

Regina McKinley

A Secret
and a Kiss



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By

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OceanofPDF.com

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Prologue

It was now or never. He had to get them out and well on their way before sunrise. He needed to put enough distance between the boys and their father as possible so that it would be too inconvenient to pursue them. They could not delay.

Warner tip-toed down the hallway, careful to stay in the shadows. His father was passed out in the library, his snores echoing through the house. Never had he seen his father so enraged as he had been tonight. The beatings delivered to his young brothers were brutal. Warner closed his eyes to block out the memory but could still hear the sound of fists landing on delicate flesh as Father cursed his sons for refusing to fight back.

Warner knew every creaky floorboard in the house. He knew where to step to either draw attention or to ensure his progress remained undetected. He eased down the stairs to the first floor, and paused at the landing to listen for any sound of movement in the house. The clock on the mantle in the parlor to his right ticked loudly, the sound cut through the stillness of the night. He counted the seconds, each that passed seemed an eternity. He turned to walk to the back of the house and paused outside the door to the library, satisfied that all else was quiet in the house.

Maude, their nosy busybody housekeeper, had hearing better than the hounds they kept tied up in the back yard. He couldn't risk her waking and putting an end to his plans. She was quick to tell Father when the children were misbehaving. Her meddlesome ways were responsible for much of the mistreatment that had been doled out. Warner had long suspected that her aim was to prove herself so indispensable to his father that she would be offered marriage. Warner shook his head at the futility of it all. Thomas Ellis had only loved one woman in his life and would never love another. Marrying again would have been an insult to his wife's memory.

Maude had wasted a lot of time pining away for a man who was no longer capable of love.

His father was sprawled out where he had landed an hour ago. His chin rested on his chest at an angle that was sure to cause him a good deal of stiffness in the morning. His arms were crossed at his waist, his legs

across the arms of the overstuffed chair. His shirt was stained and unbuttoned nearly to his navel, his hair was unkempt, and his skin had the greasy grey pallor of a man slowly poisoning himself with drink.

Warner saw the empty bottle of whiskey on the table beside his father. The smell of musty leather bound books, stale whisky, and sweat permeated the room. He turned away from the feeling of disgust and pity that his father always aroused when he was in such a state.

The brothers had seen the storm coming. As always, tension gripped the household when Father started drinking before dinner. Nights such as these were the worst. The nights when they would hold their breaths and barely move, afraid of drawing attention to themselves lest they become the target of Father's wrath were all too common.

Warner tried to protect his little brothers from the worst of it, but Father would not tolerate interference. Father had taken to locking him in the smoke shed when he tried to stand up to him. Warner was growing into a man, but at seventeen years old, he didn't have the height or the strength to withstand his father's temper. Yet he could handle the beatings much better than his brothers who were both several years younger than him and not nearly as strong.

Tonight was no different than a hundred other nights. Father started drinking and turned his attention towards Carter. By the time dinner had ended, Father was running through his typical lists of grievances against his son, never failing to tell Carter that he had murdered his own mother as she was giving him life. Carter sat as still as stone, uttered not a word, and stared at the top of the table in front of him. Warner knew that he had been praying for Father to leave him alone just this one time. God, it seems, didn't ever feel up to answering those prayers.

Porter, as usual, didn't just stand by and let Carter be berated. "Well, Daddy, it would seem you had a hand in that yourself. You were the one who put Carter in her belly," he had said. Father lunged across the table. Warner jumped between them to break up the fight, but just ended up locked in the shed again. He heard every moment of the beatings, but was powerless to help.

It was Warner's version of Hell.

It was a night that they had relived many times over the years. Tonight would be the last night.

After an hour locked in solitude, Maude had let him out of the smoke shed. She grabbed him by the ear and pulled him up to his bedroom. She then stood sentinel outside the door until she was convinced he had fallen asleep. Warner laid in bed listening to the sounds of the house. He heard Maude's door close, and later her bedsprings creak as they accepted her weight. A quarter hour later he could hear snores coming from the direction of her room.

He waited until the darkest time of night before he dared to set his plan into motion.

He found his brothers locked in the cellar behind the kitchen. He ran back into the kitchen to grab the keys from peg by the back door. He made quick work of the lock and swung open the door. They were both asleep. A single candle was lit in the center of the room and nearly guttered out. Porter sat propped up against a barrel of salt. Carter was lying on the table on the far side of the room, his head pillowed on a sack of flour.

"Hey, you two, wake up. We're going to need to get you up and going," Warner said, his voice low and steady. "You got to be well away from the farm before daybreak."

Porter woke as soon as Warner spoke. His left eye was almost swollen shut. His lip was swollen and split. A knot had formed near his right temple. He shifted, grimaced, but pulled himself to his feet. Warner noticed that he wrapped his arms around his stomach as he walked in measured steps towards the door.

"What are you talking about? Where do you figure he's sending us? A little early to start the day, isn't it?" Porter asked.

"Carter! Get up!" Warner commanded.

Carter groaned. He licked his lips and held his head as he pushed himself to a sitting position. Carter had not been totally untouched, but Porter clearly got the worst of the beating.

Carter had a black eye and a bruised jaw. He had been lucky this time.

"He's not sending you anywhere," Warner answered. "I am."

"Where?" Carter asked. "He's not going to like us leaving without him knowing."

"Away from here. If there's anything you want, tell me and I'll get it to you sometime later. You won't be coming back here," Warner said.

“Ever.”

“But...” Carter began.

Warner gestured impatiently. “Quiet. We have to get away from the house. We don’t want Maude to wake up. Follow me and be quiet. The last thing we need is for old Sally dog to start barking at us.”

Warner turned and climbed out of the cellar knowing that his brothers would follow. He closed the cellar door and locked it. He beckoned his brothers to follow him and then led the way around the side of the house. He led them away from the barns towards the line of trees in the distance. Silently they crossed the meadow.

When they reached the trees, Warner signaled them to go deeper into the woods. “Head to the cottage by the river. I’ll meet you there.”

He nodded again to emphasize his words and to get them moving. He turned back towards the old farm house they lived in and watched for signs of movement. The moon peeked out between clouds and illuminated the house and outbuildings. From a distance, it looked like a perfectly quaint and peaceful little place. He shook his head. If those walls could talk, what stories they would have to tell.

Satisfied that they had slipped away without being seen, he turned and entered the woods. He caught up with his brothers in a small clearing next to a creek. He could make out only their shapes in the dark. Behind them he could also see the shape of the two horses he had tied up outside the cottage before dinner. He wished now he had not waited until dark to send them away. If only he had been able to come up with some excuse for them to miss dinner, they could have been well on their way before Father got drunk enough to notice them and might not have had to suffer so.

“Alright, Warner, what is this all about?” Porter asked.

“Just what I said earlier. The two of you are leaving here tonight. I’ve been making arrangements for months. I’m sorry it took so long, but I had to squirrel away little bits of money at a time. It wasn’t an easy job,” Warner said.

“He’ll come after us,” Carter said. The worry in his voice broke Warner’s heart. “He’ll find us and won’t like that we ran off. Then it’ll be worse than before. He’ll be so mad he’ll probably kill us.”

A crushing sadness fell upon Warner. Carter wasn’t afraid of leaving his home. Shouldn’t he at least wonder where he is headed? No,

Carter's first thought was to worry that Father would find him and the beatings would continue.

"I'm not sure he will come after us, Carter," Porter said. "But he will come after his horses."

Warner started to shake his head then realized they wouldn't be able to see the action in the darkness. "These aren't horses from the farm. This is part of what took so long. I had to save enough to buy two new horses. They're old and should probably be put out to pasture, but they'll do well enough to get you on your way. Father doesn't even know about them. I kept them at the Brown's place across the way."

"The Browns never did have much use for the old man," Porter said, refusing to name their sire as his father.

"That worked in our favor. They didn't even ask why I needed to keep the geldings in their stables. They could probably figure out easy enough what I was intending to do with them."

"So, where are we going?" Porter asked.

"Porter, you're going to be following this stream north for a while. You'll pass the town of Honey Fork and then go West towards the mountain pass. The next person you come across will be old Trapper John, he knows you're coming and he'll be waiting for you. He'll be taking you in," Warner said. "He's a strange old goat, but he'll treat you nice. He's lonely and needs a little help with his trapping. His knees pain him sometimes. I met him in Denver a couple years ago when I went with Father. He pulled me out of the middle of a brawl Father started in front of the saloon. We've exchanged a few letters," Warner said. "I put your knives in your saddlebags. The rifle is inside your bedroll. I'm hoping you won't need either."

Turning to Carter, Warner explained, "You'll be taking the river South, passed Crofton, then you'll ride through town and take the road East. The roads are pretty well worn, so I don't think you'll lose your way. When the road splits, you'll take the road that leads towards the South. A man will be waiting there for you by the name of Roger. He's a mountain of a man and his skin is dark as pitch. But he's honest and will take care of you. He will take you directly to Southfork Ranch, where he's worked for some years now. Stephen Lawson has agreed to take you on as a ranch hand. He also said he'd see that you finish your schooling."

Sensing an objection coming in Porter's posture and the way Carter was shaking his head, he held up his hand. "You have to split up. The odds of him coming after either one of you are slim, but there is always a possibility. He won't want to put up with the bother of looking for both of you if you've gone so far in different directions. Split up, if for no other reason, than to give the other one a chance."

"Where will you be heading?" Carter asked.

"I have to stay here. He won't look for you, but he will come after me. I'm the eldest, the one who he thinks he's training to carry on the family name and business, as ridiculous as that notion is. That's why he won't touch me. He doesn't want to damage his legacy," Warner said. The bitterness in his voice was impossible to mistake.

"It's not right, Warner. Brothers stick together," Porter said angrily.

"In most families, that is true. You two try to stick around and he'll eventually beat you both of you to death," Warner said. "You know it's true."

In the silence that followed, he knew that his brothers accepted the truth of his words. "I'll write when I can. If you want to get word to me, send your letters to Mr. Brown. He'll see that I get them. Now, get on your horses and ride away. The longer I dilly dally out here in the woods, the longer I'm chancing Maude waking up and finding my bed empty."

"She sure does like to make a fuss," Carter said. "I think she puts vinegar in her tea. That's the only thing I can think of that would make a woman so sour."

Warner chuckled. Carter had been blessed with a sense of humor. He knew that was the only way he had been able to cope.

The horizon to the East was starting to show the first hints of grey against the black sky. He looked at his brothers; both were young, and strong, and handsome. Lord, would he miss them.

"Go on, now," Warner said, his voice tight. "Porter, mind your temper. Carter, go easy with teasing people. Some people don't like it much."

Warner watched his brothers mount their horses. He shook both of their hands. Porter was the first to turn away and urge his mount into a trot along the banks of the river. Carter watched him leave with a strange little smile on his face.

“You’re looking rather amused by all of this,” Warner said.

“I was just thinking. Porter is probably got it in his head that this here was the end.”

“Yeah? Well, he’s right about that.”

Carter shook his head and smiled. “Well, sure he’s right. But the ending of one thing only brings the beginning of another, don’t you think.”

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Chapter 1

Colorado, 1870

She was beginning to think she hadn't thought this plan through very well.

Meg Simpson stared at the monster being brought to her and knew she would somehow have to find the strength to master the beast. She didn't even have a choice. The stage coach brought her into the town of Stillwater, Colorado, but the driver would go no further. He had a schedule to keep, after all. So he booted her out before the dust had even settled around the wheels of the coach, tossed her bags down practically on her toes and had raced off into the distance. So now she was on her own and it was up to her to get her to the ranch.

The trouble was that she had no idea where she was going.

She should have written to let them know she was coming, but could not take the chance of her letter being intercepted. The evil one she had escaped was drawing closer, she could feel it. He always found her. She would not risk putting the only family she had left in danger.

Her uncle was an honorable man. He had met his wife on his first trip to America from England. He married her against his family's wishes, not caring that he would be disinherited, and whisked her way to the mountains of Colorado to build a horse ranch with his prized Thoroughbreds. Meg's mother was thrilled and only a little jealous that her sister had had the good fortune to find the great love of her life.

She will not stay long in Colorado, Meg promised herself for the hundredth time. She only needed to figure out where she is going to go next, how to get there, and how to remain anonymous. Had she told them that she was coming her family, in their excitement, would have announced it to the whole county. News travels fast in small communities and her efforts to remain invisible would have been for naught.

Still, Uncle Stephen would have sent the carriage to meet her in town and that would have saved her from the torture and humiliation that was sure to ensue once she had to deal with that four legged monster that was nearly upon her.

Drat!

Her poor planning had left her with little choice but to try to ride that horse.

“Now you’re sure this is the gentlest horse you have?” Meg asked.

She didn’t trust horses. An animal that big and strong had to be up to no good in her opinion. She squinted at the owner of the livery stable, careful to look for any hint of deceit.

George Lambert was a small man with shoulders stooped from years of manual labor. He was more comfortable with his horses than he was with women, that much was obvious. She knew she had taken him by surprise when she walked into his establishment. He stammered his greeting and hopped from one foot to the next as she made her request. She assumed his discomfort was because she was a woman and he just didn’t have much cause to speak to women as they were surely the more sensible sex and had enough intelligence to maintain a healthy distance from large beasts of burden.

“Yes ma’am. This is Ginger. She’s a sweet little thing, and she’s a little too old to have much pep left in her,” George replied. “And you can see I put this side saddle on nice and secure, so you won’t be sliding off.”

“I appreciate that consideration,” Meg said. She hoped that Mr. Lambert couldn’t see just how much his words had alarmed her.

Slide off? Could she really just slide off? Oh, merciful Heavens.

“Can I give you a boost into the seat?” George asked.

“No, thank you. I must collect my thoughts for a few minutes before continuing my journey,” Meg said. “I felt quite cramped inside the coach, so being able to stretch my legs for a few minutes is a welcome respite.”

“Well, suit yourself, then. I’ll just hand these here reins over to you. There’s a mounting block there beside the back corral. If I’m not around to give you a boost, just use that block,” George said. With a nod and a wave he took his exit.

Meg took a deep breath and closed her eyes, her free hand pressed to her chest. Her heart felt like it was going to pound right out of her chest and onto the ground. A wave of dizziness hit her. She opened her eyes and focused on the nearest fence post. She counted to fifty as she tried to slow her breathing.

She was aware that she was being silly. She was on her way to a ranch, for God’s sake. She ought to have reconciled herself to the fact that

she would be around horses. She should have taken an afternoon and learned the fundamentals of riding, though. It couldn't be all that complicated.

She had no idea how she was going to Southfork in one piece.

She turned to look at Ginger with what she hoped was a stern look. Imitating the brusque tone of her favorite school teacher she said, "Ok, Ginger. I must admit that you've been well behaved thus far. However, given that you have the power to bring about my rather immediate demise if you feel inclined to do so, that gives me a reason to be mistrustful of your intentions. I just want you to take me to my aunt and uncle's home. Then we can amicably go on our separate ways. Agreed?"

Meg looked suspiciously at her mount. Ginger looked bored enough to fall asleep. Meg hoped that did not mean that Ginger wasn't strong enough to make the journey. She only had to go a few miles and didn't want to worry about her horse up and dying on the way, leaving her stranded.

Just about anyone else riding Ginger would take the time to notice Ginger's finer points. She was a tall horse, a deep chestnut color, with big dark eyes. She wasn't the slightest bit swaybacked and looked to be quite sound given her reportedly advanced age. None of that signified, however, because it was Meg who had to conquer the beast, pretty or not.

"Now that I'm convinced that you'll behave yourself, I think it's time we should be going on our way," Meg said, trying to rally what was left of her courage.

She led Ginger to the mounting block. She looked from the mounting block to the saddle and had no idea what to do next. She knew that her right leg somehow had to hook across the pommel, and her left foot went in the stirrup. So, what foot does she step up on? And how on earth is she supposed to swing her right leg between the horse and the saddle without getting her skirts tangled up and then falling to her death?

She sighed. "This is hopeless, Ginger."

Chapter 2

Carter Ellis was bemused by the sight before him. He supposed this daft woman had something important to work out with old Ginger, so long had she been standing there talking to the horse.

Carter had paused long enough to admire the pretty face as he passed by George's livery. His curiosity intensified as he watched her struggle to pull herself into her saddle. She tried every convoluted way of getting herself into the saddle except for the one way that would have actually worked. It was clear that she had no idea what she was doing.

He had come to town to order supplies at the general store, and was told that it would be at least two weeks before the shipment arrived. On his way out of town when he decided to pass by the livery to see if George needed some new horses. Carter was only a ranch hand, but he often helped with finding new customers and Southfork bred the best mountain horses in the territory.

Then he saw her. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a single braid, her face was a perfect oval, her complexion flawless. Her pink dress was faded, but obviously well-tended. Even from a distance he saw that her eyes were a striking blue. He hoped that she had freckles on her nose.

He liked freckles.

Carter was pulled from his perusal when he saw the lady give Ginger a rather hostile look. She was probably getting ready to give Ginger another lecture. He knew it was really none of his business, but he couldn't go on watching this debacle.

He was going to have to get involved.

"Ahem," Carter started, "May I be of some assistance, ma'am?"

Meg whirled around, eyes widened in surprise at the handsome man standing barely an arm's reach away. He was so tall she barely reached his shoulders...his very broad shoulders. She had not heard him approach. His hair appeared to have been newly cut and was the most magnificent golden color. Warm brown eyes watched her without any hint of mockery. He had a firm jaw, a straight nose, and lips that looked both firm and soft at the same time.

Oh, Lord, don't look at his lips. This terribly handsome man might get the wrong idea if she looked at his lips.

She wasn't about to let herself get distracted from her goal. She was here to seek refuge with her uncle, not dally with tall, handsome strangers. She pulled her shoulders back and met his gaze. She was just going to have to bluster her way through this.

He sucked in his breath as he returned her stare. Her eyes were the color of sapphires, framed with long, dark lashes. Her lips were full and pink, and he had a hard time not staring at them. His thoughts made a rather licentious turn before he dragged his eyes back up to hers.

Damn, but she did have freckles.

She was magnificent.

"I thank you for your offer, sir, but I've got things quite under control," Meg said, hoping he would stop staring at her so intently.

He raised a single eyebrow at her as he chose his next words. "Well, I've been watching you for about ten minutes, and you seem to be having difficulty mounting Ginger."

"You know this horse? She's gentle, isn't she? Mr. Lambert assured me that she was," Meg said. She would not think about her difficulty with her mount, all the while being ignorant of having an audience.

A blind man could have seen how alarmed she had become. He would have to be careful not to say the wrong thing, lest he cause her further upset. "She's probably the gentlest horse in town."

Visibly relieved, she sighed. "Oh, good. I didn't think Mr. Lambert would lie to me."

"So, back to the question...can I help in some way?"

"As a matter of fact, you can. I'm new in town and looking to locate my uncle. Do you happen to know where the Southfork ranch is located?" Meg asked.

He blinked at her. "You're looking for Southfork? You say your uncle lives there?"

"Yes, my uncle. And my aunt. Stephen and Belinda Lawson. Belinda was my mother's sister," Meg qualified.

"Are they aware you're coming?" Carter asked.

"Well...no. They don't. I'm sure they'll take me in, though," Meg said. She rushed to add, "It's only temporary."

"Alright," Carter said. He looked around the stable. "Where is your escort?"

"I don't have an escort," Meg said. She wished he would stop asking questions and, even worse, she wished she didn't want to answer them.

"Are you traveling alone?" Carter asked, stunned by the possibility.

"Of course I am. I realize it might be a little unconventional for a young woman to travel such a distance by herself, but I'm quite capable," Meg said, certain that he would not recognize that lie for what it was.

Carter was of the opinion that she was probably the most insane person he'd ever met. "Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what can happen to a single woman travelling alone?"

Her eyes narrowed and her chin lifted a notch. "I'm not a fool. I know the risks, perhaps better than you," she bit out. She gritted her teeth and took a deep breath. "I had little choice in the matter," Meg said.

Carter knew that there was a lot more to this story than she was willing to say. He needed to be patient. "I'm on my way back to Southfork. I'll ride with you."

"Back to Southfork? Whatever do you mean?" Meg asked.

"I live there," Carter replied.

"Oh, that just won't do," Meg said. Oh, heavens, she was ogling this man and she would have to see him again. She would probably see him frequently. No, this is not good.

"Please say one thing that makes sense," Carter said with a sigh.

"I don't need an escort, just directions," Meg said.

"It's an hour's ride for me. For you, it will likely be an all-day trip," Carter said.

"Meaning?"

"You don't know how to ride," Carter said. "Stephen would have my head on a pike if I just gave you directions and let you go on your way. Like it or not, you're stuck with me until we get to the ranch."

"That is very presumptuous," Meg said accusingly. "Why I even care enough to debate with you is beyond my ability to comprehend. I don't even know your name."

Carter bit back a laugh. He didn't want her feelings to be hurt by his amusement. She was far too proper and indignant to belong in this place. Stillwater was a growing town, but still wild and lawless. The people here would chew her up and spit her out.

“My name is Carter Ellis.”

“How do you do?” she said as she automatically dipped into a curtsey. “My name is Margaret Simpson.”

“Well, Margaret...” Carter began, but paused as he noticed her jaw clench. “My apologies, I meant Miss Simpson...”

“Meg. Not Miss Simpson and most certainly not Margaret,” she said emphatically.

He rolled his eyes at her, exasperated at her changeable manners. “Very well, Meg, we should get going. Do you have a trunk?”

“Mister Lambert agreed to keep it in one of the empty stalls until Uncle Stephen can send a wagon to fetch it.” Feeling the need to protest one last time, she said, “I’m sure you have pressing duties to get back to. I would hate to delay you further.”

“Well, yes, I do have duties. You just became one of them.”

Chapter 3

The journey to the ranch took the rest of the afternoon. Because she wouldn't even consider renting a carriage, Carter spent half an hour explaining the basics of riding a horse, only to be contradicted by this woman who desperately wanted him to believe she knew what she was doing. He agreed with her just long enough for her to finish her tirade, and then continued with his instructions.

Eventually he got her properly mounted on Ginger. He watched as she nearly jumped out of her skin when Ginger took the first step. Shaking his head, Carter resigned himself to the fact that it was going to be a long trip home. He turned to go fetch his own mount. By the time he had returned to her, Meg's face had gone white and she looked to be ready to faint.

"Breathe, Meg. It's only a horse. They're sensitive creatures. She's going to be able to pick up your...nervousness," Carter explained. He knew better than to say the word "fear" to this woman. She'd probably just start arguing with him again.

Meg nodded and tried to control her breathing. She was not accustomed to being this far off the ground with a thousand pounds of muscle beneath her backside. She picked up her reins, drew her shoulders back and turned to look at Carter. She would have to do a better job with controlling her emotions otherwise he might begin to think she is totally incompetent.

"We'll just take it slow until you get the hang of it," Carter said, half tempted to pluck her off of Ginger onto his lap. It would be a lot quicker that way, he told himself.

Who was he kidding? He just wanted to know how she felt in his arms. Of course, she'd probably faint as soon as he touched her, but at least she would stop arguing with him.

"Thank you, Mister Ellis," Meg said, wondering about the smile that was tugging at the corners of his lips. "You may have noticed I don't have much experience with horses."

"Carter," he corrected. "Why didn't you just rent the carriage?"

Meg shrugged. "I don't know how to drive either."

“You can’t ride a horse and can’t drive a carriage?” he asked, his voice level. “Where did you say you were from?”

“I didn’t say,” Meg said. She glanced at him and saw that he wouldn’t be put off with a deflection. He wanted an answer. “I most recently lived in Denver. Everything I really needed was within relatively easy walking distance. Prior to that, I lived in St. Louis. Again, I walked nearly everywhere I went.”

He watched her bouncing in the saddle. Her backside was going to be a good shade of purple by the time they got to the ranch. “Squeeze your leg around the pommel a little,” Carter suggested. At her questioning look, he explained, “It will help with the bouncing. You won’t be able to sit down tomorrow if that keeps up.”

She flushed and looked away, not at all certain that they should be discussing such an intimate topic.

He grinned at her.

She glared back at him. “I believe you enjoy my discomfort,” Meg accused.

He looked far too innocent now, like a little boy who had just done something naughty. “No, Meg, I’m just trying to help. Isn’t that expected of a gentleman?” Carter asked.

She considered him for a long moment before answering. “I’m not convinced that you’re all that much of a gentleman.”

His wicked grin returned. “When it comes to dealing with pretty ladies, you can be sure that I’m not,” he said. He winked at her when he saw color rise again in her cheeks. “Rest assured that you’re safe with me, though. I’d rather not lose my job by dallying with my boss’s niece.”

She gasped and turned away. Her mind was playing tricks on her. She must be mistaken. She barely knew the man. And what in the world was she thinking just taking off with the man? She didn’t even know for sure if he was telling her the truth about working at the ranch. For all she knew he could be a gambler or a gunslinger. He could run with women of ill repute and kick puppies.

And he absolutely was not flirting with her. “I suspect you like to tease,” Meg said.

“I do indeed,” Carter said. “That’s only half the fun, though.”

“Half the fun of what?” Meg asked.

Carter waited to answer until she looked at him. His smile faded when he met her eyes. She was entirely too innocent and untouched for him to entertain a flirtation with her. He knew she would have a line of suitors lined up a mile long if she stayed at the ranch more than a few weeks. Beautiful women were difficult to come by around here, and Meg was stunning. He was surprised by the irritation he felt when thinking about another man showing an interest in her.

And yet, he also knew that he had little to offer her. He was simply a ranch hand with a sound horse and a little cash shoved underneath his mattress. It would be years before he had enough security to even contemplate settling down and looking for a woman. It would be best for him to put some distance between them as soon as he got her to Southfork.

“Carter? It’s half the fun of what?” Meg asked.

“Life. Life would be unbearable if you couldn’t laugh at the little absurdities,” Carter said.

His words were meant to sound lighthearted, she knew, but his expression had darkened. She thought back to their conversation but could find no reason for his sudden change in mood.

Maybe she should just change the subject. “How long have you worked for my uncle?” she asked.

Carter shrugged. “About fifteen years now,” he said. He glanced at her when he heard her gasp.

“Fifteen years! That would mean either you are aging remarkably well or you couldn’t have been much more than a child when you arrived,” Meg speculated.

“I was twelve,” Carter said.

Meg considered him for a moment before continuing. “I know it’s intrusive of me to ask and none of my business, but...why?”

“You’re right,” he said, “It’s none of your business. But to satisfy your curiosity, I left home at twelve. My father owned a small farm about a day’s ride from here. He liked his drink and his favorite pastime was to smack his kids around. My eldest brother got tired of it and arranged for me and my other brother to leave. He sent us in different directions to get us away from the old man.”

“Your father didn’t come after you?” Meg asked, appalled.

Carter scoffed. He didn't know why he was talking about this, but he felt the need for her to know more about him. "He showed up at Southfork once, about a year after I was hired on. I was still mucking out stalls at that time. I was too little to be of much more use around the ranch, but Stephen and Belinda didn't care. Once I told them the full truth about my father, they would have let me stare at the fence posts for a wage if they couldn't find some other work for me to do," Carter said. "Anyway, one day the old man showed up. He was so drunk he could barely sit his horse. I'm not sure what Stephen said to him, but he took him out back behind the barn and they had words. I was up at the corral exercising a new mare. I could hear the shouting, but didn't catch the words. My father got back on his horse and rode away. That was the last I time I saw him."

