorry miss. I think you must have gotten the wrong person," Nate said, pressing the letter back into her hands. The waitress shook her head, placing the letter into his hand. "No, I know Alice. She remembers everyone . . . say, how do you know her?" The woman grinned, her smile making her look rather impish. In quick handwriting, something had been scrawled hastily on the back of the envelope. It read "Mulligans, after sunset." Nate glanced back up to the waitress, still shocked and not believing what was happening. "Old friend," he murmured, paying the redhead and tipping her graciously before heading out of the restaurant. His spurs jingled as he walked past the couple. Alice hadn't dared to

look up at him, but she was blushing beet red. Her beau was hardly paying attention, too busy in his meal to look up.

Nate was behind Mulligans promptly after sunset. He hadn't dared to read the letter, a small piece of him not wanting to know the truth. The little envelope smelled like cherry blossoms. His hands were occupying themselves by turning the unopened letter over and over again. This was a man who had killed many men and wore colt .44s on his hips, yet he was worried sick about this meeting. There were slow, heavy footfalls approaching his way. The horse snorted, breathing heavily. The rider had run the beast hard, obviously trying to make it somewhere on time. Then, the thought hit Nate. Was this a set up? Surely Alice was still angry about their whole past. Maybe she had been put up to this by her parents. Maybe there was a whole mob of lawmen waiting for him, wanting to slip a noose around his neck for his past crimes. He felt sick, knowing he should have read the letter prior to coming out here.

Sticking the envelope inside of his shirt, he stood his ground. A hand lightly rested on the butt of one of his guns, readily to draw and shoot if this would be the end of him. He winced, wrapping his fingers around the gun tighter than he expected. The rider was dismounting the horse, and clumsily at that. He could hear the animal sidestep and snort, and then the light footsteps. They were too light for a man. Nate loosened his grip and eased the tension in his shoulders. Like a light glowing in the dark, there she was. It was Alice. She looked as if she were just as nervous as he was, for she knew that Nate was a careful man who often shot first and thought later. Nate couldn't believe it was actually Alice. "How did you know I was coming?" He asked, approaching her quietly. They spoke in hushed tones. "I didn't," she said lowly, but there was worry in her voice. "I was planning on mailing it today. To the cathouse where your mother stays," she continued. "I remembered the post office there from when we stayed and visited her. You may not remember much . . . you had your jaw knocked up and teeth broken from that injun boy." Alice smiled, her nose wrinkling in thought. "Did you read it?" She asked, her eyes shining brightly in the moonlight.

"No," Nate replied, shaking his head. He desperately wanted to pick her up and carry her off. His mind wondered if she felt the same way he did. "I didn't want to," he added quickly, trying to hide the emotion in his voice. Alice knew Nate better than he had thought. She even felt rather odd for feeling the way she did about him. She missed him more than he knew. She missed the adventure he brought along and the lifestyle he led. Alice knew he was a hard worker and an outlaw. She knew that she would be nowhere prepared to even begin living his lifestyle, yet she was willing to give up a lot of what she had. And Nate had no idea!

Feeling a bit frustrated, Alice fiddled with a loose string on her dress, briefly speaking about her current situation. She was engaged to the man in the restaurant: Buck Freer was his name. Buck had inherited the Lazy S ranch and needed a wife. Her father owned the Running B ranch. Her mother had explained to her that it would be a wise "investment" for her to marry Buck. Being a rancher's wife would mean an easy and wealthy life for her and their children. Only Alice wasn't certain. "Buck's nice and all," she started. "But he isn't anything like you, Nate!" Alice caught herself, covering her mouth with one

hand, shocked she had said it. “I know I’m not cut out for riding and life on the trails,” she smiled, “And I know an outlaw like you isn’t going to want nothing to do with some proper girl like me. I’m just wasting your time.” Alice reached for his hand, squeezing it lightly before she turned to leave.

“Alice, I—“Nate stopped. He was horrible with words. “I can’t give you a life you’d need.” Admitting this made Nate feel as if a thousand pounds were lifted off his shoulders. He was being honest after all. In the moonlight Nate could make out her horse. He would remember the strawberry roan anywhere. It was packed down. She was planning on leaving somewhere tonight. Hearing his words, she stopped and turned quickly. “I’m not going to marry Buck,” she regained her composure. “I’m leaving tonight, either with or without you.” Alice had her attitude back. The type of attitude Nate hadn’t seen in another woman before. That was why he liked her so much.

Smiling, he grabbed her arm lightly and pulled her close. “I guess I’ll come with you then. Ladies don’t last long on the trail, especially you.” Nate joked. It was all beginning to feel natural once more. Alice was coming with him and this time on her own choice. “I hope you’re ready for a four-week ride . . . And how will your fiancé and family take to you running off in the night?” Nate asked, leading his mare over to Alice’s and mounting, watching his surroundings for any eavesdroppers. Alice mounted her horse, adjusting her hair over her shoulder and lifting her chin up before she spoke. “I left them a letter and told my sister. They won’t be pursuing us.” That was the end of that. The couple rode quietly away in the night, guided by the horses and the moonlight. Nate’s adventure was over and Alice’s was just beginning. The two were starting a new chapter in their lives, but this time it was together.

The letter that Alice left read this:

Dear Mother and Father,

I am sorry to say that in this night I have run off with the man of my dreams. His name is Nathaniel Levitt, and he is surprisingly charming in a rugged sort of way. Mother, you wouldn’t like him at all, for he is absolutely too rough for you. Father, he is hard working and can promise everything but wealth. I know that the name is familiar. He is *the* Nathaniel Levitt, but he is not as bad as everyone thinks. He protected me from many men and others along the trails, and through our trips I had grown to love him. I’m not sure if he feels the same way about me, but I certainly hope. Do not pursue me, for I am fine.

I cannot marry Buck Freer, although he is a nice man. I want an adventure and something else that I am not sure of. But little sister Marianne is interested in Buck, if you’re still looking for your “investment.”

I will see you next spring with a ring on my hand and stories to tell.

Love, Alice



Her mother was appalled. Her daughter was too much like her father. “She certainly is *your* daughter,” she placed the note into her husband’s hands, and all he could do was smile. “Good,” he grinned, folding the letter neatly in his hands. “But let’s hope she’s smarter than me.”