Kimiko Rye

She held Nicole that much closer to her breast, as if proximity to her heart would increase her child’s chances of survival.

She was less sad now and more tired. All the stress was killed her slowly.

They had been so close. Their child was born whole and healthy. They had taken care of her like the precious gift that she was. And it paid off. Nicole lived longer than any of her five sisters. She lived a grand total of six days.

Kim slouched over the sink and tried to swallow the bile rising up in the back of her throat. She couldn’t keep doing this. Neither her heart nor her body could take it. Worse than the bloody miscarriages were the stillborns. Months of hope, hours of pain, only to come up with nothing.

Were they cursed? Was this land cursed? No, it couldn’t be.

Nick was born and raised here, along with his six brothers. All seven boys grew up strong and noble, but Nick was the oldest so he inherited the Rye family homestead. However, with that inheritance came the responsibility to keep it within the family.

If it wasn’t any of those things, was it… Was it her?

A sound like that of a wounded animal derailed that awful train of thought. Nicole was back in her bed, and Nick was on his knees, slumped over her… Just keening into the basin. To see the cradle that he had fashioned with his own two hands –once full, now empty– must have broken something in him.

They couldn’t keep doing this.

“Nick,” Kim whispered, throat strained from swallowing screams. She pushed off the sink with difficulty and wobbled the few steps between them, only to clasp his shoulder for support. There had never been a less stable anchor. The grief-stricken were leading the grief-stricken…

He tries to shake her off at first, only adding to her unsteadiness.

“No, she could still come back! She’s still so warm and pink. Any minute now she’s going to breathe again,” he says fervently, rocking the cradle as if that will speed their dead daughter’s miraculous recovery along.

Denial. She should have expected that, seeing as it is how he stayed sane after her many miscarriages. Problems Nick refuses to deal with obviously don't exist... One of them had to be the voice of reason, though.

“That’s just the fever. She’s gone,” she told him, in an attempt to soothe the savagery in him.

Then he turned to her with a look she had never seen him wear before. His teeth were bared in an animalistic snarl. His face was flushed, and the veins in his neck were bulging so much that it seemed like any moment one would burst. Perhaps she would lose father and daughter in one night.

“You don’t know that! You can’t!” That was the first time he had ever raised his voice to her. Which begged the question… Did he think it was her? Or was he just lashing out?

She could only watch, wide-eyed and frozen in place, as Nick turned back to their little bundle of joy.

“Nicky, baby, wake up. Open your eyes! Look at daddy! Please, please…” His baby talk devolved into body-wracking sobs and unintelligible pleas. He couldn’t keep doing this either. The death of his daughters weighed heavy on him too. One of these days he would be crushed under the weight of them. If he wasn’t already.

“Nick! Listen to me. She’s *gone*.” There was no reason her repeating the hurtful fact would make it sink in anymore. But it worked. Nick finally stopped his cooing and his rocking, went still and quiet like the sea before the storm. And then the sky opened up, and he began to howl and violently shake the cradle.

They couldn’t keep doing this. Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results was the definition of insanity. But what other choice did they have?

Kim relied on muscle memory alone to dress herself. One of them had to be the responsible adult here, and Nick was in no condition to be it. Daughter or not, they couldn’t keep a dead body in the house. Especially not a dead body with a potentially infectious disease.

By the time she had donned enough layers to brave the winter chill,

Nick’s state had improved, but not by much. At least he stopped abusing their baby’s delicate crib and their baby’s delicate corpse. Instead, he was curled up on the floor in the fetal position, his face hidden behind his hands.

Having screamed himself hoarse, the only sounds he could produce now were little whimpers. His palms were pressed so hard into his eyes that it must hurt. The pain, oddly enough, helped stop crying fits.

Kim knows, because she was the one who taught him that trick after they lost their first child.

She scoops the deceptively warm bundle of white linen and pink flesh off the floor from where it had been accidently flung. There is no point of checking for any further injury. She wants to, even knowing nothing but bitterness would come from her findings. Dead is dead.

They couldn’t keep doing this.