"What about your mother? Didn't she want you back?" Meg asked.

He chafed at the sadness in her voice. The last thing he wanted was her pity. "She died giving birth to me. That's why my father hated me the way he did."

Meg gave up trying to turn the conversation in a more pleasant direction. She pulled her gaze away from Carter's face, but not before she noticed the clinched jaw and pursed lips. She focused on her surroundings instead and became captivated by the beauty of the landscape.

They traveled towards the Southeast across the gently rolling hills of the mountain valley. The last of the late summer wildflowers grew upon the hills. The snowcapped Rockies stood like ageless sentinels to the west. A deep green forest covered countless acres where the mountain met the valley in the distance. Meg felt as if she were trespassing on God's back lawn, so magnificent was the view.

She imagined that God was displeased with her for trampling his garden, as sore as her backside was becoming. She tightened her leg around the pommel and tried to straighten her spine. She felt a small amount of relief, but knew that she would have difficulty walking for the next several days. She looked to the heavens and pled with her maker that the rest of the journey would be brief.

God proved to be in an agreeable mood and answered her prayers a few minutes later. As they crested a hilltop, Carter reached over, grabbed the reins of her horse and slowed to a stop. The valley below her was the purest green she could imagine and littered with wildflowers. The ranch

house was larger than she had imagined and newly whitewashed. A veranda encircled two sides of the house. A small garden was situated to the right side of the house.

Meg noted several outbuildings and stables. Two corrals were filled with horses that she would soon learn were newly acquired and not yet trained. A sizable herd of horses grazed in the pasture behind the house. Purple mountains lined the horizon and a delicate stream dissected the land in the distance.

“Not bad, eh?” Carter said.

Meg smiled at him. “Not bad at all.”

Chapter 4

Meg's feeling of dread multiplied as she neared the house. She knew that her aunt and uncle would welcome her with open arms, but she had no desire to explain why she had run away.

She reined in Ginger before the hitching post by the front porch and ignored Carter as he reached for her to help her dismount. She sat chewing on her bottom lip as she stared at the front door. She started to hope her aunt and uncle had gone out for the day.

She doubted she would be that lucky.

Carter thought she looked like she was waiting for her execution. She didn't notice when he took Ginger's reins and wrapped them around the hitching post. He was pretty sure she'd try to bolt if he gave her the reins back. He had no idea why she was so worried, but knew he'd just have to wait for her to make up her mind to walk the last ten feet of her journey.

He saw her eyes widen a moment before he heard the screen door open behind him. He turned to see Belinda staring agape at her niece. He reached for Meg once more, just to have his hands smacked away.

"Meg! What on earth are you doing here?" Bel rushed down the front steps. "Carter, don't just stand there. Help her down."

Carter closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I've been trying to help her down for five minutes, Bel, but she's not quite ready to go inside."

Meg gave him a disgruntled look before reaching down and placing her hands on his shoulders. He grabbed her waist and tried to ignore how perfect and small it felt in his hands. He lifted her out of the saddle and to the ground. He held her for a moment while her legs adjusted to her weight. Her hair smelled like roses. He tried to ignore that too.

Meg felt like her legs were going to fall off. She had no idea how she was supposed to stand on her own, much less climb the stairs and enter the house. She stood with her head bowed, distracted by Carter's masculine scent. He smelled like leather and man and the outdoors. She shook her head as if she could banish the thought of him with that small movement. It didn't work.

"For Heaven's sake, Carter, let her go," Bel admonished.

Carter's eyes met Bel's and he could see her awareness of his attraction for her niece. He thought it was more than passing strange that he

did not mind that she could read his emotions. He shrugged and stepped away from Meg slowly. She swayed at first, but righted herself almost immediately. He may have missed that moment of weakness if he had not been watching her so closely.

Meg turned and climbed the stairs, feeling the intensity of Carter's gaze the entire way. She tried to smile at her aunt, aware that it looked more like a grimace. Bel opened her arms and Meg stumbled into them, ready to be comforted by the embrace.

Oh how Meg envied Belinda. She had everything in life that Meg desired. A loving husband, a beautiful home, dutiful children. Her beauty had not dimmed over the years. Her raven black hair had but a few streaks of grey in it, her complexion was nearly flawless, dark brown eyes still held warmth and laughter. Bel stood in stark contrast to the shell of a woman her mother had become. Years of toil and abuse had left her mother hollow.

"Oh, Meg, I have no idea why you're here or how you came to be here, but my heart is near full to bursting with joy to see you," Bel said, looking around the yard for an escort. "You did not travel all this way by yourself, did you?"

"It's a rather long and tedious story, Aunt Belinda," Meg said.

"Well, come in the house. We'll get you settled in first and get to the rest of it all when you have some time to refresh yourself."

Carter watched as Bel ushered Meg into the house. He wondered what Meg's story was, but knew it was none of his business. As welcomed as he always had been by this family, there was a reason he wasn't invited into the house with Meg.

He didn't really belong to them.

With that silent admission, he grabbed Ginger's reins and led her to the stables. Better to just be on with his day and leave the family to sort out their affairs themselves.

Inside the house, Meg was overwhelmed. She had been impressed by the quaint exterior of the house, but did not expect the lavishness that greeted her on the inside. Inside the front door was a wide foyer with a grand staircase that led up to the second floor. A hallway that led towards the back of the house where Uncle Stephen's study was located. To the right was the parlor and music room. To the left of the main entrance was a formal dining area and the kitchen was through a wide double door. Rich

carpets protected the polished dark wooden floorboards. Bel stood next to her while she explained the layout of the house.

It took her a moment before she realized that Belinda was halfway up the stairs. Meg picked up her skirts and ran after her aunt. They reached the top landing and turned to the left. The master bedroom was the first bedroom on the right side of the staircase. Directly opposite that room was the bedroom of her cousin Bill. The next door belonged to her cousin James, and the last room on that side belonged to cousin Philippa. The guestroom that Meg would be occupying was across the hall from Philippa's room.

Bel opened the door to the guestroom and went to open the window. A warm breeze rushed into the room. Meg immediately loved the room. The walls were painted a soft green. White lacy curtains framed the windows and billowed out with the breeze. The bed was to the right of the door and covered in a yellow quilt. A small chest occupied the opposite wall. The fireplace was built into the corner of the wall a few feet away from the chest.

"What a lovely room," Meg said.

"You should be comfortable enough here. Would you like a bath? Are you hungry? I'm sure you'll want to change out of those dusty clothes," Bel said.

Meg looked down at her wrinkled gown and frowned at the trail dust covering it. A wave of self-consciousness consumed her and she tried to smooth her skirts. Her teeth caught her bottom lip as she readjusted her gloves.

"I'm afraid I left my trunk in town at the livery. I don't know if it will even be there when I go back for it. I didn't plan this trip very well, I can see that now," Meg said.

"We'll just send someone back to town to fetch your trunk. I've known George Lambert my entire life. He might be a little simple-minded, but a more honest man you will never meet. If he said he'll look after your trunk, you can trust him to do so," Bel said. "I'll see about digging around in the kitchen for something for you to eat. Just come downstairs when you're ready."

Meg nodded and watched as her aunt exited the room, a bemused look on her face as she closed the door. Meg released a breath she had not

been aware she was holding. A moment later a knock came at the door. Bel came into the room carrying a basin and a pitcher full of water. She placed it on the chest and left again.

Meg took off her gloves and splashed water on her face. She patted her face dry with a towel and picked up the silver hand mirror that was lying on the chest. Where she was expecting a dirty, bedraggled street urchin to be looking back at her, what she saw was a young woman with a clear complexion, bright eyes, and a healthy flush on her cheeks. She was pleased that she didn't look as awful as she felt.

Meg could no longer delay the inevitable. She went downstairs and turned towards the study door at the end of the hallway. She gave three sharp knocks on the door. Heavy footsteps approached. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She took a deep breath as the door swung open.

Uncle Stephen was still a handsome man at his advanced age of forty-seven. His dark blonde hair was streaked with grey at the temples where wrinkles accentuated his grey-green eyes. She wanted to believe those lines were there because of a lifetime of laughter.

"Meg," Stephen said as he pulled her into his arms for a firm hug. "Bel was just telling me about your arrival. Come in, sit down, and tell me everything."

Meg looked over his shoulder to where Bel stood in front of a large desk that was strewn with papers. She had obviously interrupted his bookkeeping to give him the news of her arrival.

"I'm sorry to intrude on you like this. I know I should have written before I came, but I was in a bit of a rush," Meg said. She settled herself into a chair in front of the desk and watched Stephen as he settled himself back into the worn leather chair behind the desk.

"Nonsense. I'll go make tea. A story is always told better over a nice cup of tea," Belinda said.

Meg and Stephen both watched Bel leave. Meg avoided Stephen's penetrating gaze by pretending to study the room, which was larger than she expected and carried the faint odor of tobacco smoke and leather. It was a masculine room with dark colors and tall bookshelves that lined two of the walls. The desk was mahogany and sat between two tall windows. Two sturdy chairs faced the desk. To the right of the doorway was a set of French doors that led out to the flower garden.

She glanced quickly at Stephen. He smiled at her. She was sure he knew she was avoiding his gaze. She started when the door opened and Belinda came back in carrying a large tray. She accepted the scone and a cup of tea that was offered, declined cream and sugar. She took a bite of the scone and almost choked. She took a quick sip of her tea to cover the taste. Covertly she glanced Bel, she was pleased to see that her distaste of her aunt's cooking hadn't been noticed.

She noticed Stephen didn't touch his scone. Smart man.

"I suppose I owe you an explanation," Meg said.

"I confess, we are both surprised by your arrival," Bel said as she reached over and patted Meg's hand. "We're delighted to see you, but surprised nonetheless."

"Again, I do apologize for my intrusion. I've been meaning to write to you for quite some time, actually," Meg looked at her lap and smoothed her skirts. "I came out to Colorado after Mother died and all of her affairs were settled."

Belinda gasped. "She's been gone for three years. You've been here all this time?"

"Bel, honey, let her tell her story," Stephen said. He squeezed his wife's hand to soften his admonition. Meg noticed that he didn't let go.

"No, not the whole time. It took several months to plan my escape," Meg said. Noticing the startled expression before her, she continued, "Our troubles started several years ago when Papa died. Papa had made several risky investments. Unfortunately he owed quite a lot of money to a businessman in Chicago. He had grand theories about how to increase profits or develop new products that were novel and interesting. Those ideas somehow never actually worked when moved from theory into practice and he lost a lot of money."

"The businessman, Mr. Peters, insisted that we move into his home. He was particularly fond of Mother." Meg clasped her hands and straightened her spine. "Then Papa died in the accident. It all happened very suddenly. When we arrived home after Papa's funeral, Mr. Peters was waiting for us. Mother tried to send me away, but I confess that I listened at the top of the stairs," she said, grimacing at the memory of how she defied her mother that day. "His proposition to Mother was vile. He wanted her to work off the remainder of the debt as his mistress, but she refused. He

threatened to have us sent to a debtor's prison. They argued. In the end, Mother agreed to become his housekeeper, nothing more, I swear it."

She picked up the delicate teacup, admiring its elegance. Her mother had never owned anything so fine in her whole life as this cup. She blinked back the tears that welled up in her eyes. "We could not afford to move out of Mr. Peter's home. I become the companion to his daughter, even though I was only a few years older than she. He wanted me to ensure that her conduct was morally upright at all times. Mr. Peters was very concerned about the image of propriety."

"She never said anything to me about this in her letters. She always sounded so pleased with her position. I wish..." Belinda said.

"Mother was very proud," Meg interrupted. "In any case, we spent the next few years in the service of Mr. Peters. She didn't say, but I knew Mr. Peters still wanted Mother as his mistress. After a while she became easily startled and would not allow doors to be closed when she was alone in a room. I do know that Mr. Peters once trapped her in the parlor. Mother refused his advances and he turned violent. I never heard her scream, and I never saw bruises, but something in her changed...I could see it in her eyes. I tried to ask her about it once, but she told me not to worry about her, that it was her job to protect me and not the other way around. The subject was closed."

Meg felt her throat close. She pursed her lips and blinked back tears. "Then one day she woke up with a fever. I thought she was going to get better, then she took a turn for the worse. She had brought a few things with her from our old house. A locket, Papa's pocket watch. She had them hidden in the attic and sent me to get them for her, but by the time I got back to her room she was gone."

She wiped away the single tear that escaped her dark lashes. "Then Mr. Peters turned his attentions to me, and I knew I had to leave. I had to find a time to sneak away. I was always with Imogen and had so very little time to myself. I was afraid Mr. Peters would come after me to finish collecting the debt. I have no idea how much we still owe him."

She shifted in her seat, denying the compassion she could feel radiating from the couple opposite her. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to feel sorry for her. "I sold my father's pocket watch to buy a train ticket and left a night Mr. Peters went to the theater." Meg paused long

enough to fill her teacup. “I didn’t have a destination in mind. I went to St. Louis and worked as a companion for an older couple for a few months. They were both quite elderly. After they died I took my earnings and traveled west. I was out of money by the time I reached Denver, so I got a job as a seamstress. Now I’m here.”

“What you’ve just described is little more than indentured servitude and illegal,” Stephen said, his voice quivering with anger. “For a man concerned with the moral superiority of his daughter, he certainly didn’t seem to have many morals himself.”

“Indeed. He cared more about appearances than actually being a decent person,” Meg agreed.

“You should have told us years ago, Meg. Pride is a ridiculous thing to hide behind,” Belinda said.

Yet her pride was the only thing she had left. She would not say that to them, though. They would not understand. “I would like your permission to stay here a while. I will not be a burden, and I will work enough to earn my keep.”

Stephen’s hand came down hard on the desk. Meg flinched. “You’re not going to be a servant here,” he said. “If you want to help, you can. There is more than enough work to go around, but you’re part of this family and you will not act like you’re a servant.”

Meg nodded and was somehow comforted by Stephen’s anger. “Thank you for understanding. I’d like to go rest a while before dinner,” she said as she stood and rushed out of the study. She almost made it to her bedroom door before she burst into tears.

Chapter 5

Meg woke with a start and looked around the room as she tried to clear her thoughts. She had not meant to fall asleep but the stress of the day had left her feeling like an old wrung out rag. She stood, shook out her skirts, and walked to the basin. She paused in her ablutions when she heard the knock at the door.

She pulled open the door and barely had time to brace herself before Philippa rushed through the doorway and wrapped her in an enthusiastic hug.

"I could hardly believe it with Mama told me you were here," Philippa said. "It's been such a long time since we visited your family in Chicago. Mama wouldn't tell why you are here, so you must remember to tell me sometime. I'm so happy to see you."

Philippa's happiness was contagious. Meg laughed as she watched Philippa pace around the room exclaiming her joy at Meg's arrival. Meg looked down at her faded, wrinkled, threadbare dress and hoped that Philippa remained preoccupied. Philippa was wearing a pretty butter yellow sundress, not a wrinkle in sight. Her thick honey blonde hair was pulled back and tied with a ribbon the same color as her dress. Her bright green eyes were wide with excitement and a pretty blush covered her cheeks.

Meg felt as attractive as a toad when she stood near Philippa.

"And I'm happy to see you as well, cousin," Meg said. "Coming here was quite an adventure. I was fortunate to meet one of Uncle Stephen's employees in town, who was kind enough to show me the way."

"Yes, well...Carter went back to town with the wagon to get your trunk," Philippa said.

"That is very kind of him. He was a great help to me today. I don't think I would have ever made it out here if it weren't for him," Meg said.

"He's a good man. He's clever, and hardworking, and handsome," Philippa said with a sideways glance at Meg. "And he's not married."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Meg asked. "Are you...are you trying to play matchmaker?"

"I'm just telling you that he's unmarried, that's all," Philippa said, the expression on her face one of pure innocence.

Meg wasn't buying it for a minute.

“If he’s so wonderful, why don’t you marry him?” Meg asked.

“Oh! I suppose no one has told you yet. I’m already engaged,” Philippa said, her smile radiant. “Gerald Kennedy. His family owns the Circle Q ranch. It borders ours to the North.”

Meg gasped. “No, no one has told me yet.” She was glad for the turn in the conversation. She wasn’t ready to examine the chill that ran down her spine at the mention of Carter Ellis.

“It’s true. We’ll be married next summer. Gerald is leaving in a few months to go finish his schooling in St. Louis. He’s apprenticing under an attorney. He came home last month because his father died. He and his brother will keep the ranch going. Gerald wants to move to Denver to set up a law office when he comes back,” Philippa said.

“Denver? But you’ve lived your entire life on this ranch. Can you imagine living in the city?”

“Well, not my entire life. I’ve visited Papa’s family in England several times. Denver is nothing when compared to London,” Philippa said.

“London,” Meg said with a wistful look on her face. “I don’t suppose I’ll ever see anything as grand as that.”

“Oh, yes, it is grand. I wonder what my stuffy old uncle would say if he knew I was marrying an attorney. Would he be pleased or would he be upset that I’m engaged to a man who has to work for a living?” Philippa mused. “He would probably think it was gauche.”

Meg could tell by the wicked grin on her face that Philippa wasn’t overly concerned with her uncle’s reaction.

“You mean your uncle, the Earl?” Meg asked.

“Yes, that one. Don’t get too excited, he’s a lesser Earl, and as stodgy as they come. My father says it’s because he was raised to always think about status and protecting his title and furthering his position in the realm.”

“That sounds like a lot of pressure to be under. However did Uncle Stephen end up here?” Meg asked.

“Wonder lust, pure and simple. He knew that he had no chance of ever inheriting land or title as the fifth child in a lineup of thirteen. The title will pass to my cousin upon my uncle’s death, and then onto his son if he has one. Next would be my uncle Arthur, then his brood of sons. Next would be my uncle Robert, and his brood. And so on and so forth. Plus, my

father never wanted to run an earldom. He wanted to travel the world and see wide open spaces that only God can imagine. Then he met my mother, the daughter of a poor farmer,” Philippa said. “He gave it all up for her.”

“It’s all so romantic,” Meg said.

“Well, there was hell to pay when my grandmother found out. My father was disinherited from any monies he would receive upon her death and she refused to speak with him for ten years. Eventually she remembered that she loved her son more than her title and invited us all to London. I was four that first trip and we go back every five years or so for a visit. Once you get past the starch in her collar, she really is a lovely woman.”

“Have you been to any balls in London?” Meg asked.

“Oh, yes. Grandmother took me all over town the last time I visited. I also attended the Opera. It was magical,” Philippa said. “Oh, that reminds me. We’re having our Fall Festival in a few weeks in town. You’ll have to come, of course.”

“What happens at the festival?” Meg asked.

“Well, it lasts three days. On the first day is a trade show. People set up a place in town to sell various things they have been working on all year. Some people sell quilts, or furniture, some people sell surplus vegetables from the garden. My father will be taking a couple of our horses to show off. I’m selling a few of the dresses that I’ve made.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” Meg said.

“Yes, indeed. On the second day, there are games and horse races. And on the last day there be a cookout and followed by a dance. The dance is what I most look forward to,” Philippa said.

“Well, I will have to sit that one out,” Meg said.

“Oh, no...that’s the best part,” Philippa said.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Meg said. She felt like she was confessing a hideous crime.

“Well, then, we’ll just have to teach you,” Philippa said, hugging Meg tight, a mischievous grin on her pretty face.

Meg could all but see her cousin’s mind at work. She wondered how she would ever work up the nerve to extricate herself from her cousin’s plans. Philippa was a force of nature and could charm the horns off of the devil himself.

Meg didn’t stand a chance.

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Chapter 6

Carter shook his head in disgust as he surveyed the grazing herd and counted the dwindling numbers. He counted again. Forty-six. Three months ago this part of the herd had sixty-one horses. All five of the stallions were gone and two mares. If the raids kept up at this pace, the ranch would go under in a matter of months.

Carter gave the signal to Jack and Jill, his border collies, to start the round-up. They were the two best herding dogs in the county. Stephen Lawson had questioned his sanity when he brought them home as nearly full-grown pups and announced that he was going to train them to work the ranch. Horses could be a bit testy when a dog was nipping at their heels, but they learned quick enough to settle down and do what Jack and Jill wanted.

He was going to drive the herd closer to the ranch house. He was going to catch hell from Stephen, who wanted this part of the herd kept separate, but there was little Carter could do about the matter. Four more of the ranch hands had been dismissed this week and the few of them that were left were working from dawn to dusk trying to keep what was left of the herd intact. The Spring drive next year would barely be profitable due to the losses they had suffered from theft. What was left of the herd was either too young, too old, or too untrained to be marketable at auction. With the loss of more than half of the staff at the ranch, the responsibility for breaking the horses to saddle and lead line was falling on Stephen's daughter, of all people.

Philippa had three horses that she had picked to train next. That girl had a way with animals that he would never understand. She could take a wild mustang, and in no time at all, she'd just hop up on its back ride off into the sunset. The horse wouldn't even put up all that much of a fight.

Sometimes he caught her singing to the herd at the end of the day when she was sneaking the horses bits of apple as payment for their hard work. Not that he minded. She had the kind of voice that could make a grown man weep.

Carter's thoughts were drawn to Meg for the hundredth time that day. Sure, she was a pretty little thing, but she Stephen's niece and therefore off limits. She was as poor as a church mouse judging by the threadbare dresses she wore and the beaten up old trunk he had fetched out of the

livery stable, but he could see strength behind her proud bearing and quiet ways.

Over the last week, he watched her far more than he thought prudent. He planned to keep his distance, but she was hard to avoid. He declined Bel's nightly invitation to join them for dinner, giving the excuse that he needed to stay with the herd as long as possible to watch for raiders. Sitting across a table, making polite conversation, and trying to not notice Meg's perfect little pink mouth and wondering what it tasted like would be pure torture. She'd be shocked out of her pantaloons if she had any inkling of what he was thinking.

Stephen would notice, though. The last thing he needed was for Stephen to see him ogling his niece. He needed his job at the ranch until he could afford a place of his own. He had almost enough saved, but needed a little more time. He had nothing to offer any woman until he could support himself and build a decent home.

He wanted to stay out on the range for the rest of the day, but he had to find Stephen. They couldn't prove it but they were both sure that the raids were done by the Downs family. Bill, Stephen's eldest son, had developed a friendly competition with Henry Downs' youngest son, Boyd. That competition had turned into an all-out feud as they grew older and discovered gambling and girls. Bill's gambling was a real problem now as he routinely lost more than he could repay at the tables. Stephen paid off the first debt with a stern warning that that would be the last time.

Bill stayed out of the saloons for a month or two before he was drawn back by his insatiable need to play the game. Carter assumed he lost his shirt again. Stephen had received a letter from Bill a few months ago, who said he was on his way to California. No one has heard from him since.

The raids started a few days after he left.

Carter drove the herd across the Southern pasture. As he neared the house he gave the signal for one of the ranch hands to open the corral. He whistled for Jack and Jill to come back to him once the corral gate was closed. They came and flanked each side of his horse, tongues lolling out the side of the mouths, looking very proud of themselves.

Big Roger stood by the corral gate, shaking his head with a look of disgust on his face. Roger was the largest man Carter had ever seen. Carter was not a small man by any means, standing over six feet tall and having a

good deal of muscle on him, but next to Roger he looked like a child. Roger stood a head taller than Carter. He had been born a slave in South Carolina. Stephen won him in a poker game two weeks after coming to the United States. Out of principle, he bought Roger's wife, Jeanette, as well. As soon as they left that town, Stephen handed them letters giving them their freedom.

Having no better place to go, the couple decided to travel West with Stephen.

"How many this time?" Roger asked. He didn't even have to wonder why Carter had brought the herd in from the range.

"They took the last three stallions and two mares," Carter said.

"You going to get them back?" Roger asked. "You might need a little help."

"If I can find them, I'll bring them back," Carter said. "There were tracks leading to the Southwest. Old Man Downs isn't even trying to hide this anymore."

"He's raising the stakes," Roger said.

"He is. That damned Bill dragged us all into the middle of his feud," Carter said. He took his hat off and wiped the sweat off his brow. "The Lawson family didn't have any enemies until this."

"Don't kid yourself, Carter. Downs has never been too keen on Mr. Lawson. Thought he was uppity with his nice English accent and blooded Thoroughbreds. This was a long time coming. Old Man Downs just needed an excuse."

"Well, he got his excuse. Where's Stephen? He's not going to like this," Carter said.

"He's up at the house doing the payroll," Roger said.

"I'd better get this over with," Carter said, nudging his horse forward. Jack and Jill didn't need to be called. They would follow Carter anywhere.

He rode around the side of the house and saw Meg immediately. She was wearing a faded blue dress today, her long dark hair pulled back with a white ribbon. She had left her bonnet on the porch swing. He didn't think she'd like it if he pointed out she would be getting more freckles in this late afternoon sun.

He couldn't quite figure out what she was doing. She was standing beside Philippa they were both moving in circles. He told himself he wasn't going to ask as he dismounted and tied the reins to the hitching post. He was halfway up the steps when he turned around.

"What in the world are you two doing?" Carter asked. Meg jumped, clearly startled. She had to have heard him coming. He watched her straighten her spine and fold her hands in front of her body. A minute ago, she was relaxed and acting foolish with her cousin. Now she was back to being proper again. He felt a wave of irritation knowing she was throwing up her defenses with him.

"We're dancing," Meg said.

Carter looked from one woman to the other. "Dancing," Carter echoed, his voice flat. "Is that what you were doing?"

"It's not easy teaching someone how to dance, Carter," Philippa admonished. "I only know the steps from the lady's side. I'm doing the best I can to show her. Everyone else is too busy to help."

Carter nodded and turned back to the house. He knew he shouldn't have asked. An alarm went off in his head as he heard whispering behind him.

"Don't you dare!" Meg said.

"I don't see what the problem is, it's the perfect solution," Philippa said.

"I absolutely won't have him thinking I'm incompetent," Meg said.

What on earth are they talking about? He wasn't going to ask this time. He was curious, but he wasn't going to ask.

"Carter," Philippa called out, "One thing before you go inside, please."

Carter sighed and turned around. "What is it?" He had a feeling he already knew.

"Well, since you're in from the range a bit early this evening, I thought that maybe you could help Meg with her dance steps."

"No," Carter answered.

Philippa ran over to him. "Be nice," she whispered. "She's very sensitive. You might hurt her feelings if she thinks you don't want to dance with her."

“But I don’t want to dance with her,” Carter said. He thought he sounded perfectly reasonable. The last thing he wanted was to put his hands on the woman who has been haunting his every waking moment for the last week.

“Yes, you do. You think she’s pretty,” Philippa said. She held up a hand. “Don’t deny it. She is pretty and everyone knows it but her.”

“I don’t like dancing and I sure as certain don’t know how to teach anyone to dance,” Carter said.

