

Decision

Howard—Hank— Alfred Theodore Francis Padden, the third, stood at the foot of Michael Watkin's hospital bed. He stared at the clean sheet that had been pulled over Michael's charred remains. Michael's last, raspy gasp would haunt every quiet moment of Hank's life.

Burn scars blistered from Hank's shoulder to his hip. The fresh bandages the nurse had applied chafed his wounds.

The pain on Hank's skin was nothing compared to the pain in his soul.

The sobs of a wife and the wails of three young children tugged his attention from his thoughts to those who grieved at Michael's side. The youngest, a babe no older than a year and a half, wailed, flailing his arms and kicking his legs. Despite repeated attempts to soothe him by his mother, he cried like it was the only sound he would make for the rest of his life.

"I'm so sorry," Hank said to the mother. "I'll see to his medical costs and funeral."

The widow looked up at him. Young with round eyes and tear-splotted cheeks, she was both lost and bewildered.

"I'll see to your children's education," he said. "And that you're well cared-for."

She looked a little less lost, but the grief in her eyes deepened.

Uncertain of what else to say, he inclined his head and went to the nurses' station. He settled the bill and strode out onto the street and flagged a cab. The driver pulled his team of horses off to the side of the road.

"Bayview and Bloor. Street East." Hank climbed into the back of the cab, sat, and banged twice against the top of the carriage.

The carriage lurched forward, carrying Hank through the crowded streets of Cabbagetown, past the shops, the street vendors selling vegetables and hot food, the clusters of apartments and boarding houses, mills, and the burnt-out husk of Padden Enterprise's factory on the corner of Wellesley and Parliament Street.

Hank forced himself to stare out the window, to look at the charred beams and piles of ash and debris that had been hauled to a corner of the lot. Some of the looms had been salvageable and had been brought to another mill in the vast Padden's Enterprise. But the looms that had remained were half-melted, deformed from the inferno and left to stand as twisted iron statues of the fifteen dead.

The cemetery of the factory rolled past, and Hank turned his attention to the other side of the street. The houses and shops grew sparser and the cluster of trees thickened until they were forests.

The cab stopped in front of three-storey, four-wing brick mansion with black wood trim with large south-facing bay windows and an overhang to the stables that was more fitting for a Medieval castle than a manor in Toronto. Everything about the mansion stated in bold, twenty-four-carat-ink letters: P O W E R.

Not the kind of power a street thug got from grabbing people by the collar and forcing them to hand over their day's pay.

Not the kind of power that someone received from having worked their way up at a company, earned the trust and respect from the owner only to lord over the works and everyone toiling there.

No.

The expansive brick mansion had quiet power, an imposing power. The kind of power that walked into any room in any country with industrialists and politicians and bankers and all would turn their heads to look at a Padden in silence because they knew they were already bought.

The cab rolled to a stop, and Hank stepped out. He handed five times the cabbie's daily wage and walked up to his family's house.

The housekeeper met him at the door. How she knew Hank had arrived, Hank would never know.

Hank handed her his hat and gloves and strode into his father's office. The place smelled of paper and ink and tradition.

The family's long-standing attorney, Thomas Caldwell, sat across from Hank's father. With a pipe hooked in the corner of his mouth, the lawyer sat with a stiff back that could only have been gained from years of stern instruction from an expensive English boarding house.

Hank Padden the second sat opposite. The expression on his face uninterested and granite, caring not in the least for whatever Hank might have to say.

"Pay them," Hank said.

Father's uninterested gaze slid to Thomas's.

"All workers have been paid their daily wage," Thomas said. For a Scotsman, he sounded very much like an Englishman.

"The widows," Hank said. "The orphans. How will they survive?"

"All legal obligations have been upheld."

"What of their hospital bills, their funeral costs, the costs of keeping their children and their schooling?" Hank's voice wavered with decades of revolt.

Father dipped his pen into an inkwell and signed a document. "There is no legal obligation to do so."

"That's correct," Thomas said. "No English court has maintained such a requirement. Not even a court in Upper or Lower Canada."

"I'm saying it is a requirement," Hank said.

Father didn't look up from his papers. Behind him and on the surrounding walls hung his engineering degree from McGill University, family portraits that dated over two centuries, and photographs of him with Canadian parliamentarians, fellow industrialists, and six English dukes. Hank didn't have time to count the photos of his family with European emperors, empresses, dukes, duchesses, and the countless aristocrats that had flooded the halls of European ballrooms over the past sixty years.

Hank pulled himself to his full height. He was the oldest son, next in line to take over this vast wealth that could shape the continent and the very future of the British Empire. "Have you no sympathy for the dead and those they left behind?"

"The dead don't make money," father said. "Their wives and children don't work."

Incensed, Hank slid his gaze over the portraits and photographs of people so important, one tilt of their heads and an entire continent would be engulfed by war. Blank faces in the portraits stared back at him, and there was no way he could ever stand side-by-side with these men and their sons and ignore the plight of those who had been afflicted by the consequences of these men's decisions.

Hank straightened further.

He had earned an independent wage for ten years. He had private investments. He had never splurged nor flashed his money. "Wish mother well." He spun on his heel and marched out of his family home convinced he could start a new life, free of shackles and shady deals, and suffering widows somewhere else.

He left all his personal belongings in his room and walked back to Toronto. He bought a simple briefcase and a few changes of clothes along with a comb and a pair of scissors to trim his beard. He walked to the train station and boarded the next train out west.

There was nothing left for him in the east, and everything before him out west.

*** About Copper Hearts: A penniless widow with young children is determined to build her business. A tragic past haunts an heir to a fortune. Together, they must root out a conspiracy gripping the town.

Never again will Muriel Calhoun trust her heart and the fate of her children to a man. Widowed and left penniless after five years of marriage and two children, she worked her way up from destitution to being the cook of a boarding house. Determined to provide more for her children and other widows, she risks her meagre savings to start a canning company. She must navigate the hostility between widows, the outlaws that threaten her business, and the quiet conversations with a man who knows all the words to songs and plays she's never heard of.

Can she learn to trust a man with a shy smile and haunted eyes and a past he never speaks of? Howard Alfred Theodore Francis Padden III can't escape the tragic day that claimed fifteen lives. He left Toronto in search of a new start where he can build a new legacy, but he can't sleep and barely eats until he finds some comfort in quiet early morning conversations with Muriel. Convinced Prosper is the best place for a fresh start, he sets out to build a foundry, only to become the target of a criminal conspiracy. Can Hank reconcile with his past and embrace the peace and happiness he, Muriel, and Muriel's children deserve?

Copper Hearts is a historical western slow-burn romance featuring a strong heroine —a widow with young children —a fish-out-of-water rich/poor, and a wounded hero with a secret past who uncovers a criminal conspiracy. Copper Hearts is medium heat, and the author uses British spelling.

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