“You know how to dance. I know you remember my father forcing you to be my dance partner as I learned. All you have to do is repeat the lessons to her.”

“Pippa, I really don’t think I’ll have time for this today. I can’t promise anything,” Carter said.

“Oh, good. I’ll go get the guitar,” Philippa said.

Carter was sure he had been speaking English this whole time. He was sure of it. So, why did was she acting like he had meant exactly the opposite of what he said?

“Don’t do that,” Carter said as he opened the front door for her.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Carter, you know as well as I do that it’s easier to dance when there’s music.”

Carter stared after her as she rushed up the stairs. He wondered how he had let the conversation get away from him like that. He remembered saying no. He remembered sounding downright mean when he’d said it. Yet, somehow, here he was cornered into teaching a beautiful vagabond how to dance when he had chores to do. He shook his head at the insanity of it all. Women had the infuriating ability to twist a man in knots. After five minutes speaking to a woman, he didn’t know which way was up.

He glanced behind him as he pulled the door shut. Meg stood in the same place, hands folded demurely in front of her, looking downright miserable. She stared at a spot a few feet ahead of her on the ground. He saw her bottom lip tremble and he realized that she had overheard his whispered conversation with Philippa. He felt like a slug.

He fought the urge to go to her, pull her into his arms, and kiss the sadness away. She would either faint or run away screaming if he tried. Philippa would be back soon and would have Meg smiling within a minute. Meanwhile, he had the unenviable task of giving his boss bad news. A

small part of him wished he had the freedom to dance with a beautiful woman in broad daylight while the world around them crumbled to the ground.

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Chapter 7

Stephen Lawson was enraged. He could abide just about anything but a thief. He had no use for a man willing to take another's hard earned possessions. He had busted his rump for twenty-five years to build the ranch he had, only to have some no-account fool take off with his herd. It was unconscionable. He knew the financial impact of these raids. If this continued for much longer, he would be in serious trouble.

"We need to recover the horses. All of them, if we can," Stephen said.

"I know. This has to stop," Carter said.

"We will have to start taking turns guarding the herds. The North herd is getting close to being ready to take to auction. We can't let them near them. It would ruin our whole year," Stephen said. "I've already had to let go of most of the help. We're stretched as thin as we can go."

Carter nodded in agreement. "The South herd has been reduced by a third. We should drive the herds as close to the ranch house as possible. If a raid happens, we need a way of signaling the other hands to come help. Let's not worry too much about mixing the herds right now," Carter said. "We can get them sorted back out later if we need to."

"You're right," Stephen said. "But we still need to get those horses back that were taken."

"Should we alert the Sherriff?" Carter asked. "He might not dismiss it this time."

Stephen balled his fists at his side as he turned to look out the window. "That lazy bastard won't care. I told him about the raids before this. Did I ever tell you what he said about them?"

Carter shook his head. "No, you never mentioned going to the Sherriff before."

"He said 'maybe they got lost.' Maybe twenty horses just left their herds and wandered off and got lost. That man is a disgrace to the legal profession," Stephen said.

"I know how much you hate vigilantism. Hell, I don't hold much to it either, but we have to stop this from happening again."

"We protect the herd. Recoup what we've lost if we can," Stephen said. "That's all that can be done. What we need is someone who can track

them down, find out who is behind all of this, you know...move in and out of places unknown. Know anyone like that?"

"I might. It will take a few days to get word to him, though," Carter said. "Besides, I think we're both pretty much aware of who is doing all of this, and why."

"Send for him today, as soon as you can."

Carter nodded his agreement. Stephen kept dancing around the real issue, the reason the raids were happening at all. The only way this would stop is if Stephen cut off the purse strings to Bill. The eldest Lawson son had not been around for months, but was still wreaking havoc on the family. Never one to take responsibility for his actions, Bill forged his father's name to all dealings. When things went south, and they always did, Bill was off the hook. Stephen paid the debt to keep things quiet and Bill out of trouble. Stephen was a pragmatic man in all matters except his children.

"This will keep happening until we deal with old man Downs and his crew," Carter challenged. He watched as Stephen's jaw clenched.

"I've been dealing with that man ever since I moved here. He couldn't stand the thought of an Englishman settling nearby him with money to spare. He's been trying to run me off for twenty-five years. I've been telling the lot of them to go to the devil. It seems my son is following my lead."

"It's no secret that he has never thought highly of you, Stephen, but he had no real excuse to run you off before now. Bill has given him one. He'll bankrupt you with his gambling."

The older man sighed and shook his head, a look of utter despair written on his handsome face. "I know he will," Stephen said. At Carter's raised eyebrow he said, "Do you really think I don't see what he's become? I'm not sure what to do with him. I've sent him away to school to keep him out of trouble. He just found more trouble there. I've cut him off from my accounts. He goes to the next town over and borrows against my name. I've made him work the trails and earn back some of what he's taken. He does just the minimum to get by. I don't understand how he can treat his family so poorly without even a second thought and still expect more."

"Some people only learn when they have nothing left to lose, Stephen."

“I was disinherited for marrying a woman below my station. When my children go to visit my family in England, they’re treated with cold indifference, if not with open disdain. They all know it, too,” Stephen said. “Would you have me do the same to my own son?”

“I’m not sure if there is an easy choice for you to make. But I do know that Bill will take away every chance of a future for James and Philippa. How do you plan to explain to Philippa that her dowry has been squandered? I’m sure Gerald’s mother is going to be really pleasant to Philippa when she finds out that her precious son is marrying into a family steeped in debt.”

“I know that,” Stephen said. “Besides, we’re not quite destitute, Carter.”

“Yet,” Carter said. With that warning, he turned and walked out of the room.

He had a dancing lesson to get to.

Chapter 8

“I’m never going to get this, Philippa. I have two left feet,” Meg said in protest. She climbed the steps onto the porch. With her hands on her hips she frowned at the place where she had been trying to learn to dance for the last two hours.

“Nonsense. You’re doing great,” Philippa said as her fingers strummed her guitar. “I think maybe I’ve confused you with trying to teach you the basics of all of the dances I know. It’s too much for you to remember.”

“You’re telling me,” Meg muttered.

She was disgusted with herself. She had been irritable all day. Philippa tried to help her feel better by teaching her to dance, and it had worked until Carter Ellis rode up. He had been sweaty, covered in dust, and had a look on his face that could frighten the Devil. She couldn’t believe she found that appealing. She had hoped for a little more than a passing glance from him. But, no, he just went about his business as if he hadn’t just given her heart palpitations.

She wondered what he had to talk to Uncle Stephen about. He had been in the study a really long time. She assumed it was serious otherwise he would not be neglecting his duties.

“I think you need a partner,” Philippa continued, oblivious to Meg’s distraction.

“A what?”

“A partner. For the dance,” Philippa said. “Are we still having the same conversation?”

Meg sighed. “Yes. I believe so. I always thought dancing looked so simple and enjoyable. I can’t help but be disappointed by the fact that neither assumption has proven true.”

“It becomes both of those things once you get the steps down,” Philippa said. “I would suggest one fast and one slow dance. That should at least get you through the festival. We can work on the others for the next party.”

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but there is a lack of available persons to serve as a partner,” Meg said. “Everyone else has work to do.

Except me, but I really am going to have to insist that you put me to work soon. I aim to earn my keep while I'm here."

Meg wondered at the smile that spread across Philippa's face and saw her eyes move towards the door just as it opened. Carter stepped onto the porch and shoved his hat back on his head. Meg's heart skipped a beat. Carter turned to her and started down the steps, his eyes fixed on hers. *What is he up to?* she wondered.

Carter stopped a step away from her and lifted his hand to her waist. A shock went through her middle, and her knees went weak. She jumped back in surprise. Carter grinned and pulled her closer, lifted her left to his shoulder and grasped her right in his left.

"What are you doing?" Meg asked when her breath came back into her lungs.

"I'm going to teach you to dance. Philippa clearly hasn't been doing a very good job," Carter said.

Meg stiffened felt the blood rush to her face in embarrassment. Through clenched teeth she said, "I've never had the luxury of dancing before."

"Oh my, but she has a temper," Carter said, his grin spreading. Seeking to ease her distress, he said softly, "I'm sorry. My teasing was aimed at Philippa. It wasn't meant to be an insult to you."

Meg relaxed a bit and accepted his apology. She could not meet his eyes, though. What was she thinking? She would forget the world if she let this charade go on any more and would likely end up disgracing herself by falling face-down in the dirt. One thing she could never claim to be was graceful. Dancing required grace.

"Philippa, we're waiting," Carter said.

The first notes of music filled the air. Meg looked over at where Philippa sat on the steps, strumming the guitar, with a far-away look on her face. How could she look so beautiful playing such a sad song?

"Meg," Carter said, his voice soft. She forgot her resolve to avoid his gaze, and her eyes met his. His eyes were such a deep, warm brown she thought she might get lost in them. His hand, still on her waist, tightened, and heat spread from his palm through the layers of her skirt. Her gaze fell to his lips. "Meg. If you keep looking at me like that, I might have to kiss you."

Her gaze flew back to his, her eyes wide. He grinned. "Alright, now that I have your attention. You've been told the basic steps. Just remember it's a count of four. I'll guide you, so wait for my cue."

"What cue?" Meg asked.

"Just trust me. You'll feel awkward at first. Everyone does. You'll get the steps down in a couple minutes. Then, I want you to have a little fun with this. Women are supposed to enjoy this."

He could see her disbelief in her eyes as he started the first steps of the waltz. He stared down at the top of her head as she looked down at their feet. He could hear her counting beneath her breath. By the end of the song, she had only stepped on his toes once. As soon as the song stopped, her hand fell from his shoulders and she stepped away. He could see that her breath was uneven and her face was flushed.

Meg wanted to be swallowed into the earth to hide from her embarrassment. She had been so busy trying to distract herself from the warmth that had settled into her stomach, the burning sensation of Carter's hand on her waist, and his perfectly formed lips that she had lost count and stepped all over the man's toes. She had to get control of herself.

"Next song, Philippa, don't make it so depressing. Sing a little, will you?" Carter said.

"Next song?" Meg said, alarmed. "I thought we were done." She couldn't believe her ears. The man was obviously a glutton for punishment.

"Not quite, sweetheart. You're doing great," Carter said. At her incredulous look, he added "You have the steps down, now you just need a little rhythm and a little confidence. Once you find those, you'll start to relax and have fun with it. Then we'll switch to something a little more fun."

"Er, I thought you had work to do," Meg said. "You're going to spend all afternoon getting your toes stepped on. I don't want you to neglect your duties."

"My toes are fine. The horses can wait a few minutes more," Carter said. He saw her bite her lower lip as he reached for her. "This time, try not to stare at your feet. It throws you off balance and makes it harder for you to move with me."

"What should I look at instead?" Meg asked.

“Me,” Carter said, his voice low. “Watch me. I’ll let you know with my touch when to move. Focus on how you feel as when we move together.”

Philippa started to play again. Carter guided her into the first steps of the dance. Philippa’s pure soprano voice filled the air in a ballad. The song was full of love and longing. Meg’s eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them away, and Carter knew exactly how she felt. Philippa’s voice could make angels weep.

And they danced. Meg felt as if she had been suspended in time. She was vaguely aware of the strumming of the guitar. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that Philippa was singing. All she could see was the man holding her so gently, his beautiful brown eyes looking at her so tenderly. All she could feel was the pressure of his hand on hers, the heat of his hand at her waist, the breeze on her cheek as he led her into another turn. Surely her heart was still beating and her lungs still drawing breath. She did not know how that was possible.

Carter slowed them to a stop as the music died. He held onto her a moment too long, reluctant to break the spell that had fallen over them. He stepped away, her hand still in his. He swept the hat from his head and bowed to her.

“Thank you, my lady, for honoring me with this dance,” he said.

Meg smiled and nodded, feeling the last of her trance lift from her. “And thank you, good sir, for taking the time to instruct me.”

“Perhaps we should resume this tomorrow evening. It seems you picked up the steps to the waltz pretty quickly, but we should keep practicing until you get it just right, but I think we’ll do something a little more fun tomorrow.”

Meg could not imagine anything ever being more pleasant than what she had just experienced. Clearly he thought differently. She was a fool to think he would have just had the same earth shattering experience she had just had. He had just been doing Philippa a favor today. She needed to remember that and not get carried away with foolish fantasies. She wasn’t here for a dalliance, anyway. She had to leave soon.

Carter could see her shields come up before he finished speaking and had no idea what he had said to put her on guard. He needed to go collect himself, otherwise he’d be tempted to ravish her on the front lawn of

her uncle's house with her cousin sitting there watching. He found himself actually wanting her company tomorrow. But, she was right, he had duties that needed his attention.

“Again, I would hate to distract you from your duties,” Meg said.

He didn't like that response. He knew she had reacted to him. He also knew that she was trying to deny it, especially to herself. He wanted to get to know her better and couldn't do that if she refused to spend time with him. “Tomorrow, same time. Right here,” Carter said, his voice harsher than he intended. He turned to Philippa. “Right?”

“Don't worry,” Philippa said. Her gaze traveled back and forth between them. “We'll be here.”

Chapter 9

Meg stared at her reflection and tried to recognize the woman staring back at her. She had been reluctant to borrow one of Philippa's dresses for the dance, but she could not regret putting it on. It was dark blue and very near the color of her eyes. The long sleeves would help her stay warm this evening, as the nights had turned cool. The neckline was demure enough to protect her modesty, with just enough cleavage showing to entice. Her waist looked tiny above the skirts that flared out from her hips.

Her hair had been carefully braided and pinned up around her crown. She had never had her hair braided before, and never had time to bother with anything more than a simple chignon. She felt elegant and could briefly imagine herself being a real and proper lady.

Her thoughts turned to Carter, as was her habit over the past two weeks. Every afternoon, he took an hour away from his work to dance with her. She, of course, put forth a protest. He, of course, always ignored her objections. She suspected that he knew that her objections were not in earnest, and that she really enjoyed the time she spent with him. Carter had often said how much he owes to the Lawson family to pay them back in even the most simple of ways, and she assumed he was being nice to her because of that debt. How could she ever tell him that she does not want to be a burden?

How could she convince herself that she wasn't really attracted to him?

Yes, she knew she was attracted to him, but she would only admit it to herself. She held firm her resolve to leave the ranch just as soon as she knew where she was going next and had the money to get to her destination. She would not let herself get caught up in impossible daydreams about the only man she has ever known to make her heart flutter.

She wished that he had been coming to see her every evening because he felt the same, but she knew he was only doing Philippa a favor. Still, it was a nice fantasy.

She needed to stop wasting time trying to fit in. She had an agenda. Winter would be here soon and if she didn't get moving she would be stuck here until the Spring thaw. She was out of money and out of her depth in the wildness of the American West. She didn't think she would be able to put

things together soon enough to leave before the first snow fall. She had no money, she didn't know how to ride a horse, and she didn't know where she was going.

She just knew she had to go. She would never be able to repay her uncle for his kindness in taking her in over the past few weeks. She would not bring danger to his doorstep.

She heard a knock on her door and turned as Aunt Bel's head peaked round the corner. Bel smiled as she closed the door behind her.

"Oh, Meg, you've grown into such a beautiful young woman."

"A nice dress and a new way to arrange your hair can do wonders for one's appearance," Meg said.

"Hmmm. Yes, the dress is very nice, dear. I was looking at the woman wearing it though," Bel said. The older woman noticed the color that spread across her niece's cheeks, and shook her head. A young woman should be able to hear a compliment. Her niece was far too humbled by life. "But, I didn't come in here to embarrass you. I came to give you a present."

"A present?" Meg said, confused. "Why would you give me a present?"

"Because it should belong to you. Your mother, my dear sweet sister, gave this to me on my wedding day. Stephen and I were not certain if we would be going to England to make our home and I did not know if I would ever see Thelma again. She had thought at the time she would never have a daughter of her own to give it to, and didn't want your rascal of a father to get his hands on it," Bel said as she took Meg's hand.

Meg looked down as the locket was laid in her palm. A rose was imprinted on the front. She turned to look at the back of the locket and saw Forever, My Love etched on the back.

"The likeness of your mother is inside. You look very like she did as a young woman."

Meg opened the locket and saw her mother staring back at her. Her chest tightened and she had to struggle to draw a breath. Tears came to her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks.

"Oh, heavens, look what I started. I didn't mean to upset you, Meg," Bel said, distressed.

"I am happy, Aunt Bel. I just miss her so much," Meg said, closing the locket. "Thank you."

“I think it would go perfectly with your dress. Turn around. I’ll help you with the clasp,” Bel said.

Meg wiped the tears away as she turned. The locket lay just below her collarbone when the clasp was fixed. Although she knew that her eyes were now red and puffy, she didn’t care.

Her mother’s locket was above her heart.

“You’re going to have quite the following tonight,” Bel said.

“What do you mean?” Meg asked.

“Women don’t tend to stay single for long in the West. There just are too few of them. I’m sure you’ll have a pack of young suitors hanging on your skirts,” Bel said. “Probably some old ones as well.”

“I’m just as certain that I won’t. I’m not looking for a husband,” Meg said.

“Trust me, that won’t deter them. Fix yourself right up by Carter’s side, if you want them to leave you alone. As ornery as they are, they won’t fuss with a woman that is spoken for,” Bel said.

“I’m not spoken for,” Meg said, hurriedly.

“Not yet,” Bel said. “You could do worse, though, than Carter Ellis. He’s handsome, he’s strong, he works hard, he’s devoted to those he loves, and he’s sensitive.”

She didn’t want to think about all of his many positive qualities. She’d much rather think him a cad. It would make it so much easier to leave if she didn’t think so well of him, so she scoffed in reaction to her aunt’s assessment. “Sensitive?”

“Oh, yes. He teases a lot, but don’t let that fool you. It’s just an act. He’s just looking for someplace to call home and someone to love him,” Bel said. “If you want to know more, though, you’ll have to ask him.”

Chapter 10

Carter was tired and in a bad mood. He'd spent most of his day rounding up the remnants of the South herd and found three more mares were missing. Now he had to put up with this farce of a party. He had more important things to worry about than to make pleasantries with a bunch of people who didn't care if he was there or not.

He would go into town tomorrow and speak to Sherriff Hadley again tomorrow. He and Stephen had gone last week and found it to be utterly pointless. Sherriff Hadley was upset about being distracted away from his apple pie and his poker game and not interested in the reasons why. He told them that he wasn't concerned about a few missing horses, and not to bother him again with such petty complaints.

Carter was relieved that Stephen finally seemed to understand the extent of the theft. Stephen just couldn't do anything about it yet. He had let go of a good portion of the help on the ranch, not being able to afford their wages with the decreased income and the increased debt from Bill's gambling that he was paying off against his better judgment.

He knew that Stephen was not telling Bel and Philippa how dire the family financial situation was becoming. He had heard Philippa exclaim over how good business was they had been selling so many horses lately and that she regretted that she had not even had the opportunity to train most of them before they were sold. Bel seemed unconcerned, never being one to pay much attention to the herd, so busy was she with running the house.

Now he had to watch the woman who had consumed his thoughts every waking minute for weeks dance with every other man in town. He shook his head in disgust. He shouldn't be worried about this little slip of a girl who had no self-preservation skills. He shouldn't be ruminating about this little beauty who kept stubbornly insisting that she could take care of herself.

He shouldn't want her this much.

But, he and there wasn't a damn thing he wanted to do to change it.

She had done everything she could in the last couple of weeks to ignore the feelings between them. He knew she felt the same way. He could see her breath catch in her throat when their eyes met. He could feel her

tense at his first touch, and then melt against his embrace as he helped her learn her dances and he could feel how she responded to him.

He also knew she was determined to leave. She had whispered this to him often enough, he supposed as a way of warning him not to get too attached. She had not mentioned this to anyone else in the family, he knew, or they would be protesting something fierce at the very suggestion.

What was she thinking? She's completely inept. She has no idea what dangers are out there in the world. She has no money, no vocation. She's single-handedly the worst rider he's ever seen and wouldn't get ten miles down the road on the back of a horse without breaking her neck. She didn't know how to drive a buggy, so that wasn't an option. She had no plan about how she would protect herself or where she would go. Yet she wanted to leave. He had no idea why and it infuriated him.

"If you keep staring at her like that, Carter, her skirts are going to catch on fire."

He turned at the sound of the voice behind him. He had not heard Stephen approach. He scowled in response.

"She seems to be having a grand time," Carter said dryly.

"Everyone here is having a grand time but you," Stephen said.

"I'm not really in the mood for a party tonight," Carter said.

"I heard you aim to talk with Sherriff Hadley again. I'm telling you, son, that it's a wasted effort. That man never did care much for me and won't lift a finger to help out when things go wrong out here. I just have to keep to myself and not make enemies, otherwise I won't get by," Stephen said.

"It's not your enemies that are the problem, Stephen. Bill's enemies are the problem," Carter said.

"I know it. After the last time I ran him off, I told him I wouldn't be paying any more of his debts," Stephen said, reaching into his the pocket of his jacket. "This arrived today. Someone was in the house and left it on my desk. No one I've asked saw anyone unexpected."

Carter unfolded the note and read.

Your family owes a debt to mine. All will be paid or I will strike you where it will hurt you the most.

~H

"H. Who is H?" Carter asked. "Let me guess...Harold Downs?"

“Harold Downs,” Stephen confirmed. “The amount he’s wanting is more than I could give if I saved every penny for the next two years,” he said.

“Where does he suppose it will hurt you the most?” Carter asked.

“He’s threatening my family. That has to be it...my wife or one of my children. It won’t be Bill, that’s too obvious. It will be either James or Philippa. They’re innocent in all of this, completely undeserving of retribution,” Stephen said.

“What about Meg?” Carter said.

“Meg is also at risk, though not as much. As much as I adore her, she’s not my child. That affords her a level of protection that will serve her well in the upcoming months, I fear,” Stephen said.

“It’s going to be a harsh winter, it seems,” Carter said, his gaze unerringly found Meg again. He couldn’t let her go through with this fool plan of leaving. Not yet. Not until she could be safe.

He heard Stephen sigh. “Good Heavens, man, go ask that pretty young girl to dance. You’ve been tripping over your boots for two weeks racing to teach her how to dance and yet now you’re sitting here sulking in the bushes while she dances with every other man in town. It’s daft,” Stephen said in exasperation.

“That obvious, was I?” Carter asked with a grin.

“About as obvious as I was when I was working up the nerve to go courting Bel.”

“You don’t have any qualms about the hired help chasing after your niece’s skirts?” Carter said, trying to mask his surprise. He wanted Stephen’s blessings, but he was damned if he was going to come right out and ask for it.

“No. No qualms at all,” Stephen said. “But let’s be clear: you get up underneath those skirts, and you’ll do right by her.”

“Yes, sir. I understand,” Carter said. “Of course, she’ll have to agree to the arrangement.”

“If she lets you get that close to her, she’ll agree. You’ll just have to convince her it was her idea,” Stephen said. “And if that doesn’t work. I’ll just bring out the old shotgun.”

“It’s usually the groom that it’s aimed at, Stephen.”

“The groom isn’t the one needing his mind changed,” Stephen said. “Are you going to stand her all night drooling in the bushes and arguing with me, or are you going to go claim your place on her dance card?”

“Alright, old man. Quit pushing,” Carter said.

Carter circled the perimeter of the lawn. He had lost sight of Meg, but he could see that she was no longer among the dancers. His gaze scanned the crowd. She wasn’t behind the musicians and she wasn’t getting refreshments. He silently cursed. She couldn’t have gone far. He’s only lost sight of her for a few seconds. He had seen her slip away from her latest dance partner, curtsying graciously as if she were in a fancy ballroom instead of on a dusty lawn in the middle of nowhere.

He knew she would argue with him but she belonged in a fancy parlor serving tea, not in the harshness of the West. He could better envision her managing a large estate, not washing linens and scrubbing floors. He knew that she was helping Bel with the household chores and it bothered him. By the quality of her work, he also knew that this wasn’t the first time she’d had to scrub floors, beat carpets, and tend the garden. If she kept this up, she’d end up slumped over with bad a back and swollen knuckles.

She deserved better.

Carter saw a flurry of motion from the corner of his eye. He saw a flash of blue before it disappeared into the shadows behind the stable. He didn’t know what she was up to, but he knew where he would find her.

Chapter 11

Meg moved into the shadows beyond the stables. She was exhausted from dancing, but thrilled that she had so many people ask her to dance. She had barely had a chance to sit still all evening and could not remember ever having such a fine time.

So why was she so irritated? She told herself that it had nothing to do with being completely ignored by the one person she had actually wanted to see tonight. He could have at least come over to say hello.

Drat!

The man was clearly glad to be rid of her. He could have at least been a little more sensitive about the issue.

She told herself for the twentieth time tonight that she was being irrational. She couldn't let herself become emotionally involved with Carter. She needed to focus on what she came here to do. She knew that she was borderline inept in this environment. She had not even had time to figure out the proper way to ride a horse, much less actually take care of the beast. Sure, she could cook and clean and scrub floors, but those skills would get her stuck in a job in a place where she had no intention of settling.

Tomorrow she would ask Philippa to teach her to ride. She had been amazed the day after she arrived to see her perfectly ladylike cousin wearing trousers and riding astride. More amazing was the fact that she was helping the men work the horses. Meg had not believed Philippa when she said she helped to train the horses, but then she watched her cousin teach a rather feisty mare to obey her with whistles and simple commands. Philippa was a rather amazing horsewoman.

Was there nothing her cousin couldn't do with ease? Meg swallowed a lump of envy that lodged in her throat. Gerald had come to the dance and was more handsome than she had even envisioned, although he was not quite as handsome as Carter. He was the perfect complement to Philippa's beauty. She was blonde and fair, he was tall with dark wavy brown hair and broad shoulders. He had a ready smile and his warm brown eyes positively sparkled when he laughed, which he did often. He was nothing but attentive to Philippa. He wouldn't have let every other man in

town dance with his fiancée without cutting in a few times, unlike somebody else she knew.

She heard the sound of footsteps and took an involuntary step back as the object of her affections stepped around the side of the stable. She drew in a sharp breath and straightened her shoulders. She didn't know what to do with her hands so she folded them in front of her. She was sure she looked calm and composed. He would never be able to know the content of her thoughts, so why worry.

He thought she looked guilty as hell. He looked beyond her, deeper into the shadows. He could see no signs of movement. He was certain she had been alone up until a moment ago when he arrived, so why did she look like she was just caught with her hand in the cookie jar?

"Good evening, Meg," Carter said.

"Good evening, Mr. Ellis," Meg said. She was having trouble meeting his gaze. The moonlight made his sandy blonde hair look like it had a halo. She knew better. He was certainly no angel, nor was he a saint. Surely, he was sent here to tempt mortal women into giving up their virtue. No, she would not look at him too closely. He was far too handsome, even in this poor lighting.

"Rather formal, my lady. Tsk, tsk," Carter said, smiling at her discomfort. What had she been up to back here? He decided to goad her a little bit. "Are you alone back here?"

Carter could hear her gasp and saw her stiffen. He was certain her spine would snap in two if it got any straighter.

"Just what are you implying?" Meg said, gritting her teeth. The nerve of this man, accusing her of doing something improper. She had been perfectly well-behaved this evening until she lost her mind thinking impossible thoughts about this infuriating man.

He stepped closer. His hands settled about her waist and tightened as she tried to step back. She smelled of lilacs. He brushed her cheek with the back of one hand. She would not meet his gaze, so he tilted her chin up gently with his thumb.

"I was just making sure, Meg," Carter said. "I wanted a minute alone with you."

"You did?" Meg said, meeting his eyes for the first time tonight. "You have been ignoring me all evening. I thought you would have at least

wanted to dance with me.”

Why had she said that? She groaned when she realized how pathetic that sounded. And why was he still stroking the side of her face? Didn't he know how distracting that was? She thought about moving away from him, but she enjoyed the touch too much.

“I mean, you took all the time to teach me the dance steps, I thought you might want to show off how well your pupil had learned,” Meg clarified. There, now there was no reason for him to think she wanted to be around him. She did...but he didn't need to know that.

“Your dance card looked pretty full from where I was standing. Besides, I wouldn't have been able to do what I really wanted to with all of those people standing around staring at us,” Carter said, pulling her closer.

“And what is that, exactly?” Meg asked, breathless.

“This,” Carter said as he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers.

She felt as if she had been branded. His lips were firm and soft at the same time. Her knees went weak as his teeth gently nipped her bottom lip. She had been kissed before, but she had found it a messy and unpleasant affair. This was different than anything she could have ever imagined. She sighed and tilted her head. He took that as an invitation. His hand wrapped tightly around her waist, pulling her even closer. His mouth slanted over hers, his tongue delving into her mouth. Her tongue rose up to meet his in an erotic dance as her arms found their ways to his shoulders. Her fingers threaded through the thick hair at the nape of his neck.

A strange heat ignited in the pit of her belly. She felt strange, intoxicated. She felt alive and she wanted more. She didn't know what came next, and could not hold a thought long enough to protest. She felt the muscles underneath his shirt as he lifted her ever so slightly so that their hips met. A moan escaped her as his lips left hers and traveled down the side of her throat.

Carter was on fire. He kissed a trail down the side of her throat, relishing the sexy little moans she made. His hands left her waist and moved downward to cup her sweet little backside. It was firm and fit perfectly in his hands.

His mouth moved along the edge of her collarbone. Her high, firm breasts now straining against her gown. He caught her as her knees buckled.

He leaned her against the side of the stable door, once again finding her mouth.

She was breathless when he lifted his mouth from hers. He kissed her cheek, her forehead, and the tip of her nose as he held her in his tender embrace.

“You’re a delight, Meg,” Carter said.

How could he even speak at a time like this, let alone say something so absolutely wonderful? She shook her head and took a deep breath. Surely her wits would come back to her. First she should stop clinging to the man, though. She let her hands drop down to her sides as she straightened away from the side of the stable.

“You mean to say, you would have wanted to kiss me in front of the whole town?” Meg said.

“Yes,” Carter said simply. “I had a feeling you might be embarrassed if I had done so, though. Not to mention that I’d probably end up in a fight with one of your beaus if I had tried.”

“You know good and well none of them are my beaus, so stop trying to bait me,” Meg said.

“Yes, my lady. And now would you like to dance?” Carter asked.

“I’d love to,” Meg said. “But I won’t dance with you here. You’ll dance with me in full view of everyone else, or not at all, Mr. Ellis.”

“Yes, love. Anything you say,” Carter said.

“I’m not your lady, you know,” Meg said in a whirl of skirts as she walked away, liking the sound of that far too much.

“Yes, you are,” Carter said softly, as he watched her leave. “You just don’t know it yet.” For propriety’s sake, he would wait a bit before he went after her. He had no desire to have Stephen break his shotgun out too soon. He needed a little more time to figure things out. How hard could it be, really? He just needed to figure out how to make a woman fall in love with him.

He was smart enough to admit to himself that he had no idea what he was doing.

Chapter 12

Meg walked around feeling like she was in a dream most of the following day. She was being foolish. She should go talk to Carter and tell him in no uncertain terms that they could not pursue what was now obviously a mutual attraction. After the kiss they shared last night, there was no way she could deny to herself that Carter wanted her.

She had no experience with love. The one man who ever tried to show an interest in her before was an overbearing lout. He had kissed her several times, and she had just barely tolerated the ordeal without gagging. He would not take no for an answer and became increasingly aggressive with his attentions.

Her mother's sudden death had saved her from a lifetime of misery and certain abuse. He had a temper, and had been growing more and more impatient with her. As soon as her mother was buried, she had set about planning her escape. She sold as many of their meager possessions as could fetch a price and had purchased train tickets under an alias. She had never discussed her family with him, but she couldn't be sure that he wouldn't track her down. He was a dangerous man. She would not be responsible for bringing trouble to the family that had taken her in during her time of need.

She could no longer afford to dally. She had skills to learn before she could go out on her own. She was in desperate financial straits. She needed an excuse to give Uncle Stephen and Aunt Bel about why she was leaving and where she was going. She would have to figure out a way to say goodbye to Carter. But first, she had to find Philippa, who would be the least suspicious of her motives. Philippa was an innocent in a very cynical world. Meg wished she could feel as hopeful and joyous as her cousin did.

Meg found Philippa in the corral closest to the stables. Meg felt her face flush as she looked over at the spot where Carter had kissed her senseless the night before. She shook head at her foolishness. She had no time for daydreams today.

Philippa was once again wearing her trousers, the hems tuck inside her knee high boots. She looked to be a truer version standing there in the dust, wearing boys clothing and doing a man's work, than Meg had ever seen before. Meg noticed that Philippa's lips were moving. She strained to

hear the words but couldn't quite make out what her cousin was going on about. Philippa should have looked ridiculous, but she didn't.

She looked radiant.

The horse inside the corral was having a fit, rearing and bucking. The noise he was making led Meg to believe that this horse had to be Satan's own mount. No other reason came to her mind why the beast would be so...animated. She stopped in her tracks and stared agape at her cousin. Philippa seemed to be unconcerned and climbed up on the bottom rung of the gate to the corral.

"Ahem," Meg started, recovering her senses. "Philippa, I was wondering if I might ask a favor of you?"

Philippa turned and motioned her forward. Meg looked suspiciously at the beast on the other side of the fence and took a cautious step forward.

"Oh, don't be so worried," Philippa said. "He's all bluster. He doesn't like being separated from his friend over there."

Meg looked where Philippa pointed and saw a lovely grey stallion was standing near the fence. He looked to be waiting patiently for his friend to come back.

"That old grey will wait there all day, if he needs to. You don't see these to get too far from each other," Philippa said with a shrug. "It's not that unusual. Papa once had a horse that was best friends with our goat."

"I guess I never thought horses could have friends like that," Meg said.

"Oh, yes. They often bond with other members of the herd. Once they work with a person for long enough, a special relationship develops between man and beast. It's really amazing once you figure out that your horse loves you."

"Now you're just being fanciful," Meg said. "Why are you standing here talking to yourself?"

Philippa laughed. "I wasn't talking to myself. I was talking to him. I think I might name him Buster."

Meg thought that was a silly name for a horse. Lucifer would fit the beast much better. "Why are you talking to a horse?" Meg asked.

"He and his friend are new to the herd. James bought them at an auction in Denver a few weeks ago. They're completely untrained. They've

never been broken, not even to a lead rope. Buster here is pretty skittish, too. So, my trick is to separate him from the herd. For the next few days, I'll be the one to take care of him. I'll talk to him, get him used to my voice. Eventually, he'll settle down and start to trust me. Once he stops acting a fool, I'll get in there with a bridle and a rope and start his training. He's smart and will learn quickly, I think," Philippa said.

"Are you going to spend all day just talking to him?" Meg asked.

"Not all day, no. If I get bored, I'll sing to him or I'll switch to speaking French. I usually only do this for about an hour at a time," Philippa said. "The more time I spend with him, the quicker he'll get used to me being here."

"French? I didn't know you speak French," Meg said.

"Oh yes. My grandmother was born in France and traveled to England as a young woman, before she met my grandfather. She, of course, taught my father and he taught all of us. I don't know where he thought we'd be able to use it, but he thought it was an integral part of our education. My relatives in London were quite surprised that I could speak it so well," Philippa said. "Of course, that kind of thing is rather expected of a Lord's daughter. Even if that Lord has been disinherited."

Meg had never felt so unaccomplished. She knew how to read and write and could do basic cyphering, but that was only because she had to accompany Mr. Peters' daughter, Imogen, to her lessons. Meg had listened and paid attention to every minute of the lessons, while Imogen petulantly protested the entire affair. When Meg was old enough to do household chores, her exposure to education ended.

Meg remembered seeing ladies and gentlemen come to the estate for teas and parties. Meg watched them covertly as she was serving the meals. In her room at night, she tried to replicate their mannerisms and pretended that she was a proper lady sitting in a salon having tea.

Her uniform had been simple and grey. She had to save her very meager wages for months to be able to afford the fabric to sew her own dress. Her favorite had been the pretty pink dress she had made six years ago. She had wisely left enough fabric in the seams to be let out as her figure developed from a girl to a young woman. Over time it had become faded and threadbare, but it was still one of the most beautiful things she had ever owned.

“Meg,” Philippa said, waving her hand in front of Meg’s face. “Where did you drift off to?”

“Oh,” Meg said. “I was just thinking about my life in Chicago. I didn’t have much time to spend in proper society, so I suppose I never had much use for speaking French.”

“I use it to speak to the horses, Meg,” Philippa said wryly. “I don’t have much use for it either.”

“In any case, what I came here to ask you was if you would be willing to give me riding lessons?” Meg asked. She needed to focus on all of the things she had to learn.

“Riding lessons?” Philippa said, surprised and pleased. “Of course I can give you riding lessons. Oh, this will be great fun.”

“Don’t you want to know why I want them?” Meg asked.

Philippa shrugged her dainty shoulders. “I assume it’s because you grew up in the city and never had a reason to learn. Out here, you need to know how to ride a horse. It’s common sense,” she said.

“Precisely. When can we get started?” Meg asked.

“As soon as we can get you into my other pair of trousers,” Philippa said.

Meg thought she looked serious, but that was impossible. Philippa could not possibly expect her to wear trousers. The very idea was ludicrous.

“I’m serious, Meg, so don’t look at me as if I’ve just grown an extra head. It’s easier to ride astride than side-saddle. Until we get you a split-skirt riding habit, trousers will have to do,” Philippa said. “Or, we can have you ride seriously for the first time with your skirts flapping in the breeze and have you fall on your arse a couple times.”

Meg gasped in shock at that image and Philippa’s language. “Good, Heaven’s, what has come over you? Can’t we just improvise?” she asked.

“This is us improvising,” Philippa said, sounding entirely too rational.

“What is Uncle Stephen going to say if he sees me?” Meg asked.

“If you’re with me, he won’t say much. At least he won’t say much to you. He’ll tell me that my habits are a bad influence on you. He won’t really be mad, though. If he was, he would really say something. Besides, what if Carter sees you?”

“That would be far worse,” Meg said. What is she saying? Carter would think her less than ladylike. Isn’t that what she wanted, to prove that he was making a bad choice with his attraction to her? “What does Gerald say?”

Her cousin laughed. “You mean after he stops sputtering? He lectures me about appearances and how I need to always present myself as a lady,” Philippa said, rolling her eyes. “His mother, Shirley, would be absolutely apoplectic if she ever saw it. She’d probably call off the wedding.”

Philippa had taken her by the arm and was dragging her toward the house. She could tolerate the mortification of wearing trousers for one afternoon if she could finally learn how to ride a horse. She now regretted her decision to ask for riding lessons.

“Maybe we should just start with you showing me how to care for the horses. Shouldn’t I learn how to feed and groom them or something?” Meg asked.

“Nice try, Meg,” Philippa said as she opened the door to her room. “I’m determined.”

Meg relented and allowed her cousin to dress her how she wished. Meg put on the trousers that were handed to her, which clung to her hips and thighs like a second skin. Philippa reassured her that she looked perfectly decent. Next she was given a shirt that buttoned up the front. She had to roll up the sleeves and tuck the tail of the shirt into her trousers. The boots she was given pinched her toes. Of course her feet and backside were bigger than Philippa’s. Why wouldn’t they be?

“Now all we need to get you is a hat and you’ll look like a cowgirl,” Philippa said as she started to braid Meg’s hair.

“I think I might want to get that riding habit soon,” Meg said as she looked down at her attire.

“We will,” Philippa said. “This is only a temporary fix to keep you from getting tangled up in your skirts. Believe me you’ll be thankful for it for the first few times you ride.”

Meg followed Philippa out of the house and to the stables. She was surprised when she saw Ginger poke her head out of one of the stall doors. Philippa grabbed the bridle hanging on a hook outside the stall and slipped it over Ginger’s muzzle and ears. Ginger’s ears flicked back and forth, but

she made no other movements until Philippa opened the stall door, and led her out to where Meg was standing.

“I think we’ll put you back on Ginger,” Philippa said. “You already know her. She’s also the gentlest horse we have.”

“Mr. Lambert said she’s too old to have much pep left,” Meg said. She once again felt a sense of dread as Ginger was led to her. “I thought Carter was taking her back to town.”

“Mr. Lambert was right. Carter told me that he bought her from old Mr. Lambert because didn’t want her to get sent out to become glue,” Philippa said. “I think he just wanted to get you a nice gift.”

Meg decided to ignore that last little quip. Give her a gift, indeed! He did no such thing. “Oh, she’d make terrible glue, I’m sure. I’m glad Carter thought to spare her that end,” Meg said as she stroked Ginger’s muzzle. She stepped back and looked sternly at Philippa. “I still don’t trust her. She looks like she’s up to something.”

Philippa could not hold back her laughter. “Oh, that’s rich. You just made my day. Now listen up and hold this.”

Meg reached out and took the reins that Philippa held out to her. Ginger stood still and seemed uninterested in what was being said about her.

“Ok, I’m going to show you how to put the saddle on,” Philippa said.

Meg watched as Philippa deftly saddled the mare. Ginger did not so much as shift her weight during the process. Meg reluctantly admitted to herself that Ginger was well-behaved.

“Ok, now you get to mount her. Come over here,” Philippa said. “You always mount from the left side of the horse. Now put your hands up on the pommel.”

Meg complied. She could have used these instructions when she had first arrived in town, but that was neither here nor there.

“Now put your left foot in the stirrup. Then at the same time pull yourself up gripping the pommel while also stepping down on the stirrup. When you’re high enough, swing your other leg over the other side.”

It only took her three attempts to get up on Ginger’s back. She had been terrified that Ginger was going to get tired of her ineptitude and bolt. Meg reached down and patted Ginger’s neck in thanks.

Philippa showed her how to get Ginger to walk, stop, and turn, and how Meg could keep from bouncing in the saddle. Meg was sure her backside was going to be bruised by the end of the day, but by her third trip around the yard she felt confident enough to let Ginger trot. The faster pace was thrilling even if it was bumpy.

She reined in Ginger to a walk as she saw Carter riding over the North hill. She had the urge to turn tail and race as far and as fast as she could to the South, but she would probably break her neck in the process. Besides, she was sure that she had already been spotted. She was going to have to face the man who caused her to toss and turn all last night and have the most wonderful, sinful dreams.

Meg remembered that she was wearing trousers that were too small, boots that pinched her toes, and she was riding his horse astride without his permission. She resisted the urge to reach up and pat her hair. She knew she looked like a mess, but perhaps that would only add to the image that she had decided to portray. He couldn't possibly want her if she looked ugly, could he?

Carter slowed his horse to a walk as he neared the corral. His eyes move to Meg where she sat atop Ginger. She was trying to avoid making eye contact with him, but her perfect little chin rose a notch up in the air. A blush stained her cheeks making her freckles more evident. Wisps of hair near her temple had escaped her braid, framing her face. He took in her attire and admired the way her trousers hugged her perfectly shaped thighs and found himself feeling a little jealous of old Ginger.

Philippa stood nearby smiling like a simpleton. Carter slowly dragged his eyes away from Meg and looked at Philippa. He suspected she was behind this display. He was still just getting to know Meg, but he was sure she would never wear a boy's clothing without a fair amount of coercion being involved.

"Pippa," Carter said, using his old nickname for Philippa, "It seems you've been a bad influence on your guest."

Philippa's smile became mischievous and she shrugged. "I was simply trying to teach my dear cousin a few survival skills. You'd hate for her to get twisted up in her skirts and fall off Ginger, breaking her pretty little neck, wouldn't you?"

“I asked Philippa to teach me how to ride,” Meg interjected. She didn’t like being talked about as if she weren’t sitting right there. “It’s a skill I’m sorely in need of learning.”

“How are your lessons going?” Carter asked, his gaze again was drawn to her shapely legs.

“I feel I have basic idea of how it’s done properly,” Meg said, wishing he would stop looking at her with such heat in his eyes. She felt that heat start to grow in her belly again and resisted the urge to shift in her saddle.

“Oh, Carter, you have a letter inside. It came with the post today,” Philippa said. “I’ll run inside and fetch it. Could you help Meg down? I think she’s had enough of a lesson for one day.”

“I could ride a bit longer, Philippa,” Meg protested. “Really, I can do more.”

“If you do, you might not be able to walk tomorrow. You need to take some time to get your leg muscles get used to having a thousand pounds of horseflesh between them. You’ll be sore for a couple days,” Carter said as he dismounted and went to Ginger’s side. He reached up and grabbed her by the waist. “Hold onto my shoulders as you swing your leg over. You need to strengthen your legs. The first few times you ride, your legs will feel like mush when you dismount. I’d hate to have you fall on that pretty little backside of yours.”

“You shouldn’t say such things, Carter,” Meg admonished as she reached for him.

She tried to ignore the fact that he held her a little too close as he helped her to dismount. She pretended she didn’t feel the light kiss he planted on the side of her neck at the moment her feet touched the ground. Her hands tightened over the muscled shoulders and her breath caught in the back of her throat. Her knees went weak, but whether it was from his nearness or the hour she had just spent learning to ride she didn’t know. She didn’t care.

Carter held her close until he felt her legs strengthen beneath her. He kissed a trail down from her temple to her cheek. His mouth settled on hers. His lips teased hers. He felt her response in the way she welcomed his kiss. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Carter felt his control starting to slip and took his lips from hers.

Her eyes were soft as they looked into his and her lips were swollen. He could spot the moment when she regained her senses. She gave a little shake to her head and pulled away from him. He nearly groaned aloud, so great was his disappointment that the moment had ended.

“I didn’t expect you to kiss me in the bright light of day,” Meg said. What on earth was she doing? “Especially with me dressed this way.”

Carter perused her garb once again and thought she had to be either blind or crazy. She had no idea how appealing she looked. The shirt she was wearing was a couple sizes too big. The sleeves were rolled up and the tails tucked into her waistband. The fabric of her trousers hugged her hips and thighs in a way that left little doubt what her shape was beneath them. All he could think about was unbuttoning the shirt and dragging those horrid trousers down those perfectly formed legs.

“Meg, I think you underestimate just how beautiful you are,” Carter said before he turned at the sound of feet approaching him from the rear. He saw Philippa carrying his letter. By the look on her face, she had very likely seen the way he had just kissed her cousin.

Meg couldn’t believe what she had just heard. He thought she was beautiful. Even dressed as she was, like a ragged little boy, he thought she was beautiful. She believed he meant it, too. He had not said it in a way that suggested he was trying to flatter her, but rather as if it were simply a fact.

“Here’s your letter,” Philippa said. “Meg, now I’m going to have to show you how to take care of Ginger after a ride.”

Carter’s demeanor changed when he looked at the letter. His lips compressed in a tight and the muscles in his jaw clenched. He didn’t open the envelope, but stared at it as if he dreaded reading the contents. She wondered what had upset him so. It occurred to her that she really knew very little about this man who had such power over her.

“Come along, Meg,” Philippa said, her voice exasperated. “You can stare at Carter some other time. Right now, you have work to do.”

Chapter 13

Carter heard the women go into the stable. He heard the hushed tones as they whispered between each other. No doubt Philippa was digging for information from Meg. He doubted she would be successful. Meg was certain to deny ever meeting Carter, so great her embarrassment would be at the knowledge that they had been seen. He wasn't planning to tell her that Philippa was probably not the only person who had seen their kiss. Nor was he planning to tell her that it had been his plan for everyone on the ranch to know his intentions.

Carter decided to stop putting off the inevitable. He opened the letter and scanned the contents. His brother had written with news about the family farm. As always, he gave what should have been the bad news first before trying to close the letter on a hopeful note. Carter suspected he should have been more upset. He wasn't, though. He was simply reminded of the fact that he had always been an orphan, if not in fact than in deed.

"Bad news?" Meg asked. He was lost in thought and had not heard her approach.

"My father died," Carter said, his voice flat.

"Oh, dear. I'm terribly sorry," Meg said.

Meg had left the stables with the intention of going straight to the house to avoid another display with Carter. She was mortified that Philippa had seen every moment of their kiss. In lieu of the earth swallowing her up to hide her embarrassment, she had had to bluster her way through it.

Then she left the stable and had seen the look on his face. He looked so alone and lost for a moment, she had wanted to weep. Or to hold him close. Both reactions left her bemused. She had no choice in that moment but to go to him.

"It hardly even affects me," Carter said as he folded the letter and crammed it into his pocket. "Really."

"I'm not sure why, but I suppose I had assumed that you didn't have any contact with your family," Meg said. She didn't want him to leave just yet.

"Your assumption wasn't far off," Carter said. "I told you a little about my past the day we met. I am sure you don't really want to hear the full dirty truth."

"I'd like to know more about you," Meg said softly.

"But you don't want me to know about you," Carter countered.

He saw her flinch at his tone and felt like a cad. They barely knew each other, but they wanted each other. They both knew that. Also obvious was the fact that he wouldn't endear himself to her by snapping at her.

He reached out to clasp her hand as she stepped away. "I never knew my mother. She died giving birth to me," Carter explained. "My father was determined to never let me forget that. If it hadn't been for my older brothers, he would have let me starve to death as an infant. A neighbor asked to take me and be my wet nurse, but my father refused to let her have me. My brothers fed me from the old nanny goat we had. When I was about four years old my father figured out that I wasn't going to die, and he started beating me, all the while raging about how I killed my mother. My brother, Porter, wasn't too keen on that happening and would put himself between old Daddy and me to take the worst of it. He wouldn't touch Warner, though, with him being the eldest and the son he was pinning his hopes of a ranching legacy on."

"It's a miracle you weren't killed," Meg said, horrified. "How can a grown man hold a baby responsible for his mother's death? That's insane."

"Yeah, he was pretty crazy," Carter agreed. "He started drinking. I could always tell when a beating was coming. We'd work the farm all day and come in exhausted. If he let me eat that day, he'd tell me all through dinner how worthless I was to him. If I was lucky he'd drink himself senseless. The night before I left home, he came after me. Porter jumped in front of me and was beaten bloody and we both ended up locked in the cellar. Then later on after he passed out in a drunken stupor, Warner sent both me and Porter away. He'd been planning it for months. I guess he was pretty sick of it, too. I came here. Porter went to live with some old mountain man."

"Warner took a huge risk," Meg said. "I believe you told me before that you were twelve."

"That's right," Carter confirmed.

"You were just a child," Meg said. She wanted to hold him close, but didn't think she would allow this. He had not looked at her once as he told her his story. Hardly even affect him, he says?

“I had to grow up pretty fast,” Carter said. “Bel wanted me to stay in the house and share a room with James, go to school with them, basically become another one of the family. I stayed out in the bunkhouse, instead. I was suspicious of families for a long time until I saw how different the Lawson’s were. By then, I had made it clear to the family that I wanted to be seen as just another hired hand, not a surrogate child.”

Carter met her eyes for the first time and smiled, “I’m not sure Bel ever bought my act, but she sure let on like she did. She gave me the job of being Philippa’s bodyguard. She was already the prettiest girl in three counties and had a lot of boys trying to sneak a kiss. I was to escort her to the schoolhouse and be her dance partner and bloody the nose of any boys who came sniffing around her skirts. That was the only way Bel was getting me near the school,” he chuckled. “Crafty gal, she is.”

“Sounds just like Aunt Bel,” Meg conceded.

“Are your memories of your parents more pleasant than mine?” Carter said.

After hearing him talk about his past, Meg couldn’t countenance not telling him a little of hers. “It doesn’t sound like it would be difficult for me to meet that standard,” Meg said. “But, yes, mostly. My father was a lost soul. He had good intentions for his family, but absolutely no business sense. He took all of his earnings and invested them very poorly. He ended up owing a particular bad character in Chicago more money than he could pay off in a lifetime. My parents became indentured servants to him to pay off the debts. There was even a contract drawn up saying how much my parents had to pay off and what their wages would be. They never worked enough to pay off the debt. My father died when I was fourteen. My mother died about three years ago.”

“That’s illegal,” Carter said. “Your parents could have fought that.”

“With what money?” Meg challenged. “We were destitute, powerless. How could they hire a lawyer? This is a man with well-paid connections. He had every police detective and judge in town securely in his back pocket. Their employer made it seem to me that it was legitimate, but I found out the truth shortly after my father died. I was the companion to his daughter, who was a spoiled brat. After my mother died, I left.”

This explained a lot about Meg. The faded clothes, the calluses on her fingers, her reserved nature were all evidence of what her life had been

like before they met. He had thought she didn't have any survival skills. He had been very, very wrong about her.

"But to answer your question, my parents were wonderful, mostly. Even my father, who made every decision the wrong way, was good to me. He was inept and had horrible judgment, but he was kind. My mother was the kindest, most humorous, most faithful person I have ever known. Whatever mistreatment I have experienced in this life did not come from them," Meg said.

Carter looked down into Meg's bright blue eyes. Her chin was thrust up in that defiant way of hers and her fists were clenched at her sides. She was a little spitfire underneath her calm façade.

He was not sure what had happened today, but he felt something shift between them. Despite the differences in their background, they had one thing in common...they were both searching for a place to call home.

"The letter wasn't all bad news," Carter said. He felt the need to lighten the mood. "Warner, is getting married."

"Oh, how wonderful," Meg said, smiling. "Will you be attending the nuptials?"

"Perhaps," Carter said. He didn't want to think about what he had left behind and most certainly didn't want to go back and see the place that held nothing but bad memories. He would be perfectly happy to never step foot in that house again. "I didn't know Warner had gone back to the farm. He has been away traveling for the last few months."

"Something must have brought him back," Meg said. "I suspect he was none too fond of your father, as well."

"He'd never admit that. He would not speak against the family, he's too loyal to do that," Carter said. "I don't know why, but being loyal to his family, including my father, really matters to Warner."

"I think he showed where his loyalties lie the night he sent you away. I'm sure facing your father the next day was not pleasant," Meg said.

"I suppose not. Good old Papa never would have laid a hand on darling Warner, though," Carter said with a hint of bitterness in his voice. "I used to think he was the lucky one, but now I guess not. I think it would have been sheer hell to watch the two people I love the most being mistreated just for simply existing. I suppose the guilt got the better of him

and he did the only thing he had left to do for us, which was to send us away.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” Meg asked.

“Oh, we all meet up a couple times a year,” Carter said. “Porter is not pleased with the idea of going back to the farm, either, so we usually meet up somewhere in the middle of wherever we all are. That depends largely on Porter. He never stays in one place very long.”

“I think you should go to the wedding,” Meg said. “It seems you have a lot to say to him.”

“I haven’t decided if I’m going to accept the invitation,” Carter hedged.

“You should go,” Meg said again. “You should celebrate your brother’s happiness. Love is always something to celebrate.”

Carter studied her in silence a moment before answering. “Indeed it is.”

Chapter 14

Meg had never known this god-awful level of pain before this day in all of her twenty-one years in this world. Every step was agony. She had completed her third riding lesson two days ago and had ridden most of the afternoon, much against Philippa's protestations. How bad could it be? Meg had asked herself this after each of the first two lessons where she had heeded the advice of the more experienced riders.

Today she was finding out just how bad it could be. She felt as if she had woken up bow-legged. Her inner thighs were on fire. Every step she took made pain shoot from her groin to her knees. Her backside felt as if it were bruised. How did people do this every day?

She stood in the middle of her bedroom and looked around hopelessly. She had almost fallen on her face when she first got out of bed. She made it to her chamber pot and had a devil of a time lowering herself enough to use it. She crawled back over to the bed and pulled herself back up to her feet just to wobble over to her armoire and pull out the first dress she touched. Luckily for her, it was suitable enough to wear as a day dress.

Meg had no idea of how long it had taken her to fully dress herself, but she was sure that she was now too late for breakfast. On top of her misery, she'll have to settle for cold toast or go hungry. Before that, though, she would have to get down the stairs without her legs giving out and breaking her neck in the fall down the stairs. With that thought, she decided that she would prefer to simply starve to death in her bedroom.

She heard a light tap at her door and looked at the offending portal with dread. She neither wanted whomever was on the other side of the door to know of her distress nor did she want to expend the energy to hide it. She needed to rest so that she could heal. She hoped whoever it was on the other side of the door would be sympathetic.

"Come in," she called.

Philippa bounded into the room, as always joyful and smiling. As soon she saw the look on Meg's face she stopped cold in her tracks. "Oh, dear cousin, what is wrong? You look positively dreadful."

"I think I'm dying," Meg said. She didn't think it was an exaggeration.

"What is wrong?" Philippa asked, her concern evident.

Meg closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could think of nothing more painful than admitting that she had been wrong, except maybe the feeling in her thighs.

"I'm afraid I should have listened to your words of warning, Philippa," Meg said. "My legs will barely hold me."

Philippa grimaced. "I was worried about that. You'll need to take a few days to rest as much as you can. Walking will help some."

Meg thought she had lost her mind. Walk? It was impossible. "My immediate concern is the stairs."

Philippa nodded. "That might present a problem," she said, looking around the room as she thought of solutions.

Meg inwardly cringed when a sly grin spread across her cousin's beautiful face. "What are you thinking?"

"Maybe we can have someone carry you downstairs."

"Absolutely not," Meg said. She had a strong suspicion of who her cousin would ask to carry her down the stairs. She was not about to let the man who dominated her every waking thought think she was any more inept than she had already proven herself to be. "I'm not an invalid. Well, at least, not yet."

Another knock came at the door. James pushed open the door enough to poke his head inside.

"Philippa, stop dawdling. Did you even get around to asking her yet?" James asked.

"I was about to," Philippa said as she turned to frown at her brother. "Don't rush me. This is a traumatic day for me."

"Well, get on with it then. We need to get going," James said as he pulled the door shut behind him.

Philippa turned back to Meg, rolling her eyes at her brother's impatience. "He's always in such a blasted hurry."

"What did you need to ask me?" Meg asked.

"Well, Gerald is leaving today," Philippa said. She nodded ascent at Meg's look of surprise. "Yes, I suppose I forgot to mention it. I have been quite distracted lately with training the horses, and then giving you riding lessons, then there's the wedding to plan, and now I have my fiancé to ship off to St. Louis."

“Oh, Philippa! I didn’t mean to be such a bother,” Meg said, feeling instantly guilty. She reminded herself that she was the guest here. Everyone here had full lives before she had arrived. She was being a huge imposition.

“Oh, not at all. I enjoy our time together,” Philippa insisted. “We’re going to see him off. He’ll be taking the stagecoach to Denver to the train station. I wanted to go all the way to Denver to see him off, but Gerald convinced Papa that it would be unnecessary.”

Philippa’s words trailed off and she frowned. “At breakfast, James reminded me of how neglectful I had been about telling you what was happening today. Would you like to come into town with us?”

Meg wanted to go. She did not want to walk down the stairs, though. She most certainly didn’t want to get back on a horse.

“Are we taking the carriage?” Meg asked. She wasn’t able to keep the hopeful note out of her voice.

Philippa chuckled in response. “Oh, yes, of course. My future mother-in-law would have a stroke if she saw the way I ride a horse,” she said.

Meg wondered how long her cousin was planning to hide her true nature to her fiancé’s family. She couldn’t imagine that Philippa would be able to maintain the pretense for very long. If she did, she would end up miserable. If she didn’t, she would displease her husband’s family. Meg could see no way this was going to end well for her cousin.

“I suppose we’re going to have to figure out a way to get me out of the house and into the carriage,” Meg said.

Philippa had grand ideas about how to best get her down the stairs. Meg soundly rejected the suggestion that she slide down the bannister on her backside. She also discounted the notion of being suspended by a bed sheet from the upper floor. Really...the ideas that her cousin dreamed up were enough to drive a body batty. By the time they finally reached the front door they were both out of breath. Philippa had practically had to carry Meg down the stairs. Meg made Philippa swear that she would never tell a soul about this ordeal.

The carriage was ready and waiting for them outside. Meg was going to have to get down the front steps without disgracing herself. It was only five steps, she told herself. That would be easy. Right? Bel and Stephen were already in the carriage waiting for them. James was waiting

by his mount. Roger was in the driver's seat, holding the reins. His wife, Jeanette, was beside him. This was apparently going to be a family trip to town, with one notable exception.

Carter was nowhere to be seen.

By sheer stubbornness and a fair deal of grinding her teeth, she made it from the front door, down the steps, and up into the carriage. She saw Bel's quizzical look as she climbed into the carriage. She lifted her chin and shrugged away her aunt's concern.

The ride into town was uneventful. Meg tried to keep up with the friendly chatter that surrounded her, but she was preoccupied with thoughts of Carter. She wondered if he had not been invited to come along or if he had simply declined. She was sure he had a lot of work to do. She overheard him talking with Uncle Stephen yesterday about some missing horses. Surely he was out trying to round them up. She hoped that he had not been excluded from the family outing.

Why couldn't she simply put him out of her mind and enjoy the day? Meg looked over at Philippa who sat prettily beside her. Her cousin was showing little sign of distress. Meg thought it was odd given the fact that the man she loves is getting ready to leave her in just a few short hours. Meg thought of Carter riding away from her and of not knowing when she would see him again, and her heart constricted. The thought that he would not be there when she returned home was unbearable.

How was she going to leave him when the time came? She worried more and more as each day passed that she cared too deeply for Carter. He was handsome, strong, and loyal. He had been horribly damaged by his family and was looking to find his place in the world. He was not so different from her, in truth. She was trying to find her way, as well.

Meg focused her attention on the town of Stillwater as it came into view. It was a small town, but had many of the conveniences one would expect of much larger city. Edith Sawyer's boarding house was the first house you passed coming into town. It was a two story clapboard house with a big oak tree in the front yard and a wrap-around porch. Meg thought the porch swing was a nice addition and dreamed of a day when she would have a swing on her own front porch to sit on with a glass of lemonade and her knitting while her children played in the yard.

The bank was in the center of town, conveniently located across the street from the Sherriff's office and jail. Meg supposed that the banker would feel a lot more secure knowing that the law was so close in case trouble happened through town someday. She had heard awful stories of bank robbers and gunfighters who terrorized the West before she came out to Colorado. She was thankful that the reality of the West was nowhere near as frightening as the stories.

Mr. Lambert's livery was at the far-end of town, next to the stagecoach office. The coach was piled high with luggage and waiting for its scheduled time to depart. The driver was on top of the coach making sure the rope tying the luggage was secure. A small crowd of people stood along the side of the road, no doubt to see their loved ones off as they departed on their journeys. She wondered how many people were riding the coach and hoped that Gerald had pleasant companions to talk to during the long hours he'll be cooped up in there.

Meg's dread returned to her as Roger slowed the carriage near the station. She had to figure out a way to get out of this carriage without giving away her weakness. She looked at Philippa for help but could see that she would get no help from that quarter. Meg's earlier doubts about Philippa's devotion to Gerald disappeared when she saw the look on her face. Her cousin was nearly hanging out of the carriage in her eagerness to jump down and run to where Gerald stood surrounded by people on the platform.

As soon as the wheel of the carriage stopped, Philippa flung open the doors and jumped out of the carriage. She was halfway across the platform before Meg could even shift forward. Stephen departed next and turned around to help Bel down. James appeared in the doorway of the coach and held out his hand to help her down. She frowned at him. He smiled at her. She suspected he knew about her discomfort but was grateful that he was gentleman enough to keep his thoughts to himself.

She slid across the seat of the carriage. She smiled to cover the grimace of pain that shot across her backside. She knew that it was more a baring of teeth than a smile, and she knew that James was not fooled by the way he chuckled at her distress.

"Come now, cousin, there's no need to pretend with me," James said as he clasped her hands. "You're miserable and in pain, and everyone

knows that you're trying to hide it. Everyone else is willing to play along with your little game, but I'm going to call a spade a spade. Now, let me lift you down and stop dawdling."

She frowned at him to let him know what she thought of his willingness to call her bluff. Doesn't he understand the concept of pride? Silly, dense man, she thought as she grabbed his hands and let him lift her down out of the carriage. She grabbed onto the side of the door when her feet touched the ground to steady herself until she was sure she wasn't going to fall on her face. She looked around and saw the number of road apples littering the street. That, above all else, put some steel back in her spine. If she was going to make a fool of herself today, at least she would not end up covered in manure.

Meg took a deep breath, and took the arm James offered. She lifted her chin and smiled at him. He might know she could barely walk, but he wasn't going to see this moment of weakness get the better of her.

"That's it, Meg," James said with approval. "Sometimes you have to grit your teeth, throw back your shoulders, and smile through the pain."

"That's grim, James," Meg said.

"Whatever gets you through the day," James said.

They made their way to the crowd to the edge of the platform. Each took their turns wishing Gerald well on his journey. Well-intentioned barbs were traded amongst Gerald and a few close friends. Gerald's mother stood back, her face full of pride when she looked at Gerald. Her expression changed when the older woman looked at Philippa. A hardness settled around her mouth and her eyes turned cold. Philippa seemed unaware of the disapproval from her future mother-in-law.

Philippa stood by and laughed at each joke Gerald exchanged with his friends, all the while she blinked back tears and clung to Gerald's arm. He would reach over and pat her hand, seemingly with affection, but he only fleetingly glanced her direction. No doubt that he was simply distracted from all of the noise and activity that surrounded him.

The driver rang a bell that hung from his seat and announced that they would depart in five minutes. Gerald shook the hands of each man who stood near him and received a fair numbers of pats on the back and well wishes for his journey. He hugged his mother and then turned to Philippa. She rushed into his arms, tears now spilling down her cheeks. He patted her

on the back and looked around at the crowd around him, a blush moving up his neck. He ignored the glare that his mother aimed at his fiancée. He pulled back, and planted a quick kiss on Philippa's forehead, who stood up on her toes to whisper something in his ear. He his blush intensified and he looked around to see if anyone overheard them.

Gerald turned and climbed into the coach. As it pulled away, he leaned his head out and waved a final farewell. Meg hobbled over to where Philippa stood weeping into her handkerchief and put her arm around her cousin's shoulders. She had misjudged her cousin's level of devotion to Gerald. A woman would not weep so if she were not watching her dreams ride away.

Chapter 15

Meg felt like a lout for the rest of the day. Philippa was inconsolable on the ride back to the ranch and had run up to her room to cry behind her locked bedroom door for most of the afternoon. Meg wanted to go to her to comfort her as she stood inside the front door looking helplessly at the stairs. Her legs would not carry her up the staircase unaided. She resigned herself to the fact that she would be of no use to her cousin today and cursed herself for the tenth time today for not listening to reason about her limitations.

She went into the kitchens to heat up water to continue washing the linens she had started yesterday. If she were to be stuck on the main floor of the house all day, she might as well put herself to doing some of the chores.

Meg was elbow-deep in dirty, soapy water when she heard the back door open. She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear as Carter came through the door. He grabbed a glass and the pitcher of water, leaned against the counter and emptied the contents of the pitcher into the glass. He took his hat off before lifting the glass to his lips and taking a big gulp. She watched in fascination at the muscles in his throat constricting. For heaven's sake, he couldn't even take a drink of water without her thoughts taking an inappropriate turn.

He sat the glass on the counter and turned to her. "Hello, Meg."

Hello? Just...hello? "Good afternoon, Carter," Meg said in reply. "I wasn't sure I would see you today."

"I had duties," Carter said with a grin.

"I was surprised that you did not come into town with us this morning," Meg said. She was not sure if she meant that as censure on her part or on Philippa's. Either way, he had ignored the women in his life.

He shrugged. "I didn't know I was expected to go," Carter said.

"Philippa's fiancé left this morning and won't be back for months," Meg said. "We all went to say goodbye."

"You barely know Gerald. Why would you care about his leaving?" Carter asked, his expression puzzled.

"I don't care one whit about Gerald, other than Philippa loves him," Meg said.

She vigorously scrubbed the sheet she held. Carter wondered if she even knew that she was getting angry. He thought about mentioning it, but he knew she'd just argue more with him and insist that everything was just fine.

"Yeah, I know that she thinks she loves him," Carter said. "It's just too bad that he doesn't love her."

Meg's mouth made a perfect O before she started sputtering. She dropped the sheet and the washing board into the tub, causing water to splash out the side. She grabbed her apron and started drying her hands.

"I...I can't...how can you?" Meg said. "Why would you even think such a...horrible...no, that's not even bad enough..."

"Take a deep breath, Meg," Carter said. He crossed his arms and braced himself. He knew he was going to get a bit of her temper. "If you think about it rationally, you'll have to admit that I'm right. He doesn't love her."

"How can you say that?" Meg said. "You can't possibly know how he feels."

"Of course I can," Carter said. "I've known this man for fifteen years. I know that he has never made a single decision on his own. Why do you think he's going to be a lawyer?"

"I assume it's because he cares about the rule of law," Meg said. "It's a noble profession." She nodded just to emphasize her point.

Carter rolled his eyes at her indignation and earned himself a nice glower. "It's because his mother wants him to be a lawyer," he said. "He has never done a single thing for himself because he cares too much about what other people say. He courted Philippa because everyone in town expected it. They're almost the same age and they're the children of the two wealthiest families in the county. His mother disapproves, but his father liked the match."

"You still can't know that he doesn't love Philippa in spite of all of that," Meg said.

"Of course I know," Carter said simply.

Meg waited for him to explain, but she could see that he was not planning to explain. Her head felt like it was in a vice. Her pulse pounded in her ears and her face was hot. She gritted her teeth and took a deep breath.

She thought about throwing her washing board at him but didn't want to damage it on his hard head.

"How could you possibly know that?" Meg demanded. She could not believe that he was being so disloyal to her cousin. After all this family had done for him, you would think he would think more kindly of them.

"Simple...he's leaving her," Carter said as if it made all the sense in the world. "He put off the wedding, at his mother's behest of course, until after he gets back. If he really loved her, he would have told his mother to go jump in a lake and then would have married Philippa so that he could take her with him as he finishes his schooling. A man in love won't stay away from his woman for long if he can help it. Gerald can certainly help this."

Meg thought about the way Gerald responded to Philippa on the platform this morning. He had glanced at her only briefly before turning back to talk to his friends and later had tensed at her cousin's embrace before he got into the carriage. She recalled the brotherly kiss he placed on her forehead. He had seemed embarrassed when his fiancée whispered something presumably naughty into his ear.

Meg did not know Gerald well and wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. She could not believe that such a gentleman would not have the best of intentions in regards to his dealings with others. Her cousin seemed quite naïve and innocent in the ways of deception and would be devastated if she lost Gerald's affection. Meg prayed silently that Gerald was the kind of man she wished him to be.

"You seem to very easily disregard Philippa's feelings in all of this," Meg said.

"No, I don't disregard her feelings at all. She's the one I'm worried about," Carter countered. "But there's no doubt in my mind that she's going to end up hurt in all of this. If Gerald comes back to marry her, she'll end up miserable. That old harridan of a mother he has will work for the rest of her life to make sure that Philippa ends up miserable."

"Why doesn't she love Philippa as much as everyone else does?" Meg asked.

"Because of Stephen and Bel," Carter explained. "Stephen is a foreigner and Bel grew up poor. Nobody is good enough for Shirley Kennedy unless they were born in this country and with a silver spoon in

their mouths. The situations of Stephen and Bel's births are enough for her to hate all of their children."

"Uncle Stephen is nobility for God's sake," Meg said, now indignant.

"Which matters in England, not here," Carter said. He paused and looked out the back door. He had not meant to start a fight with Meg when he came in here. He had come to tell her that he was leaving for a few days. She'd probably welcome the news now.

Meg watched him reach up and rub his brow as if working out tension. She wondered at how she could be so angry with someone and yet wanting to soothe their discomfort at the same time. Worst yet, she feared that she had been told a brutal truth today, not that she was prepared to admit it aloud. She could not see a way out of this for her dear cousin that was not going to lead to unimaginable suffering.

"Look," Carter said as he turned back to her. "Philippa is clearly infatuated with Gerald, there's no doubt. She might even love him to some degree. She is not in love with him, though. At least, I don't believe she is. He's handsome, wealthy, and educated. He's popular and he is the perfect image of what a rancher's daughter ought to want in a husband. But I've seen the way they respond to each other. When they touch, there is no heat between them, only an awkward discomfort."

"Love is more than being physical," Meg protested.

"Yes, it is," Carter agreed. "But if you don't want your husband, something is wrong in that relationship. It's not only that. Neither one of them gives the other one much thought unless they're around."

"Then why has Philippa been in her bedroom crying all day?" Meg challenged.

"Because her fantasy just rode away into the sunset," Carter said.

"What makes you such an expert on love?" Meg asked.

Carter's eyes locked on hers and she felt threads of heat arc in the air between them. His dark eyes were intent with purpose as he slowly made his way across the kitchen. He stopped when he was just a breath away from her. He had not touched her but she felt his nearness. Her skin started tingling and her breath became shallow as he leaned his head down to hers.

She licked her lips, a subtle invitation. His were so close she could almost taste him. If she leaned forward just a bit they would touch. She didn't move, anxious to see what he would do next.

"I know next to nothing about love, Meg," Carter said, his voice low. "But I think I'm learning fast."

With those words spoken he closed the distance between them. She opened her mouth wide to welcome his kiss. He made no move to hold her. She moved nothing but her mouth against his. Time stood still and the world spun out of control. A moment later, Carter broke the kiss and turned without a word. He grabbed his hat off the counter and shoved it down on his head. Without a backwards glance he walked out the back door. Meg heard the sound of his horse cantering away from the house. She made it to the back door in time to see him ride into the trees to the West.

She felt sick as she realized that he had just ridden away with her heart.

Chapter 16

Meg woke up the next day to the sound of music. She laid snuggled deep in her covers and let the sound wash over her. It was a pleasant start to the morning. Meg smiled, knowing that Philippa was feeling better. The joyful song left no doubt about her cousin's mood.

Meg's legs barely protested as she got out of bed and completed her morning ablutions. She dressed in her pink gown, which she had newly mended around the elbows. She pinned her hair up in a simple bun, pinched her cheeks to bring a little color to them, and then turned to greet her day.

Meg found Philippa sitting at the piano in the parlor on the first floor. Philippa smiled at her as she started singing a new song. Meg wanted to tap her feet to the jaunty melody, but instead folded her hands in front of her and smiled back at her cousin. Philippa's strong soprano voice filled the parlor. The beauty of it brought tears to Meg's eyes.

Meg tried to see her cousin through unbiased eyes, a task that was far more difficult than she had thought it would be. No one could deny Philippa's physical beauty, her charm, or her talent.

She had the uncanny ability to get along well with nearly everyone she met. Everyone who knew her loved her, with the notable exception of her fiancé's mother. The idea that Philippa was anything but a mother's dream for her son was simply preposterous. Yet, she had seen the hostility Shirley Kennedy had for Philippa first-hand.

Meg moved further into the room as Philippa closed the song. She sat upon the settee, tucked her skirts around her knees, and folded her hands on her lap. Philippa turned on the piano stool to face her.

"I see you're in a fine mood today," Meg said. "I'm glad to see you much recovered from your upset yesterday."

"Oh, yes," Philippa said with a self-deprecating grin. "I am over my histrionics of yesterday. I suppose a girl needs a good cry every once in a while."

"I suppose," Meg allowed. "Still, it must have been upsetting to see Gerald leave. When will he return?"

Philippa's smile faltered for a moment. "He'll be gone about a year. His apprenticeship is in St. Louis and the firm he will be working at has

required at least a year's commitment. I just worry that he won't be back before the first snowfall next year."

"Perhaps you can arrange a visit in St. Louis in the spring time," Meg suggested, not knowing what else to say.

"Perhaps," Philippa said with a shrug. She took a deep breath and stood up. "But enough of this sad talk. I woke up with a song in my heart and I plan to be happy all day."

"Of course," Meg said. "I did not mean to bring you pain."

"Nonsense, Meg," Philippa said, waving her hand in dismissal. "It was just doubt creeping in."

"You have doubts about yourself?" Meg said, incredulous. "What on earth for?"

"My fiancé just left me for a year," Philippa said. "We courted for three years before he proposed. Since then, none of the planning has gone as I hoped. It has been just one delay after another. Then he got this apprenticeship and I hoped things would be settled before we left. Then he decided to push back the wedding date until he got back. He said he would need to focus on his studies and his work and would not be able to give me the attention I needed as a newlywed."

"You wanted to go with him?" Meg asked.

"Of course," Philippa said. "But it's almost as if the harder I work to get the life I imagine, the farther away it slips."

Meg watched as the crack in Philippa's perfect façade widened. Perhaps Carter had been right about Philippa's engagement. Was it disloyal of her to question the sincerity of such a picture perfect relationship in the absence of evidence of a deeper connection between the two?

"Philippa," Meg started, not quite knowing what she wanted to ask next. "You and Gerald seem to be made for each other, as far as everyone in town is concerned. What do you love about him?"

Philippa started at the question. She cocked her head to the side and furrowed her brow as if she was thinking about it for the first time. She shook her head and shrugged.

"I've known Gerald for my entire life. He's always just kind of been there in the picture, somehow. You must see how handsome he is. He's intelligent and kind. He's respectable and he works hard. He's just about the perfect example of what a husband should be."

It did not escape Meg's notice that her cousin mentioned traits that everyone in town would have been able to name. She left out all of the ways he must confound and infuriate her, and how he would later make it all better. She hoped her cousin had a few of those things in her relationship with Gerald, otherwise it would be superbly dull. She thought about Carter. Along with all of the things that drew her to him were all of his great many flaws. Chief among those flaws was the fact that he was making her fall in love with him. He probably couldn't even help himself. He was just so blasted appealing.

"He sounds like quite the paragon," Meg said.

"Oh, he has a few flaws," Philippa said. "The biggest one was the fact that he left me here. There's no help for it, though...he has to complete his training. And I just have to be the long-suffering bride."

Philippa walked to the window and pulled back the curtain. Sunlight flooded the room, surrounding her like a halo. Meg felt the weight of her disillusionment hit her. She had spent weeks feeling envious of her cousin for living what appeared to be a perfect life. She saw now that her cousin was living in a state of near-complete denial.

Meg rose and went to stand by the window, enjoying the warmth of the sun shining down on her face. She reached over and took Philippa's hand. They stood there, hands clasped, basking in the sun and enjoying each other's company.

Philippa turned to look at Meg. "Don't worry. He'll be back soon enough."

"Gerald? You said he'd be gone a year. That doesn't sound like 'soon enough' to me. I don't know how you'll survive the wait," Meg said.

"Not Gerald. Carter," Philippa corrected.

"What do you mean? Carter's gone?" Meg asked. At Philippa's nod she asked, "Where did he go? When did he leave?"

Why didn't he tell her?

"He left yesterday afternoon. He went to visit his brothers," Philippa said.

Meg turned back to the window, her face blank. He had left without telling her. Perhaps that had been his intent yesterday when she saw him in the kitchen. He had come to say goodbye and she had gotten angry at him and fantasized about throwing a washing board at his head. She tried to

draw a deep breath, but couldn't quite manage it because of the weight that had settled on her chest.

"He didn't say anything," Meg said, her voice low. She could hear the disappointment in her own voice. Philippa, always astute, heard it as well.

"He told Papa that he would be back by Christmas," Philippa said. Christmas was five weeks away. Five weeks might have well have been five years in Meg's mind. She had grown accustomed to his teasing. She looked forward to him showing up unexpectedly and kissing her senseless. She enjoyed pretending like she didn't want him and knowing that he knew she was bluffing.

Dear God, she really was falling in love with him...and had never felt more miserable.

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Chapter 17

It was the most depressing wedding he had ever seen. Sure, he'd only seen a total of three weddings by this time in his life, but this one was more like a few of the funerals he had attended. Warner, his eldest brother and the groom, had a look on his face that suggested a case of mild indigestion. His bride, Mary Channing, was oblivious to his distress and alternately screeched and whined through the entire ceremony. She was even less tolerable during the reception.

She was a passably attractive woman with black hair and dark eyes. Her figure was nice and round in all of the right places. She still had all of her teeth and her skin was clear, save for the large hairy mole on her right cheek.

Lucy Davis, the minister's wife, insisted that the reception be held in her parlor. They lived in a three-room cottage across the street from the church. The cottage was so full of people that Carter had a hard time shifting from one foot to the other without bumping into someone. He finally found a spot by the back door where he would be out of the way.

He looked down at the glass of punch Lucy had thrust into his hands as soon as he walked through the door. The liquid was dark red and so sour it made his jaw lock. He had politely excused himself from eating the lunch that was offered, saying that he had overeaten at breakfast. It wasn't the truth, but the sight of the overcooked and greasy fried chicken laid out on the table and the biscuits that had not been given time to properly rise made his stomach revolt. Lucy Davis was a kind-hearted woman, but she was a danged awful cook.

The only thing saving this day from being a complete disaster was that the wedding was held in the church in Rockville rather than at the family farm. He had reconciled himself to the idea of never stepping foot back on that land many years ago. Now that his father was dead and buried, he might have to re-evaluate his decision. Maybe he could talk Warner into burning the old house down and starting from scratch.

The back door behind him squeaked open. He saw Porter step into the house and remove his hat. His brother was always astute at reading a situation within moments and today he proved to be as sharp as ever. His

glance settled on Warner who stood in the living room with that same mildly nauseated look on his face.

Carter turned to his brother and shoved his shoulder into Porter's chest in greeting. Porter, in turn, lightly jabbed Carter in the ribs with his fist. They exchanged a nod and a grin and settled back against the door jamb to watch this farce play out.

"By the look on Warner's face, I'm guessing this was a shotgun wedding," Porter said.

"I won't argue," Carter said.

"I wonder what he did to get himself hog-tied," Porter mused aloud. "He must be getting rusty."

"It's not at all like him to be careless," Carter agreed.

"Maybe we should go over and get to know his lovely bride," Porter said. A sardonic upturn of the corner of his mouth belied his words. "Good God, she sounds like a hen with all of her clucking about."

"I say we abscond with Warner, get him liquored up and drag the story out of him," Carter said.

"Agreed. He's not going to tell us what's going on without some persuasion," Porter said.

They stood in silence, watching the festivities unfold. Warner had still not moved. Carter knew he would eventually get around to speaking to his eldest brother, but he wanted time to sort out his thoughts. He had much to discuss with both brothers, most especially with Porter.

He accepted that a trip to the farm was inevitable. Warner might not be too thrilled about his new state of matrimony, but he would at least keep up appearances by sleeping in the same house as his new wife. Warner had said in his letter that there were estate issues to be resolved. Carter wanted to get his business taken care of and leave as soon as possible.

Warner shook himself out of his stupor and crossed the distance between them. He looked from one brother to the next and then walked past them out the back door. Carter put his glass on the table and turned to watch his brother walk to the fence at the far end of the yard. Carter and Porter shared a look and then turned to follow their brother.

Warner was standing with his hands in his pockets. From a distance, the tension in the muscled in his arms and shoulders was evident. His head was bowed as if he was studying something very puzzling on the

ground in front of him. As Carter drew nearer he saw the furrowed brow, the clenched jaw, and the flared nostrils that spoke louder than any words could about the state of Warner's mood.

Carter and Porter both stopped walking a bit more than an arm's length away. Carter braced his legs apart and shoved his hands in his pockets. Porter stood with his arms crossed and a bored look on his face. Carter wasn't fooled. Porter was paying very close attention to what was about to happen; he just was too stubborn to show it.

The two youngest brothers waited for the eldest to get control over himself. They didn't wait long. Warner straightened and rolled his head around to ease the tension in his neck. His emerald eyes were hooded as he took measure of his brothers. He was glad to see them, but hated that he was seeing them for the first time in months under these circumstances.

"We need to talk," Warner started, "but not here and not now."

"When?" Porter asked.

"Tonight," Warner said. "Come to dinner at the farm. We'll go into the study, drink the old man's whiskey, and smoke his cigars. Don't argue with me...either of you," he said as he saw both of them getting ready to object. "I know you don't want to come back. I don't blame you, but I need my brothers right now," he broke off, then smiled sardonically, "and you'll both need a couple drinks in you to stomach what I have to say."

Carter's stomach knotted at the thought of going back into that study. Has time lessened the feeling of evil that had soaked into the floorboards of that house? Did the study still smell of stale smoke, old whiskey, and rage? He wondered if his father still kept a club behind the desk and a whip on a nail on the wall by the doorway. He swore to himself that he'd burn them both if he saw them.

Carter glanced at Porter. By the stillness in his stance, Carter knew that his brother's thoughts were closely aligned with his own. The muscles in Porter's jaw flexed and he gave a small nod of agreement. If Carter had not been watching so closely he would have missed the movement. Carter turned back and met Warner's eyes. He shook his head, not eager to go back into the bowels of Hell.

He spit out a curse and kicked the dust at his feet. His curiosity was getting the better of him. Warner was never out of control, but he was

damned close to it right now. Something had happened and Carter wanted to know what.

“Fine,” Carter said. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

The house was smaller than he remembered it. The once bright white paint on the exterior was now a dingy grey and peeling off in sheets. Two shutters on the second floor were hanging at an odd angle on their hinges. A window was broken towards the back of the house. One of the poles on the clothesline on the side of the house was tilted. The whole place just looked...less than it was before.

Carter took his time bedding down his horse in what was left of the stable, which had been left empty for quite some time by the look of it. The smell of mildew and old horse feces assaulted his senses. He checked the loft for hay, which had an odd green tint. He shook his head and went back down to the stall where he had put his horse. He stroked the animal’s muzzle before removing his saddle and hanging over the stall door. He brushed down his mount and went to get a bucket of water to hang on the hook in the corner of the stall.

“Sorry, old boy,” Carter said reaching up to pat the neck of his horse. “It looks like we’re both going to have to wait for our supper.”

Carter walked across the yard and passed cellar that Porter had been locked in their last night here. Carter pushed away the memory of the sound of his brother getting beaten with the whip, his father’s drunken cursing, and the anger and helplessness he had felt that night. He pulled open the back screen door and saw a sizeable hole towards the bottom of the screen. He could imagine his father’s foot going through the door as he drunkenly stumbled outside, probably turning to kick the door and otherwise abuse the house. He was being overly dramatic, he knew, but was also not likely wrong.

Carter walked through the kitchen. The study was down the hall to his left. The hallway was dark, like he had last seen it. He started down the hall, the floorboards creaking underneath his weight. He grabbed the door handle and took a deep breath, clenched his jaw, and steeled his spine. He reminded himself that his father was dead. He was a grown man and had not lost any of the few fights he had been in since he left home. His father

couldn't hurt him anymore. So, why was he wasting his time out here in the hallway?

Carter opened the door and stepped into the study. The smell of stale cigar smoke and whiskey filled his nostrils. A fire burned low in the fireplace. Only two candles had been lit, leaving the room with dark corners and long shadows. Carter turned and closed the door behind him. He stopped short at the sight of the whip hanging from the nail by the door, dried and cracked with age.

He doubted it had been moved since the night he left.

The whip had a short handle with two long braided leather thongs at the end. His father had learned how to flick his wrists at the precise moment of his strike to bring forth a loud crack the moment before those braids tore into flesh. The pain had been terrible, but the sound of the whip as it sliced through the air and the explosion of sound a second before the blow landed had been terrifying.

He remembered one beating that had left the flesh on his backside and down his legs so raw that he could not sit down properly for a fortnight. He had vowed to himself that he would never take a whip to neither man nor beast. A vow to which he still held firm.

He walked through the room lighting candles. The light took away some of the eeriness of the study. Papers littered the desk and the tables. Books were strewn about the room, in haphazard piles. He went to the window behind the desk and tested the window. He had to work to open it, as the wood frame had swollen over the years. He lifted the window about an inch before it would not go any farther. Fresh air seeped through the crack, carrying the stench of cruelty out of the room.

Carter went to the fireplace and added two logs to the dwindling fire. He worked to build the fire up to a nice blaze. Warmth spread through the room counteracting the chill that was in the air tonight. He looked out the window to the sunset beyond. Streaks of red and purple lined the sky. The mountains were white capped and purple in the distance. The grass had turned brown and the wind was starting to blow. Grey clouds were approaching quickly from the North.

Winter was coming to Colorado late this year.

Carter turned at the sound of the door being opened in time to see Warner step into the room, his face carefully blank. He looked around as if

he too saw the ghosts that had been left in this room. His face was lined with the same misery that Carter felt.

Carter crossed to where the whip hung on the wall and ripped it off of the hook. He turned back to the fireplace and flung the whip onto the flames. He watched tongues of fire danced around the whip, almost as though it were too evil to burn. The dried leather thongs caught fire first, curling in on themselves and glowing white before spreading up the length to the handle.

He turned and saw that Porter had joined them, as well. Porter's eyes rose from the fire to meet Carter's. He nodded and then went to take a chair in front of the desk.

"Warner, you need to fire your housekeeper," Porter said, once again looking bored.

"I haven't stepped foot in this house in five years," Warner said. "There's a cabin in the woods at the edge of the property that I built a couple years after you left. I got tired of watching the old man scream at shadows, so I spend most of my time there."

"You should have just left," Porter said. "Once you were old enough, you could have."

Warner stared at his brother for a long moment. His brothers would not understand the sense of duty he had felt to his father. He didn't understand it himself. How could he explain to them that he hated what his father did every day of his life but still held out hope that he would change for the better?

Warner was old enough to remember their father before he turned into the Devil's incarnate. He remembered good times he had with both of his parents when he was a small child. Porter was too young to remember much that happened before their mother died and Carter had never known anything but hatred from his only parent.

Warner remembered the day their mother died. He remembered her screams of agony as she fought to bring Carter into this world. He remembered running to her room, desperate to offer her comfort. He stood in the doorway to her room as she reached for her newborn son, called out his name, and drew her last breath with a shudder. Her eyes became cold as her spirit fled the room. He could still see her nightgown and bed sheets covered in her blood. His father had fallen to his knees beside the bed,

crying out his wife's name, shaking her shoulders and pleading for her to come back to him. He remembered the sounds of his father sobbing into his wife's lifeless body.

When Father stood up and walked away from her body, he became a different man. All warmth and tenderness left him that day. He went out to the barn and built her coffin. He returned to the house and never once looked at his newborn son. He never went to his two young children to give them comfort. He dressed their mother in her best gown and carried her out to the wagon, laid her in her coffin, and touched her face for the last time.

She was buried the following day in the cemetery behind the church where they were married. Their father did not speak to them save to tell them to get into the wagon to go back home. Supper was served cold by the neighbor as Father locked himself away in the study with a bottle of whiskey.

How could he explain to them that all this time he secretly hoped that their father would go back to the way he was before their mother died? Unspeakably terrible things had been done by this man, but he kept looking for signs of the father he once knew. Until they laid him in the ground next to their mother, Warner always thought there would be a day when his father would realize his failures as a parent and try to make amends. His brothers, having received the worst of his father's cruelty, had never seen the good that was beneath the surface. Once they had left, they were never able to witness the bond that still existed between a father and his eldest son. It was so rare that he almost forgot about it himself.

"I could have, yes," Warner said. "I didn't. My reasons for that are my own."

"I thought you were going to feed us," Porter said, accepting Warner's words.

"You can have some more of Lucy Davis's fried chicken. She sent the leftovers home with us," Warner said.

"Never mind," Porter said. "I'm not that hungry."

"So this room is exactly like he left it?" Carter asked. "Seems like he didn't change much."

"He was much like you remember him," Warner confirmed. "Maybe a little meaner when he was drunk, but sometimes he would have moments when he was just a regular old man trying to run his farm."

“What is it that’s so important,” Porter said, his discomfort and impatience in full evidence.

Warner reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a stack of folded papers. He flipped through them. He moved to stand closer to the candelabra to his right, next to the window.

“Father’s will,” Warner stated.

“Goodbye,” Porter said as he stood to walk toward the door.

“Sit down, Porter,” Warner said, his voice stern. “I know this is unpleasant. I’m none too fond of this task myself. I damn near puked when it was read to me the other day.”

“What is it?” Carter said. He just wanted to get this over with and get back into town. He looked out the window and saw the first snowflakes of winter fall to the ground.

“In short, both of you inherited a third of the farm,” Warner said. “The only thing our father did right in his entire life was buying up the land around us whenever it would come up for sale. This farm is easily four times the size it was when we were kids.”

“Well, hell, I don’t want it,” Porter said.

“It’s a lot of land, Porter,” Warner said.

“I still don’t want it,” Porter said. “I’m not a farmer and I’m never going to be. If I ever decide to buy land it sure as certain won’t be anywhere around here.”

Warner nodded his understanding and looked over at Carter, who was watching the snow fall. The ground was still too warm for it to stick, but it would be a slushy mess within a few hours if he didn’t get back to town. He could feel the silence expand around him.

“I’ll sign it over to you if you want it,” Carter said, knowing that Warner was waiting for a response. “I don’t want anything to do with this place. I certainly don’t want my name on the deed.”

“I’ll buy it from you,” Warner said. “Stop shaking your head at me, both of you. Carter, you’ve been talking for years about that little plot of land next to the Lawson’s ranch that you want to buy. You’ve been saving up the money for years. The sale of this property to me will get you enough to make that possible. I guarantee fair market price.”

“I don’t care about what the fair market price is,” Carter said. “Give me ten dollars and you can have the whole of my part.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Warner said. “You’ll get a fair price or you’ll keep the land.”

Carter saw Porter roll his eyes at his brother’s high-handedness. None of them were easily intimidated by each other, but Porter was easily the brother who had been most hardened by life. He wasn’t impressed with Warner’s attempts to control the conversation.

“You too, Porter,” Warner said.

“Fine,” Porter said, not finding this a worthy subject to argue over. “Give me a bank draft and I’ll sign whatever papers I need to in order to be done with this.”

“Do you have enough to buy us out?” Carter asked. “It’s going to be expensive.”

“I’ve been working this farm for as long as I can remember. I started stashing money away from Father long before I sent the two of you away, otherwise he would have spent it all on whiskey. About ten years back, I started keeping the books on the farm. Father doesn’t...er...didn’t have much of a head for figures. I kept us secure enough to avoid bankruptcy, and started giving him an allowance. He was mad as a hornet at first until he figured out that he could still afford his liquor.”

“That sounds just like him,” Porter said. “He only ever really cared about his booze.” He shifted in his seat, his expression thunderous. “Might as well get it over with as soon as possible so I don’t have to stay here any longer than needed.”

“We’ll settle everything tomorrow in town,” Warner said. He went over to the desk and opened the top drawer. He put a cigar box on the top of the desk and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

Warner poured two fingers in a glass for each of them. They chose their cigars and sat in comfortable silence enjoying each other’s company. The whiskey was smooth and the cigars were stout. His father might have been a mean son of a bitch, but he had good taste in whiskey, Carter admitted to himself in silence.

“So, how did he die?” Carter asked after a long silence.

Warner took a long draw off of his cigar. He studied the smoke curling up from the end as he exhaled. “He finished a bottle of whiskey and started this one. Eventually he stumbled up the stairs lost his balance and fell backward. He broke his neck sometime before he hit the bottom.”

Carter felt an odd numbness in the area of his chest. He had imagined his father's death to be very different, perhaps a long and painful illness or violently at the hands of an angry neighbor. Drunkenly falling down the stairs seemed a perversion of justice.

Carter swirled his whiskey in his glass and thought about going home. He wondered if Meg knew he was coming back to her. She was still hiding something from him and he was determined to find out what as soon as he got back. She kept talking about leaving but would never say where she was going or how she was going to get there. She hadn't figured out yet that she wouldn't be going alone. He would at least make sure she was safe when she was running away.

"Where are you living now, Porter?" Carter asked.

"I'm between jobs at the moment. Just finished tracking down a small time horse thief down by Yuma. Before that I was up in Cheyenne helping the Sherriff track a gang who liked to do intimidate the local ranchers," Porter said.

"We're having similar problems at the Lawson's. I could use some help," Carter said. He quickly told his brothers about the trouble the Lawson's had been having with their eldest son running up gambling debts and horses being taken in retaliation.

"I suppose the local law enforcement has been made aware of this," Warner said.

"The Sherriff is about as useful as teats on a bull," Carter said. "He's not inclined to walk away from his poker game long enough to do any actual policing."

"Seems like there might be more at play than just gambling debts," Porter said.

"If you're interested in a job, this one will keep you occupied," Carter said. "I just need you to track down who's doing it. We can track the horses for a while but we always lose them after about five miles, which doesn't make any sense with the number of horses we're following. It's like the tracks just disappear. I don't have your eye for tracking."

"They don't disappear. They just hide them," Porter said. He shrugged and downed the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. "Might as well. I've got nothing else to do for the next few months."

Carter nodded and turned to Warner. He grinned. Warner frowned.

“Your turn, Warner,” Carter said.

“What?” Warner asked.

“You know what,” Carter said. “Explain.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He’s talking about today,” Porter said. “Where is your lovely wife anyway?”

“She’s upstairs sleeping with a bottle of laudanum,” Warner said.

“At least I got out of having to have a wedding night.”

“Oh, come now, big brother. She’s a handsome woman,” Porter said, then qualified, “from the left side.”

“Until she speaks,” Carter further clarified, watching Warner.

“We’re waiting.”

Warner sighed and spread his hands wide. “I don’t know. I don’t know what happened. I had been traveling, mostly through Texas and Louisiana. I was gone for about a year by the time I returned. When I got back, I was sick with a fever for a week. The Channings own a small place just outside of town. Her mother has been stopping by once a week while I was gone to check on Father. They’re nice people, if not a little nosy.”

“You were tagged as husband material, Warner,” Porter said.

“Edith Channing is a pretty simple-minded person. She has a big heart, but doesn’t have a head for schemes,” Warner said, running a hand through his thick, dark hair. “I could remember her hovering over me, smacking me in the face with her cold compresses and shoving her disgusting home fever remedies down my throat. My fever broke and I woke up with Mary in the bed next to me. Her mother walked in to check on me and screamed. Her father had driven her mother over that day and was waiting in the wagon and came running in.”

Carter and Porter were laughing at the ridiculous picture their brother had just painted for them. The one time in his life that Warner had been caught unprepared it landed him with a wife. He was none too happy about it too.

“A month later I was still arguing with her father about what happened. He actually showed up at the church after Father’s funeral, ready to tan my hide until I agreed to do right by his daughter. Mary soon after announced that she’s carrying my child. I sure as certain don’t remember

bedding her,” Warner said. “I might have, but I don’t remember it. I was delirious.”

“You’d have to be,” Porter said, ignoring the look Warner gave him. “Hey, you’ll figure out the truth in another month or two. Either she will be growing a baby or not. Problem solved. Just try to avoid consummating the union until you know for certain. I know it will be tempting for you.”

That quip earned Porter a glare from the eldest brother. He smiled in return.

Carter finished his drink, put his glass on the desk and stood. He was leaving now before the temperature dropped, the snow started to stick to the ground, and he ended up stuck here.

“I’m heading back into town to get a meal and some sleep. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

Chapter 18

Meg was out of sorts. She looked up from her knitting needles, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. She had just made the same mistake in the socks she was making for the third time this morning. Again, her thoughts turned to Carter. She gave herself a mental shake as she looked out the window at the falling snow. She always enjoyed watching the snow when she was a child. Now she thought of it as a nuisance.

The snow kept Carter away from home for longer than he had intended, not that he had actually shared that information with her. Uncle Stephen mentioned, too casually, that Carter was only planning to be gone for a few weeks. That was four days ago. It chafed that he had spoken to her uncle about his plans and had left her ignorant of his intentions.

The snow was now ankle deep and the skies were as grey as her mood. Why should it matter to her how long he was gone? She reminded herself for the tenth time today that she wasn't here for a dalliance. She was running for her life. She couldn't risk involving any more innocents in her conflict with Mr. Peters.

She would put him out of her mind, and that was that.

She missed him.

She didn't want to miss him. It made no sense for her to miss him when she was planning to leave him in a few months anyway. She had tried to get used to his absence since the day he left her standing in the kitchen alone, dazed, and frustrated with need. She wanted to kick herself for the way they had parted. They had been arguing, and she had thought that he was the most insensitive man alive at the time. It seemed silly now. She wanted him home. She would deal with her wayward feelings later.

Meg had become aware that things were amiss on the ranch during Carter's absence. Uncle Stephen was distracted and short-tempered. A visitor had arrived yesterday with a note for her uncle. He had read it on the front porch, turned red-faced, and then had run the messenger off the ranch. Bel had followed him into the library to try to find out what the problem was, but Uncle Stephen simply muttered something about problems with the horses.

Meg didn't believe that excuse for a minute.

The ranch was falling into disrepair. Meg was familiar enough with the signs of descent into poverty to recognize the first sign of trouble. Uncle Stephen had let go more than half of the ranch hands, which left the rest of them seriously over-worked. Uncle Stephen now spent more time on the range mending fences. Most of the herd had been driven to within sight of the house. She knew nothing about ranching, but this seemed a little odd.

It was possible that they simply wanted the horses close to the house. She had heard that Colorado Winters were quite severe, and that livestock often froze to death if not properly protected from the elements. Keeping the herd warm and dry seemed a difficult task and it made sense that the horses not be spread out halfway across the county.

Meg worried that Uncle Stephen would have to let go of Carter, as well. He was not telling Aunt Bel or Philippa the details of their financial situation, but her aunt was getting suspicious. Aunt Bel had made mention of Uncle Stephen tightening his purse strings more than once recently. Philippa was quick to dismiss the worry, though, as she was so focused on training the horses from dawn to nearly dusk.

Philippa was preoccupied with working on wedding plans, as well. Since Gerald was going to be gone for a year, Philippa wanted the wedding to be held as soon as possible next winter after he returned. When not occupied riding and roping horses, Philippa spent time upstairs in the sewing room tatting the delicate lace she intended to use to make her bridal gown.

Meg stood up to stretch her legs. She wandered from window to window, scanning the mountains in the distance. She crossed her arms at her waist, her fingers tapping a rhythm on her ribcage. She let her arms fall to her side, aware that she was fidgeting, and drew her shoulders back. She frowned at the sky and looked to the horizon to the west, her eyes squinting at the brightness of the day. She shook her head as she turned and saw Philippa come into the room with her sewing basket. The other woman perched herself daintily on the sofa and smiled at Meg in greeting.

Meg smiled back and mumbled an excuse to leave the room. Her thoughts were too dark today to entertain Philippa's near-constant good mood. She walked towards the back of the house towards the kitchen.

Bel stood at the kitchen table kneading a loaf of bread. Her sleeves were rolled up and flour covered her forearms. Meg smiled in greeting and

looked around for something to do to occupy her hands.

The older woman took in Meg's stormy expression at once. "What's troubling you, Meg?" Bel asked.

Meg's brow furrowed as she tried to articulate a response. She didn't want to talk about her feelings for Carter. It was clear that her family recognized the attraction between them. Based on the response, or lack thereof, she assumed that her family approved of the match.

Regardless of her personal entanglements, a killer was on the loose. It was only a matter of time before Mr. Peters discovered where she had gone. As careful as she had always been about revealing personal information to him, she had no way of knowing how much he had been told by either one of her parents. He also had an obscene amount of money and could hire the best detectives to track her.

Over the last few years, she had grown accustomed to staying on the move, never settling in one place for too long lest the bodies start piling up.

"I don't know, Aunt Bel," Meg said. "I'm just in a sour mood today."

"Anything in particular on your mind?" Bel asked.

"A lot of things are on my mind, which is part of the problem," Meg said. "My thoughts won't focus long enough to figure anything out."

The corner of Bel's mouth turned up and she shook her head slowly at Meg.

"You don't even recognize it, do you?" Bel asked.

"Recognize what?" Meg asked, puzzled.

"You're lovesick," Bel said. "Don't deny it. A blind man could see what is going on with you and Carter. You just haven't worked it out for yourself yet."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Aunt Bel," Meg admonished. "My every thought is not about that man."

"I would hope not, dear," Bel said. "But don't deny it to yourself that he takes up a good deal of them. Sometimes life gives us unexpected gifts. You both are two lonely souls looking for a place where you belong, so it makes sense that you recognize that in each other."

"I won't deny that he's handsome. He's clever. He's smart and he's strong. But he's also stubborn. He thinks he knows everything. He's bossy,"

Meg said. She pulled out a chair and fell into it with a sigh. She propped her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. "It just seems terribly complicated."

"Indeed, love is complicated. Love is messy. Love is even unpleasant at times," Bel conceded. "But it's also the best of all possible things. If you find a man who makes your knees go weak and your mind go blank with just a look, you better scoop him up. That kind of thing doesn't happen to every woman, you know. Most women will marry a man they can live with, and sometimes just barely. It's a rare and wonderful thing for a woman to marry the man she can't live without."

Good grief, if this kept up Bel would have them hitched before Christmas. "I think it's a little premature to start talking about marriage," Meg said.

"I don't," Bel said. "Judging by the looks that pass between you two, I'd say it's something that you would be wise to start thinking about soon."

"I'm not sure what I want from Carter," Meg said. "I definitely don't know if I could ever mention marriage to the man."

"Oh, that's the easy part," Bel said.

"Easy?" Meg asked, now thoroughly confused. "How in the world is that easy?"

"You just make him think it was his idea," Bel said.

Meg stared at her aunt for a moment before she turned walked back into the hallway. She climbed the stairs and went to sit in the chair by the window in her room, wondering how to get out of this mess.

One thing was for certain, she would not be marrying Carter Ellis. He was loved so deeply by the Lawson family, though he does not recognize it. He may feel like an outsider here, but he was one of them. He belonged here in this wild land. He didn't deserve to have her problems land in his lap, which was bound to happen if she stayed.

No, he deserved so much better than the life she could live with him.

Chapter 19

Carter left the law office of John Parks at noon the next day. He had signed over his legal right to the land his father had purchased without a moment's hesitation. The Will had to be read in full before the lawyer would allow the transfer of ownership to be completed.

He was surprised that his father had bothered to even include him in the Will. That feeling dissolved when he discovered the reason behind it was an attempt to evade a debt collector. His father had thought if he put all three of his son's in the Will his creditors would not be able to take the farm away. He was wrong. Now Warner would be left to pay off his father's debts out of what was left of his estate. If the old man had ever been told that, he most likely would not have cared. The old man wanted things done his way even to the end.

Carter was eager to leave town before the snow got any deeper. He could ride until dark, stay at a Way Station he knew of about halfway between the farm and the ranch and be home by lunch. He quickened his pace as he turned the corner and caught sight of the boarding house.

A man stood near the fence in front of the house. He held a stack of papers and handed them out as people passed by. Carter figured he was selling something. He wasn't interested in whatever it was. He didn't see any way to avoid this man, who now stood in front of the gate and looking right at him.

Carter tried to side step the man but was intercepted. The man cleared his throat and looked up at him.

"Excuse me, sir," the man said. "I'm newly arrived to the territory and I'm looking for a missing woman."

"Good luck with your search, sir," Carter said, trying to edge around him.

"I was hoping that I could give you this. It has her likeness. If you've seen her, I'd be very appreciative of your help in locating her," the man said.

Carter took the poster the man held out to him. A familiar face looked back at him. He would know those freckles anywhere. Her name was printed in bold letters across the top underneath the word "Missing."

Carter kept his face carefully blank as he looked from the poster back to the man who had given it to him.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never seen this woman,” Carter lied.

The man’s face fell. “I had hoped I’d find her here,” the man said. “I knew she once had family in this territory, but I suppose they may have moved on to a new place.”

“Who is this woman?” Carter asked.

“She’s my fiancée,” the man answered.

Carter looked back at the poster. He slowly folded it and put it in the inside pocket of his coat. He needed to get home. He didn’t know if he was going to kiss Meg when he saw her or wring her pretty lying little neck. He wanted to put some distance between himself and this dandy in front of him. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was something about him that Carter just didn’t trust.

“I’ll tell you what, Mister,” Carter said. “I travel around a lot. If I see her, I’ll let her know you’re looking for her. Surely your fiancée will want to get back to you as soon as possible.”

“I do hope so,” the man said.

“How did you lose her?” Carter asked. At the man’s surprised look he continued, “Most women are pretty excited to be getting married. It seems odd that you’d lose track of your betrothed for long enough for her to get all the way to Colorado from...”

“Chicago,” the man supplied. “We lived in Chicago, although I’m not sure how you surmised that I wasn’t from around here.”

That lying little wench, he thought. She told him that she was from St. Louis. She had quite a lot of explaining to do.

Carter took a measured look at the man. A blind man could see that he didn’t belong anywhere in the West. His dress was too refined, his speech too proper. Yet, there was a coldness beneath the façade the other man had carefully constructed. A less astute person may have missed it.

But Carter was an old hand at recognizing a predator.

“All the way from Chicago,” Carter echoed. “If she’s that lost, she’s likely looking for you too. Will you be here long? You don’t look like the kind of man to spend much time outside of the city.”

“Indeed, I’m not. I admit I enjoy the excitement of the city far more than the dullness of the countryside. However, I’ll stay a few more weeks

before moving on,” the man said. “I’m not sure where I’ll go next, though.”

Carter had heard those exact words before. He knew what she was hiding from him now, he just didn’t know why.

“Good luck with your search,” Carter said. He turned and continued towards the house. He could feel the man staring at him as he walked up the walk to the front porch. To give the image of a man unconcerned with the world, he started whistling as he walked in the house.

Meg was going to catch hell when he got home.

Chapter 20

Meg couldn't stand being cooped up in the house a minute longer. She went to look for Philippa only to learn that she had ridden over to Gerald's ranch to meet with his sister about the wedding plans. Meg went out to the stables and saddled Ginger. She wouldn't ride far and would stay in view of the house. She didn't even care if Philippa's prophecy came true and she got tangled up in her skirts. The snow would surely break her fall.

She pulled her gloves on before she pulled herself up onto the saddle. She put her bonnet on and tied the ribbons under her chin. She had never cared for hats and the freckles on her nose were testament to that. She looked out the barn door at the trees in the yard gently swaying with the cold breeze. She would put up with the hat to avoid having her ears fall off from frostbite.

Meg rode out of the stables and turned to the west. A lovely spot near the tree line on the hill caught her eyes that would afford her a good view of the ranch. She guided Ginger to that spot, careful to keep their pace slow. Her confidence in the saddle was much greater than it had been before she started riding lessons, but riding in snow was new and she didn't know what she would do if something unexpected happened.

Meg stopped Ginger between two Aspen trees that blocked the biting wind. Snow drifts had formed near the house and around the stables. Grey clouds covered the sky and matched her mood.

The threat of more snow was not far away.

A rustle in the trees behind her caught her attention. She turned her head to the side, her ears strained to listen for the sounds of movement. She heard only silence. She looked back down at the ranch below her and dismissed the noise. It was probably some small animal scurrying through the leaves and was certainly nothing to cause her undue concern.

The sound came again from a few feet behind her and to the left. A blur of grey shot across the white snow and between Ginger's feet. Ginger, startled, danced from side to side. She tossed her head back and forth. Meg tightened her grip on her reins, squeezed her knees together, and quickly said a prayer for mercy.

"Whoa, old girl," Meg said. "It was just a rabbit."

She looked at the prints of the offending animal, disappearing down the side of the hill and shook her head at the foolishness of her mount. That such a big and strong beast could be frightened by a two pound ball of fluff would have amused her had her life not been threatened. The rabbit was in a pretty big hurry to not even try to navigate around the hooves that could crush it with the smallest movement.

It was strange indeed that the rabbit would not take a different route. She narrowed her eyes as she heard another quick movement in the brush behind her. She turned her head at the sound as a blur of red fur shot from underneath Ginger's belly a moment before she reared up. The Meg gripped the saddle horn and tried to keep her feet in the stirrups. She dropped the reins a moment before Ginger reared again.

Meg fell on her backside in the snow. Her skirts flew up around her chin. Ginger bolted away from the tree line in the same direction the fox had taken as it chased its noon meal. Meg shoved her skirts down away from her chin where they had landed and glared at Ginger's retreating form.

How like her to predict her next humiliation. She said a quick prayer of thanksgiving that no one was around to see her disgrace. She pulled herself to her feet and stretched her arms and legs to test for soreness. Other than her pride, and a little soreness in her backside, she was unharmed.

She grabbed her skirts and shook off the powdery snow. She started to remove her cloak to inspect for damage to her dress. Her hands stilled on the buttons. Any new damage to her dress would be found once she was back in the warmth of the house. It would only serve to make her more irritated. She fastened her top button again, reached up and retied the ribbon to her bonnet, and turned to glare at Ginger, who was now standing calmly halfway down the hill.

The horse had not gone very far after scaring her rider witless. Meg took care as she started down the slope towards her mount. She had no intention of riding Ginger any time soon, but she was still responsible for putting her back where she had found her. Ginger had better not expect any extra oats tonight. Meg was not about to reward bad behavior.

Meg heard the staccato beat of hooves behind her. She turned as a horse and rider crested the hill and stopped short. She felt warmth spread from her neck up her face and was sure that her face was the color of a ripe

tomato. Of all times, of course he picked now to be coming home. With a disgusted sigh, she turned and stomped down the hill. Her worry about falling was forgotten in her embarrassment.

Carter slowed his mount as he took in the sight before him. By the tracks leading away from the trees, the upturned snow, and Meg's angry trek down towards Ginger, he was able to guess what had happened. She wasn't walking with any stiffness or apparent injury, and he heaved a sigh of relief that she had not been injured in her fall.

"Meg, stop," Carter called out.

She kept walking. She was not about to tell him that she had just been thrown on the first ride she had taken alone. She was trying to prove how capable she was, for God's sake. She would scream if he gave her his silly, teasing smile or made a joke at her expense.

"Meg," Carter said as he passed her and turned his horse in her path. She veered around him, her face still downturned.

He dismounted and reached for her. She snatched her hand away. He followed and took hold of her arm, stopping her. He tried to turn her to face him, but she resisted. He stepped closer to her, wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled the back of her neck. He saw gooseflesh rise along her nape and smiled to himself, knowing that she'd tell him that it was the cold air and not his nearness that was causing her reaction.

Meg stared down at the snow at her feet, her face burning. Her vision became blurry and she blinked back the moistness behind her eyes before closing them tight. Her chest had that heavy, constricted feeling that she could not get used to when Carter was near. She felt his lips at her nape again. Her teeth found her bottom lip and she struggled to take in a deep breath.

"Have you forgiven me yet?" Carter asked.

What on earth was he talking about? She looked up and blinked, trying to clear her thoughts. Her mind was as fuzzy as her vision had been a moment ago.

"Was I supposed to?" Meg asked. "What did you do that needs forgiving?"

Other than leaving her for so long?

He spun her around and took in the sight of her beautiful blue eyes. He kissed the tip of her nose and pulled her closer.

“We quarreled when we last spoke,” Carter reminded her. “You were pretty angry at me.”

Now she remembered. He had been an insensitive lout the day he left. “You really shouldn’t have said those things about my cousin,” Meg chastised. “She will be heartbroken if any of what you said is true.”

“She’ll be humiliated, not heartbroken,” Carter said with a shrug. “There’s a difference.”

“I don’t want to see her hurt,” Meg said.

“Neither do I. She’s as much of a sister as I’ll ever have,” Carter said. “That doesn’t change the facts, though.”

He watched as her eyes narrowed and the muscles in her jaw clenched. He smiled. She tried to pull away.

“I missed you,” Carter said.

With those three words the wind left her sails. She wasn’t going to keep sniping at him after he said something so wonderful when all she wanted to do was kiss him as senseless as he had left her that day in the kitchen. Her eyes fell from his eyes to his lips. She shook her head at her foolishness. She had decided to stop loving him, and that was that. She couldn’t keep kissing him and stop loving him at the same time.

Carter’s hand was rubbing circles on her lower back. She leaned into him. He smelled like leather and fresh air. Her head fell to his chest and she wrapped her arms around his waist. Perhaps she could hide here with Carter for the rest of her life. She had not seen Mr. Peters for more than a year. He might have stopped looking for her.

She might be safe with Carter. She dismissed the thought. Of course she would be safe with him. He would let nothing bad happen to her, but she could not protect him when trouble came for her. Mr. Peters would never stop looking for her. Such was the nature of obsession. She owed him a debt that he was bound to collect one way or another. Carter would get in the way and would get himself killed.

Carter moved back from her and scooped her up in his arms. He turned to his horse, lifted her up, and dropped her very unceremoniously onto his saddle. He mounted behind her, ignored her look of indignation at being man-handled, and wrapped his arms around her waist. She shoved her skirts down past her knees and shifted her weight so that the saddle horn

was not in such an uncomfortable place. She looked back at Carter as his lips grazed her temple.

“Just what are you about, Mr. Ellis?” Meg asked, her voice haughty. “I thought you were going to be gone until Christmas.”

“As much as I wanted to see my brothers, it turns out I couldn’t stomach being near the old farm one day longer than necessary. Come on, there’s something I want to show you,” Carter said, ignoring her indignation.

He gave a low whistle and motioned for her to look down the hill. Ginger’s head came up and her ears twitched in their direction. She turned and walked toward them. Carter nudged his mount forward and reached over to grab Gingers reins. He tied them deftly to his saddle and turned to lead them into the trees.

Meg could not see the path that they took. A tangled mass of tree branches and fallen logs littered the forest before her. Carter guided them through the trees as easily as if he followed a well-worn path. She leaned back and let the heat of his body warm her own. She reached up and untied the ribbons to her bonnet, wanting the freedom of letting her hair down. She stopped herself from pulling out her hair pins. A girl had to maintain some level of decorum when riding a horse with a handsome man holding you in his arms.

They came to a small stream and Carter turned them to follow it. Meg looked down at the water running over the rocks. The edges of the stream was covered with a thin sheet of ice. In a few weeks it should be frozen over. Meg looked down as their mount traveled sure-footed along the slope along the river. She craned her neck back to see Ginger following without difficulty.

“Don’t worry so much, Meg,” Carter said as he read her concern. “Old Gus here knows his way. He won’t take a tumble.”

Meg nodded and looked forward. Her brow was still furrowed and she still chewed on her bottom lip. She looked around for signs of their destination but all she could see were trees, rocks, and the creek. She really should get out and explore the ranch more once the spring time comes.

No, that wasn’t right. She’d be leaving then. It didn’t matter if she ever learned the area, she’d never see this place again, anyway.

The creek emptied in to a small pool just beyond a break in the trees. The clearing was small and circular. A small log cabin sat across the clearing. A well was nicely situated near the cabin. A clothesline ran half the distance of the clearing and a small barn that was situated to their right.

Meg could not recall having seen such a handsomely situated retreat. She smiled as she heard the sounds of the water emptying into the pool over rocks. A fox looked at them curiously before it disappeared into the trees.

Carter guided the horses toward the barn. He stopped just outside the door, dismounted and then turned hand held his hands out to Meg. She smiled down at him and put her hand on his shoulders. She wrapped her arms around his neck before her feet hit the ground and reached up to put her lips on his.

Carter was stunned. She had always responded to his kisses, but had never initiated the contact. He let her have her way, placing light kisses on his lips. His frustration grew with her teasing touch. He pulled her close as his mouth slanted over hers, taking control of the kiss. Her mouth opened under his and her tongue rose up to tangle with his.

Carter felt Gus shift beside him. He pulled away from Meg, reluctant to leave her. He looked down at her shining blue eyes, her kiss swollen lips, and the dazed look on her face. He was so pleased with her, he kissed those lovely freckles on her nose.

Carter opened the barn door and led the horses inside. He opened one stall door for Gus and the one next to it for Ginger. He started to bed Gus down. He took the saddle and bridle off and started to rub Gus down. Meg moved to Ginger's stall, wanting to show Carter that she could care for her own horse.

When she finished, she looked up to see Carter standing in the stall doorway watching her. He nodded approvingly and held out his hand to her. She put her smaller hand in his large one and let him pull her close to his side. His arm wrapped around her waist as he led her back out into the cold air.

"What is this place?" Meg asked.

"I built the cabin three years ago," Carter said. "I've been working to save up enough money to buy the land since then."

“You built a house on land you don’t own?” Meg asked. At Carter’s nod she continued, “Why?”

“The man who owns this land is old and wanting to move back East to live the rest of his years with his family. I just haven’t had quite what he’s asking for it yet. I’m working on it,” Carter said.

“How much land comes with the cabin?” Meg asked. She was glad that he was chasing after his own dream. She pushed away the feeling of sadness that overcame her at the thought of not seeing him every day when she left to continue her own journey.

“All together it’s about six hundred acres. It’s not quite the size of the Lawson’s, but it’ll be plenty for me to live on happily for the rest of my days,” Carter said.

“That’s an impressive sized piece of land,” Meg said, her eyes wide.

“I’ve looked into it,” Carter said. “I’ll get a few cattle. The trees will have to be thinned out quite a bit around the house. The open range is just beyond those trees on the other side of the cabin. It’s not that far through the woods, really.”

“Have you worked cattle before?” Meg asked.

“On a small scale, yes,” Carter said. “The chicken coop will go over there on the left side of the clearing. I haven’t decided if I want to get a couple pigs yet or not.”

“It sounds quite lovely,” Meg said. “Does Uncle Stephen know about all of this?”

“I’ve mentioned bits and pieces to him over the years,” Carter said. “He knows that I’ll be leaving at some point. I need to tell him that it might be sooner rather than later.”

“So what are you waiting for?” Meg asked.

“Just the right time, I suppose,” Carter said. “Come, I want to show you the cabin. I think you’ll like it.”

They walked across the clearing hand in hand. Snow crunched under their feet. The wind whistled through the trees. The brook bubbled over the rocks. The sounds of nature were so agreeable to Meg that she wanted to laugh with the simplicity of it all.

The cabin was larger than it had first appeared. The door swung open easily on well-oiled hinges. The main room was spacious. Simple

furniture filled the room. A dining table and chairs sat to the right of the doorway across from a fireplace large enough to roast a fair sized animal on a spit. Shelves lined what she supposed to be the kitchen, noticeably devoid of utensils and the other kitchen accoutrements one might expect.

Meg turned to Carter. The intimacy in the cabin made the hair on the nape of her neck stand on end. Surely it was sinful for her to be in this place with this man. She watched as he took off his hat and hung it on a peg beside the door. He shrugged out of his coat, seemingly oblivious to the cold air. As he passed her he reached out to stroke her hip. The touch, so causal but so intimate, made her toes curl.

He stooped down in front of the fire place and stacked the logs and lit the kindling. The embers caught slowly. Tongues of flame danced upward and the logs started to smolder.

Carter turned as he stood. His eyes were intent as he took her in. Her eyes were as dark as sapphires, her mouth parted as she studied him with blatant longing. She did not understand the feelings growing between them. He meant to teach her the meaning.

Meg felt herself grow warm under his scrutiny. She shifted from one foot to the other and dared herself to tear her eyes from his. Her mind was empty of thought. Her mouth was dry. She didn't know where to put her hands.

She knew where she wanted to put them. She knew where she wanted his hands to go too. Her breasts started to tingle, a sensation she had not known before. She felt her nipples harden as he slowly made his way across the room. Her breath caught in her throat. Was the fire too big? Maybe they should open a window.

Carter reached for her as she moved toward him. Their lips met in a slow, deep, searching kiss. Her arms wound around his neck and she stretched up on her toes, longing to get closer. His hands moved from her waist down to her hips and around to her firm bottom. He squeezed those perfect orbs and she moaned in his mouth.

He broke the kiss and kissed a trail down her jawline to her throat. She arched toward him and her fingers dug into his shoulders. His hands left her bottom and traveled up to unfasten her cloak. She felt the weight of it fall from her shoulders. She felt cool air touch her skin. Carter kissed a

trail down from her neck down through the valley between her breasts as he unbuttoned her dress.

She did not protest as he pushed the fabric down to her waist, so caught up in the delicious sensations he was creating in her. Dear God, how had she ever lived a day without his touch?

She looked down as he pulled the ribbons that held her chemise together. She raised a hand to stop him, but stroked the side of his face instead of pushing him away. He leaned down as he pulled the fabric aside to expose one of her firm, high breasts.

She watched as he took one of her erect nipples in his mouth. His tongue darted out and around her swollen breast. His hands raised up to cup her breasts and he squeezed gently. Her head hung back on her neck and she arched up to him, desperate for more yet not knowing what.

Carter picked her up and laid her down on the settee near the window. He lowered himself along her length, his mouth never leaving hers. Their legs tangled together. She her teeth bit into his lower lips. He growled into her mouth. Her hands found his shirt, pulled it out of the waistband of his trousers. Her fingers itched to touch him. His mouth left hers as he leaned back, stripped out of his shirt, and threw it to the floor.

He returned to her, his lips dominating hers. His hands were everywhere. He grabbed the back of her right knee and pulled it up around his waist. His hand stroked her thigh and then her hip. His mouth again left hers to trail along her neck, back down to her breasts. His tongue lapped at one, as his free hand stroked the other. It drove her mad. White hot bolts of pleasure shot from her breast to her belly.

She felt hot and desperate for relief she did not understand. She wrapped her leg around his waist and started moving next to him. His hand moved from her thigh to her belly, and then traveled lower to the junction of her thighs. She gasped, fearful and yet anxious for his hand to find where her aching had spread.

His fingers stroked her outer folds before delving into her heat. She arched up into his hands as he found the nub that was swollen and slick. Her hands tangled in his hair as she started to move against his fingers. Tension built in her limbs, spreading down through her in waves. Carter's lips rose to meet her. His tongue was now moving in the same seductive motion as his hands.

She felt as if she were flying out of her skin. Waves of pleasure crashed over her and she lost control. She cried out her satisfaction against his mouth and arched against his hand as he brought her to release.

Her body went limp. Her head fell back against the cushions, her lips parted. Her breasts heaving from her exertions. They were both covered with a light sheen of moisture. Carter raised his lips from her and smiled down at her, his eyes heavy with want. He kissed her nose as she struggled to catch her breath.

“You’re beautiful, Meg,” Carter said.

“You might need spectacles, Mr. Ellis,” Meg said, breathlessly. She wondered briefly where the feelings of embarrassment she expected to come were, but she didn’t care enough to seriously ponder it for long. He had just done the most wonderful thing to her. She wasn’t going to argue with him right now.

Seeking to distract him from where his hand was still stroking her femininity, she cleared her throat.

“So, how was the wedding?” Meg asked.

“It was a disaster,” he said, too cheerily.

“How was it a disaster? Weddings are never disastrous,” Meg said.

“How many have you attended?” Carter asked.

“None,” Meg said. “And before you ask me how I could know that they’re never disastrous, I just know. Weddings are celebrations of love, and that is always a blessing.”

“Warner most certainly doesn’t love his bride,” Carter said.

“Well then why would he marry her?” Meg said.

“Shotgun wedding,” Carter answered.

He did not look like he was going to explain further. She let out an exasperated sigh.

“Explain, please,” Meg urged.

“I just did. Her father walked in on her sleeping in his bed. He says he doesn’t remember inviting her there, but the damage to her reputation was done. Shotgun wedding.” Carter said.

“How awful for both of them,” Meg said, her brow now furrowed again.

“To be stuck in a marriage and no love between you. Dreadful.”

“Indeed,” Carter said. He kissed her nose again.

“Why do you keep kissing my nose?” Meg asked.

“I’m kissing your freckles,” Carter said.

“My freckles?” Meg asked. “You can go ahead and kiss them right off, please.”

“I’m partial to a girl with freckles,” Carter said, his eyes warm as he gazed down at her. “I think you need a few more of them. You should throw away your bonnets.”

“Absolutely not,” Meg said. “I have freckles because I don’t wear my bonnets enough. I’m going to start wearing them very day.”

“I’ll take them off and burn them,” Carter said, his smile belying his threat.

Meg’s hands ran over the length of his arms. His muscles flexed beneath her fingers. His skin was soft, his muscles firm. She looked up into his dark eyes, still alive with passion unspent. Not ready to leave behind the wonder of this moment, she leaned up and took his mouth with her own.

The kiss was slow and languorous. He propped himself on his elbows, his hands framing her face. She held him close as she opened her heart up to the love she felt for him. She felt that exhilarating warmth spread through her limbs once again as her hands stroked the muscles in his back. She would have been content to stay in this cabin for the rest of her days. An image of living with him in this lovely little copse filled her imagination. She would feed the chickens and hang out the wash as he worked the range. She would teach their daughters how to knit and do the mending as he taught their sons how to hunt and fish.

She cursed herself for being ten times a fool. She had come to her uncle’s ranch looking for peace and safety. She had found passion and love. She was running from a madman and had found the gentlest man she had ever known. She had tried to keep her heart safe from this man, and hoped that his was safe from her. One day he would wake up from his infatuation with her and turn away from her when he saw her flaws, as he seemed to be ignorant of them all.

She couldn’t believe how perverse fate was.

He liked her freckles.

Chapter 21

Carter sat in the rocking chair by the fire and watched Meg. She was turned away from him, pinning her long chestnut hair into a semblance of control. A wayward piece next to her temple kept escaping her control. She grabbed it, twisted it and pinned it behind her ear.

Meg rose from where she sat on the settee and smoothed her skirts. Carter pictured the long, well-shaped, milky white legs underneath those faded and wrinkled skirts. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He had pulled away from her after giving her pleasure; his own would have to wait until she was more familiar with his touch. She was still and innocent in the ways of loving. He wasn't about to scare her off with his impatience.

He knew she would be perfect. She responded to his kisses with abandon. The strength of her climax at just the touch of his fingers made his manhood twitch in his trousers. Since the day they met, he only had to think about those brilliant blue eyes, the dark hair he just wanted to pull from its pins and run his fingers through, the high bosoms straining against the fabric of her dress, and those wonderful freckles before he was hard and aching for release.

Meg turned to inspect the room. She touched each piece of furniture. She looked out each window. She peaked into the bedroom, but backed out quickly when her eyes saw the double bed in the center of the room. She looked at every corner of the little cabin except for the one where Carter sat. He suspected she had a healthy blush staining her cheeks.

Shadows were starting to lengthen within the cabin. He had to get her home soon as to not attract too much notice at her long absence. He was reluctant to take her back to reality. If only he could keep her here forever.

Meg could not think of a single thing to say that wouldn't come out silly or trite. How does one behave after having such an earth-shattering experience? How can she ever go back to what was normal before? Why on earth was Carter acting like he didn't have a care in the world? Hers had just been turned upside down.

He really should give her a little leeway. She was new at intimate dealings with men. She would improve with time, surely. She had wanted to touch him more intimately. She felt her face grow warm and her breath catch. She had a general idea of what happened between men and women.

She had never thought she would enjoy it. It always seemed messy and unpleasant to her. She might just enjoy the intimacy with Carter, though.

She stole a quick glance at Carter. He was looking at her through hooded eyes. He might look bored enough to go to sleep at first glance, but the intensity in his eyes as they followed her around the room gave little room for doubt how alert he was in that moment. She lingered next to the front window, not wanting to leave this place. She looked around the small clearing where Carter planned to make his home and imagined impossible things about having a life with him here.

She closed her eyes at the sharp pain that tore through her breast when she thought of leaving him. Sooner or later, her past would come calling. People she had loved had already died. She would not be responsible for another death.

She jumped at the touch of Carter's arms going around her waist, nearly bumping her head on the edge of the window. She had not heard him move. She leaned back against his chest, welcoming his warmth. He nuzzled her neck and placed a light kiss along her temple.

"I need to take you home," Carter said.

"I know," Meg sighed.

Carter took her hand and tugged to get her moving. He watched as she shrugged into her coat, still avoiding his eyes. He wondered how long it would take for her to get over her shyness with him. He thought about saying something stupid to get a rise out of her temper. Surely that would work.

"Are you going to avoid looking at me forever, Meg?" Carter asked, going for the direct route.

"I'm not avoiding it," Meg said, her spine stiffening. She wasn't going to have him thinking she was embarrassed. She was, but she wouldn't have him thinking it.

"Just taking your time, then?" Carter said.

"I'm sorting out my thoughts," Meg said.

"You're overthinking things," Carter said.

"I...I most certainly am not," Meg sputtered, now glaring at him.

Clearly he was under-thinking things. Or maybe he hadn't enjoyed himself during their interlude today. Or maybe it meant less to him. She was never going to figure this out.

“You’re doing it again,” Carter said as he opened the door.

He took hold of her hand and pulled her out into the cold, pulling the door shut behind him. She marched toward the barn, stomping through the snow. He heard her mutter something under her breath. She was mad, alright.

He followed at a close distance and helped her open the heavy barn door. He tried to reach for her to soothe her frayed nerves, but she jerked away from him. He went to Ginger’s stall to make sure she wasn’t taking her anger out on the old mare. He should have known better. Meg was still talking to herself and shooting arrows out of her eyes in his direction, but she was as gentle as a lamb with Ginger.

He went to saddle Gus. He couldn’t quite understand what she was saying, but Meg was still not done working things out in her head. Ginger proved not to be a sympathetic ear, though. He heard Meg’s tone change from irritated to gentle after Ginger let out a healthy snort. Apparently, Ginger didn’t have much patience for complainers.

Carter led Gus out of the stall and turned to help Meg mount, but found that he was too late. She had used an old bucket as a mounting block and was pulling her skirts down over her ankles. He saw her reach into her coat pocket and pull out that ugly old bonnet. Her little nose went into the air as she fixed it on her head, hiding those lovely dark curls, and quickly tied the ribbon under her chin. When she was finished she picked up her reins and waited.

Carter hid his smile as he mounted Gus and rode out of the barn. Meg followed, but more slowly. He turned in his saddle to see that she had stopped and was looking around the clearing, frown on those delicious lips. She looked up at him, her eyes sad.

“What is it, Meg?” Carter asked, feeling like a cad. He had teased her when she was feeling vulnerable. He still had every intention of confronting her about her secrets, but he had been so happy to see her all he could think about was touching her.

He hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings.

“I was just thinking that it would be a shame if I never saw this place again,” Meg said.

Carter smiled at her. “I’ll bring you back someday.”

“What if I wanted to find it myself? I’d never be able to remember how to get here. I don’t have much of a sense of direction,” Meg said.

“I’ll show you the easy way. You won’t have to go through the woods,” Carter said.

Meg looked around. He had either gone blind or lost his mind. They were surrounded by trees.

“The trees thin out within about fifty yards on the other side of the house,” Carter said, reading the look on her face. He was inordinately pleased that she wanted to come back. “It’s open range after that.”

Meg nodded and smiled. He might be an insensitive lout at times, but at least he could take a hint. Her mind screamed out a warning for her to tell Carter that they had to stop this from developing into a relationship. Her heart had no intention of heeding that warning.

Meg followed Carter as he rode in a straight line through the trees. Exactly as he had stated, the trees thinned out and became open range. They rode through the snow in companionable silence, each absorbed into their own thoughts. Meg wondered how she was going to become more skilled at life in the West.

Carter wondered how he was going to get her to tell him the truth about her past. He had not said anything about the missing person’s poster he still carried in his coat pocket. Her name and likeness was being passed around the Colorado territory. It was only a matter of time before someone recognized her picture and told the man in the fancy suit where to find her. Meg was hiding from something. He didn’t know what, but he knew she must be afraid, otherwise she wouldn’t be running.

He feared that time was running out.

Chapter 22

Another raid happened the day after he returned. Only three mares were taken this time. Carter surveyed the tracks in the snow. At least eight horses had been culled from the herd and driven towards the north. He followed the tracks and saw the spot where five turned back toward the ranch. They were being driven fast. One of the bandits tried to drive the five back away from the ranch. He gave up the chase and joined his two partners as they drove the remaining three across the property line to the Kennedy's.

Carter followed the tracks well onto the Kennedy's ranch, wondering at the audacity of the thieves. The Kennedy's and Lawson's were friendly enough, nearly joined in marriage. To drive stolen horses across an allied ranch was the height of stupidity.

Carter spied two riders coming at him. Both worked for Shirley Kennedy. They were loyal to her and as mean as vipers. Carter thought of them more as hired guns than ranch hands. That old harridan sure did know how to protect her land.

Carter pulled up and nodded to him. "Good morning, Monroe," Carter said. Looking at the other he nodded, "White."

"A bit far from home there, Ellis," Monroe said.

"I'm following these tracks," Carter said. "Someone has been stealing horses from the Lawson's and drove them across this land. I'm

aiming to fetch them back.”

“You’re looking for trouble, is what you’re doing,” Monroe said. “Ain’t nobody stole nothing from that Englishman. He always was one to try to claim cheating.”

“The tracks in the snow are pretty clear,” Carter said. He was itching to get going. The longer he waited the farther off the mares got. “It’s pretty hard to dispute what’s happened.”

“Could have been any horses. Lawson sells horses all the time,” White said. “He could have sold those.”

“He didn’t,” Carter said. “They were stolen just like all the others.”

“Well, I don’t know about all that,” White said. “What I do know is that oldest Lawson boy has a gaming problem. Stephen Lawson has a spending problem. Maybe he’s telling you they were stolen instead of sold.”

Carter looked from one defiant man to the other. He bit back a retort. He wasn’t going to justify Stephen’s actions to these two parasites. He wasn’t sure what their game was, but he knew he was wasting time. He knew that they knew it too.

“Will you let me be on my way?” Carter asked.

“I don’t suppose so,” Monroe said. “Mrs. Kennedy said that no one crosses her land until the snow thaws.”

“As you can see, someone has already crossed her land,” Carter said. “With a couple horses coming from the Lawson’s herd.”

“I ain’t disputing the facts with you, boy,” Monroe said, his voice hard. “You’ll be turning around and going back home. We’ve had about enough of your outfit causing trouble.”

Carter didn’t know what Monroe was talking about. The Lawson’s were liked by almost everyone in the territory, except for the Downs family. Shirley Kennedy would lick the bottom of his horse’s hooves before she associated with any of that outfit.

Monroe’s hand moved toward the pistol holstered at his hip. Carter’s shotgun was in its scabbard on the side of the saddle, but he wouldn’t be able to draw it quickly enough for it to be of use in the event that Monroe got trigger happy. White was as stupid as a rock, but known to be a crack shot with his sidearm. He would only need a moment to distract White before drawing on Monroe, but he was likely to get shot. He accepted that he was outgunned for the moment.

“I suppose this is a discussion for Stephen Lawson to have with Mrs. Kennedy,” Carter said.

“I don’t suppose it is,” Monroe said. “She won’t be pleased with the implication here.”

“No one is accusing her,” Carter said. “We know who is behind this. They were trespassing and I was following them.”

“Well, if you know who done it, go after them,” Monroe said. “Stay clear from this land.”

This had to be the dumbest man alive. What did he think Carter was doing if not going after the thief? He inspected the other man. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He shifted in his saddle and scanned the horizon. Within a second he knew that he was being watched by more than these grimy old cow pokes.

Deciding discretion was the better part of valor Carter nodded and backed his horse away. He would not fully expose his back until he was well and truly out of sight. He had no desire to have Philippa pull a bullet out of his spine and wouldn’t count on these two thugs to afford him safe passage home.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Carter said. “Give my regards to Mrs. Kennedy.”

Monroe’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded. His hand did not move away from the butt of his gun. Carter kept his eyes trained on the man until he was confident that Monroe couldn’t hit him with the first shot. He dug his heels into Gus’s sides and headed back towards the ranch.

He took a detour around the ranch and rode towards town. He needed to track down Porter, who had ridden to Stillwater with him. Porter could track a single fish all the way down the Colorado River if he put his mind to it. He would have no problem following a trail of horses through the snow. He just had to do it without being seen. Carter only knew one man who could be invisible in broad daylight.

Piney’s Saloon was situated two doors down from the livery, towards the end of town. The two story structure was indistinguishable from other businesses in town, save for the sign in front. The bar was to the left of the doorway and ran the length of the room. The shelves behind the bar were filled with liquor and framed a rather impressive mirror which

happened to by the pride and joy of Nick Piney. He told anyone he caught looking at it the story of how he had it especially commissioned for his saloon and delivered all the way from Kansas City.

A stairwell in the rear of the room led to the four rooms that could be rented out for an hour or the entire night, whichever was your preference or need. It was still too early in the day for the ladies to be moving about much, as they usually entertained well into the wee hours of the morning. Carter suspected that is where his brother had been spending his time since he rode into town alongside him.

Carter found his brother there nursing a glass of whiskey. Porter sat in the back corner with his feet propped up on the chair next to him. The brim of his hat was pulled low across his brow. Carter felt the moment his brother saw him. The intensity in Porter's eyes was like a physical weight settling on his chest.

Carter stopped by the bar to get a fresh glass and a new bottle. His intent was not to get drunk, but rather to wash away the foul taste of having to deal with Monroe and White. Even the rotgut passed off as whiskey is preferable to that foulness.

Carter took the chair across from his brother and removed his hat. He filled his glass with the pungent amber liquid and topped off Porter's before he turned to survey the room. Clive Johnson, the town drunk, leaned against the far end of the bar and stared into his cup. Other than Clive and Nick Piney and the ladies upstairs, the saloon was empty.

"Pleasant evening?" Carter asked.

Porter tipped his hat back out of his eyes and grinned wickedly. "Decidedly so. Told you that you should have stayed in town."

"Pass," Carter said. "I was busy elsewhere."

"Eh? You've got a twinkle in your eye, Carter," Porter teased. "Could this be love?"

"Twinkle, my ass," Carter scoffed. "I do have my eye on someone, though." He held up a hand to cut off his brother's remark. "You'll meet her soon enough, I'm sure. We're not here to talk about my love life. There was another raid last night."

"How many were taken this time?" Porter asked.

“They culled eight from the herd, lost control of five. They were driven to the North, onto the next ranch. I followed them this morning but was kindly asked to leave before I got that far.”

“Peculiar, isn’t that?” Porter asked.

“At first, the raids seemed like petty retaliation. Nothing dangerous has happened so far. Threats have been made, but nothing attempted. Really, it’s been more of a nuisance than anything. Come Spring, it will mean trouble with so much of the herd gone. Bill’s debts keep coming in with Stephen’s name forged on the notes.”

“He better do something quick about that son of his,” Porter said. “He’ll drive the lot of you into the poor house.”

“It’s already starting. Stephen hasn’t said anything to the rest of the family, but he’s keeping the purse strings closed pretty tight. It won’t be long before questions he’s not ready to answer come up.”

“Who else has a vendetta against the family?” Porter asked. “You mentioned the Downs family, but from your description of them they sound too stupid to come up with much of an idea. Besides it doesn’t add up. Southfork produces some of the best horseflesh in Colorado. They could easily sell them to pay off a gambling debt in no time. There’s no need to keep up the raids.”

“Unless you’re trying to get rid of someone,” Carter said.

Porter nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. What we’re going to have to figure out is who is behind it and who they are wanting to get rid of. Until we do that, just tracking down a bunch of stolen horses won’t account for much.”

Carter drained his glass and rose from his seat. “Keep the bottle, you’ll need it to keep you warm in this cold since you won’t be gracing Piney’s girls with your presence any time soon.”

“Now, that’s just downright mean, Carter.”

Carter chuckled. “Get over it. You can stay at the cabin while you’re hunting.”

With that parting shot, Carter shoved his hat back on his head and stalked out into the biting cold.

Chapter 23

Meg was distracted again. She shoved her knitting needles back into her skein of yarn and shoved it down into the basket at her side. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her mind raced from one thought to another, barely registering one for long enough for her to take notice.

She stood and paced around the parlor. She rubbed her hands together for warmth and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. She went to the window and watched the snow fall. She threw her shawl across the back of a chair with a sigh and looked back at the sweater she was knitting, thoroughly uninterested in going back to the task.

Meg had been cooped up inside all week. The snow was now nearly knee deep and still falling in giant fluffy flakes. She frowned at the sight of the drifts piling up near the side of the house. At this rate they were going to be buried alive under the weight of the snow. How did anyone survive the entire winter like this?

She wanted to go out for a walk but doubted she would be able to push the door open far enough to squeeze herself out of it. Uncle Stephen and her cousin James took turns shoveling pathways from the front and back doors to the cellar, the privy, and to the stables. They were both out in the stables checking on the horses. It might be some time before she saw either one of them.

She had no idea where Carter was. She had barely seen him in the three weeks that he had been home since the afternoon they spent together in the cabin. He had been especially busy with driving the horses closer to the ranch and taking care of them. So far, only one of the horses had succumbed to the cold, a young filly that had been born too late in the season and wasn't growing as she should have been.

Uncle Stephen had let go of more men in his employ just after the first snowfall of the year. Only Roger, his wife Jeanette, and Carter were left to help out with the ranch. Meg thought that it seemed an odd time of year to end someone's employment. She had overheard a discussion between James and Carter about missing horses. Carter had left to go track them down more than two weeks ago. With the exception of one dinner he ate with the family, she had not seen him since that night.

She had been so pleased that he had returned from his visit with his family far earlier than expected. Now, she felt an increasing frustration that she had no idea what was going on with him. It was unreasonable for him to be out hunting down missing horses in weather like this. The snow would cover any clues about where they went. No, there was more to this story than he was letting on.

It might make her a hypocrite, but she didn't like that he was keeping things from her.

She wondered where he was. She wondered if he was warm enough. She wondered when he was coming back. Would he be back in time to celebrate Christmas with them next week? She wondered if he would like the present she made for him. She wondered if he wondered about her.

She paced down the hallway to the kitchen in the rear of the house. She leaned against the frame of the door and frowned out at the snow. Would he be around more if the snow wasn't so deep? What was he doing with his days? All of the horses were within sight of the house. The barns and cellars were well-stocked. A few repairs were needed on one of the wagons and one of the corrals needed to be made bigger, but all of those things could wait.

Meg's suspicions that the men in this family were hiding something important from the women were all but confirmed. She knew it had to do with money. Bel and Philippa seemed unaware of their financial status, but Meg could see the signs of encroaching poverty. The dismissal of nearly every one of his employees was a sure sign that something was amiss. Bel had said that they all left of their own accord for various reasons. She seemed to really believe it, too. Meg wasn't so easily fooled. Uncle Stephen couldn't afford to pay them any longer.

She had no idea of how dire the situation was, but she knew that Carter was out there in the cold trying to stop whatever it was that was happening to this family. Uncle Stephen and James were out patching up whatever needed patching. Bel was growing frustrated that her once indulgent husband was now quite frugal. Philippa was too wrapped up in tatting the lace for her wedding gown to pay much attention to anything else around her.

A blur of movement on the horizon caught her attention. The rider crested the western hill and made his way slowly towards the house. She

squinted against the glare of the sun shining down on the snow and tried to make out who was approaching. The big grey horse was having little trouble punching its large hooves through the snow. The rider was hunched over, his hat pulled low on his brow.

The rider made his way to the stables, dismounted and led his horse inside. She still could not make out the man's features. He did not match the size or stature of any of the men she had seen at the ranch since she had arrived, but seemed familiar enough with the ranch that he looked for no greeting.

"Meg, if you keep frowning like that, you'll get wrinkles before your time," Bel said as she entered the kitchen carrying a load of linens for the wash tub.

"Someone just went into the stable," Meg said. "I didn't recognize him."

Bel came to stand by her and focused her gaze on the stable door. Meg heard a Bel's sharp intake of breath and looked over in time to see a broad smile spread across her aunt's face.

"Bill has come home for Christmas," Bel said. "Oh, to have all of my children home in time for Christmas. Why, I think it has been about four years since both of my boys were home at the same time."

Meg looked back at the man who was now half the distance to the house. She had not seen Bill since she was a small child when he had last visited Chicago with the rest of the family. She recalled her discomfort when he had been near. Her mother had always warned her about men who seemed to be too charming and had said that those kinds of men were hiding darkness within. Bill was like that. He could charm the horns off of the devil, but his smile never seemed to reach his cold eyes.

Meg moved away from the door as he approached. She went to stand by the warmth of the stove. A blast of cold air shot through the room as the back door opened. She wished she had kept her shawl, as much for the warmth as for another layer of protection from her cousin.

Bill ducked through the door. Bel exclaimed her happiness and rushed forward to hug her eldest son. He pulled out of the embrace quickly, threw his hat down on the table and shrugged out of his coat. His eyes settled on Meg. She felt bile rise up in her throat as he perused her. His eyes went from her face down the length of her body and back up again,

lingering too long on the swell of her breasts. His eyes rose to meet hers again. Although his face remained carefully blank, his eyes were lustful and mocking.

She had seen that look before on another face. That look had haunted her nightmares since she was a child.

“When did you get here?” Bill asked, ignoring Bel’s fussing.

“I arrived more than two months ago,” Meg said. She resisted the urge to cross her arms across her bosoms. She would give him no satisfaction for knowing she was uncomfortable.

“How long are you staying?” Bill asked.

“That hasn’t yet been determined,” Meg said, her chin rising up a notch.

“For Heaven’s sake, Bill, stop hounding the girl,” Bel chided.

“She’s family and she’ll be staying for a good long while.”

“Will she, now?” Bill’s eyes narrowed and his lips curved in a grin that Meg imagined he stole from the devil. He shrugged. “Don’t worry, cousin. You aren’t the first stray that my parents have taken in.”

“Enough with your teasing, now,” Bel said, dismissing him. “Go clean yourself up for supper.”

Meg watched him leave the kitchen. His eyes returned to hers as he walked out of the room. A shiver ran down the length of her spine. Her mouth went dry and her heart started to pound. The threat had been unspoken but very much understood.

Bel was now happily buzzing around the kitchen, unaware of the undercurrents that were swirling around her. Meg looked at her with amazement. Was it a mother’s love that left her blind to the faults of her son? Or was it simply that Bill had fooled her the same as he was able to fool so many other people?

Meg had felt safe here until he walked through the door. She was stuck until after the Spring thaw. She had to have a way to protect herself, but had no idea how she would keep herself from being other than in close quarters with her lascivious cousin. She made a quick excuse and left the kitchen, making her way up to her bedroom.

She needed to make sure that the lock on her bedroom door worked.

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Chapter 24

Carter was tired. He was hungry. He hadn't been able to feel his toes for the better part of the day. He gave Gus an extra scoop of oats. He wanted a hot bath a decent meal. He wanted to find Meg and kiss her senseless. Then he wanted to sleep for the next week.

Meg was probably good and mad at him, he knew. He had all but ignored her for the better part of a month. He had left with his brother to locate the missing horses. He had found them along with information that would shake this family to its core. He would have the unhappy task of telling Stephen just how much he had been duped.

First he had to go smile through Christmas dinner.

He made his way to the bunkhouse and lit a fire in the stove before he stripped out of his cold, wet clothes. He left them in a pool at the foot of the bed. He wasn't one to leave a mess lying around, but he would get them later. He sat on the edge of his narrow bunk, stark naked, and inspected his feet. He didn't see any sign of frostbite and the tingling that was moving up his leg told him that he was going to be just fine.

He lay back on the bunk and wrapped the blanket around him and thought back on the last week. Porter had had no trouble skirting the Kennedy's land and finding the stolen horses. He had counted eight sentries guarding the herd. Half of them were drunk and the other half were just stupid. By the following morning, half of them were missing. Porter never said where they went.

Carter wasn't too sure he wanted to know.

Driving the herd with only the two of them in knee deep snow across the length of the county was a foolish endeavor in anyone's opinion. Neither Carter nor Porter were fools. Stephen Lawson would get his herd back, but not until the Spring thaw. They had to deal with the man calling the shots first or it would all be for naught.

Porter had a unique way of being undetectable when he needed to be. For a large man, and one Carter had often heard referred to as extremely handsome, Porter blended in with any crowd. Carter wasn't sure how he did it but he was thankful for it, nonetheless. Porter had joined a faro game in Stillwater a week ago. He had won twenty dollars by the end of the night

and had found out more information than Carter had uncovered in the last six months.

He did all of this without ever once saying his name.

Carter heard a knock on the door and started upright. He had not been aware that he had fallen asleep, but the darkness outside the window belied how long he had been there. He wrapped the cover tight around his waist and called out his permission for his guest to enter.

His body did him no favors when Meg's chestnut curls and those gorgeous freckles peeked at him around the door. Her bright blue eyes widened and her mouth fell open. He saw her eyes move from his down to his chest then to where his long, muscular legs were uncovered. He shifted to ease the discomfort that her open admiration of his body was causing him. Her eyes jumped back to meet his.

"Come in Meg," Carter said, smiling. "You're letting all of the warm air out."

Meg stepped forward and shut the door behind her without thinking. Her mind was filled with the sight of a beautiful man sprawled out and, she assumed, naked underneath a thin wool blanket. He was bronze everywhere. Dark hair covered his chest and narrowed in a straight line down the middle of his flat stomach. Dear God, the man had muscles to spare. Perhaps she should open a window. It seemed a little overly warm in here to her.

"Let me know when you're finished," Carter said, laying back and stacking his hands underneath his head. He closed his eyes and smiled to himself.

"When I've finished what?" Meg said trying to gather her wayward thoughts.

"When you're finished ogling me," Carter said.

That brought her up short. She had been caught red-handed and they both knew it. She was going to have to bluster her way out of this one.

"I most certainly was not," Meg said, putting her pert little nose into the air. "I was simply a little shocked to see you in such a state of undress."

"I'll say," Carter said.

She looked around for something to hurl at his head. Nothing was suitable. She needed to get out of here and compose herself, otherwise she

might disgrace herself. Then they would both be late for dinner.

“I’ve been sent to fetch you for dinner,” Meg said. That’s it. Now she remembered why she was sent out here.

“Are you on the menu?” Carter asked.

“Put your clothes on and come up to the house,” Meg said, “then you’ll see what’s on the menu.”

With that she whirled and raced back out into the snow. Her face felt so warm she thought she could melt icicles if she walked close enough. Did that man have to be so perfectly handsome? Why on earth was he just lying there without his clothes on? As much as she wanted to know the answer, she knew where such a discussion would lead. With that thought, she almost turned back around.

The family was waiting in the parlor. Everyone was dressed in their Christmas finery. The men were standing around the fireplace, each holding a cup of the egg nog that Bel was passing around. Philippa was sorting presents into different piles for each person. Meg searched for some task left undone, but everything appeared to be in order. She had no idea of how to make herself useful.

The back door banged shut. She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Carter enter the parlor. He was dressed simply. His trousers were clean and his shirt looked new. She blinked away the image of that broad chest, muscled and taut, bathed in golden light. She longed to reach out and feel the heat of him. She folded her hands in front of her. Better to resist temptation when she had an audience.

Carter accepted the cup of egg nog Bel thrust at him. He handed it to Meg and accepted another one in its place. Meg sipped the strange liquid and thought it most enjoyable. He smiled his thanks and waited until Bel ran back into the kitchens before he exchanged Meg’s now empty cup with his full one. He made a face of exaggerated disgust at Meg’s silent inquiry.

“I never could abide the stuff,” Carter said. “I just never had the heart to tell Bel. She tries to make every Christmas perfect. It would hurt her feelings if I told her that egg nog makes me want to gag.”

“I think it’s quite pleasant,” Meg said sipping the brew.

“Don’t drink more than a couple cups,” Carter warned. “James is prone to spiking it with a little whiskey. If you find yourself unexpectedly warm and sleepy, blame him.”

Meg laughed at the image Carter painted in her mind, drawing the attention of her uncle and Bill, who she ignored. James was her jovial and lighthearted cousin. It did not take much imagination to picture James pulling just such a prank on his family. He probably had gotten away with it a few times too.

"I'm glad that you're in such an agreeable mood, Meg," Carter said, his voice low.

"Were you expecting me to be in a foul mood on Christmas?" Meg asked.

"I was expecting you to be in a foul mood whenever I saw you next," Carter said simply.

"You mean because you have been quite pointedly ignoring me for the last month?" Meg asked, trying to not lose her happy mood.

Carter turned to face her fully, his head mere inches from hers. The look in his eyes was one she had not seen before, both searching and intent. She felt lightheaded. The sounds of the room around her seemed distant. The feeling of gaiety was replaced by a feeling of soul-crushing longing. She read the same in his dark gaze.

"Far from ignoring you, Meg," Carter said. "I've been inexcusably distracted by dealing with a rather large problem."

"Will you tell me what the problem is?" Meg asked.

"Soon," Carter hedged. "Soon we are going to have to have a very serious discussion. Secrets are going to have to be put aside if we want to continue our association."

Meg's heart leapt up into the base of her throat. She swallowed convulsively. Her smile felt brittle over her panic. How much could he know? She had not been followed. She had not said anything that would suggest that she was more than what she appeared. He must be referring to something else. He must be referring to whatever was going wrong with the ranch.

Bill chose that moment to interrupt. He clapped Carter on the back in greeting. His smile was too wide and the look he gave to Meg was too familiar and lingered too long. She shifted away from Carter's nearness and her face fell blank as she gently clasped her hands in front of her.

Carter did not miss the distance that Meg created, nor did he fail to see the wall of protection she expertly threw up at her cousin's nearness. He

looked back at Bill in time to see the other man leer at Meg. Carter shifted his stance, partially blocking Bill's view. He would have to remember to ask Meg what happened to make her so afraid of Bill. Whatever it was, Meg was right not to trust him.

"Carter, old boy," Bill said, "I'm not surprised to find you here sniffing around Meg's skirt. I've heard before that outcasts tend to find each other. Not that I blame you, she is a rather choice piece."

Carter heard Meg's sharp intake of breath. He felt her hand clutch at the back of his shirt. He didn't take his eyes off Bill long enough to see if Meg's reaction was one of fear or anger.

"Good to see you too, Bill," Carter said, his voice lacking warmth. "I see that you're still very much the same."

"Why change perfection?" Bill said, his arms sweeping wide to encompass the room. "I'm the heir to a successful horse ranch, the eldest son of British nobility, and I'm the smartest man within the nearest three counties in any direction."

It took almost every ounce of control Carter had to resist the urge to clench his fist and send it flying into Bill's jaw. Bill was either willfully ignorant of the troubles he had caused his family or he was simply uncaring. Both were inexcusable. Bill would have to be dealt with soon. Carter had no intent of destroying Bel's Christmas dinner, however.

Carter turned and wrapped his arm around Meg's waist and pulled her close. He smiled down at the question in her eyes, but was relieved when she accepted his embrace in full view of the family. More than one curious glance was cast in their direction.

"You are right about one thing, though. Meg is the most beautiful woman in the room," Carter said. "And she's spoken for."

With those words Carter ushered her across the room to where Bel stood. He kissed the older woman on her cheek and wished her a Merry Christmas. He even took another glass of egg nog and pretended to sip it. He handed it to Meg as soon as she turned away. Meg tried to hide her giggle behind her hand. Carter winked at her.

"Spoken for?" Meg asked. "A bit presumptuous of you, isn't it?"

"Why are you afraid of him?" Carter asked. "What did he do?"

"Nothing in particular," Meg said. "He just has this way of looking at me that makes my hair stand on end. He just looks too close, like he's

trying to tell me something that I don't understand. It's rather unnerving."

"I'll explain soon, but keep your distance from him. Don't let yourself be caught alone with him," Carter said. When he saw her nod, he continued, "And for all that's holy, if he touches you, scream."

"Look at you two, heads together and whispering like you're keeping secrets," Philippa said before hugging both of them. "What is so important that you have to keep it secret, Carter?"

"I was just telling Meg to be wary of nosy cousins," Carter said as he reached up and pulled one end of her braid.

She swatted him on the arm. "Fine, don't tell me. But I'm stealing Meg from you. It's her first Christmas here and I won't have you keeping her all to yourself."

Bel announced that dinner was ready. The family filed into the dining room one by one. Stephen was the last to leave the parlor with Carter. Stephen leveled a pointed look at the younger man. Carter inexplicably felt the need to confess, but kept his mouth shut. He hadn't done anything wrong.

Yet.

"I'm expecting an announcement soon, Carter," Stephen said.

Carter wasn't going to pretend that he didn't know what the older man was saying. Carter had the blessing of everyone in the family except Bills, not like that mattered much to him. That didn't mean that he could keep openly trying to seduce Meg without answering some questions.

"You'll get one as soon as I ask her and get an answer," Carter said.

"You should be asking her soon, I'd say," Stephen said. "The air between you two gets any hotter and we'll have to call for the fire brigade."

Chapter 25

Meg sat in the seat by her bedroom window as the sounds of Christmas revelry died down and each member of her family settled in for the night. She had excused herself after the presents were opened, overwhelmed by the generosity shown to her. Never before had she received such gifts.

Philippa gave her three new store-bought dresses. She couldn't decide if she liked the blue one or the green one better. Although the pale yellow one was lovely, too. Bel had given her a new pair of boots as well as new undergarments to complement Philippa's gift. Uncle Stephen gave her a book of fables and James had bought her a new sewing kit.

She had knitted socks for everyone. The men receive a matching pair of gloves while the women were given a matching pair of mittens. She had not yet had the time to make the shawls she had planned for Bel and Philippa. Meg had no problem admitting that her gifts were less impressive by most standards. She had received nothing but praise at her skills, but she wondered at how much of it was given to avoid hurting her feelings.

She had not given Carter his gift yet. Somehow giving him a present in front of the family seemed less intimate than she wanted. She had watched his dark figure as it left the house and walked across the gleaming snow. A low light shone in the window of the bunkhouse. She could see no more movement inside and imagined him lying on his bunk as he had been before.

She shivered at the image.

Meg waited until she could hear Uncle Stephen snoring softly down the hall before she grabbed her coat and the small bundle laying on the foot

of the bed. She opened her bedroom door and lightly stepped out into the hall. She took care to pull the door closed behind her while making no sound. She walked on her tiptoes down the hallway and sidestepped the now familiar floorboards that would have groaned under her weight.

She eased down the stairs and looked back toward the bedrooms every few steps to make sure she was not being watched. She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the bottom stair. Her feet padded quietly along the rug that ran the length of the hallway towards the kitchen.

The back door stuck a little as she pushed it open. She grabbed it when it popped away from the frame and cast a quick glance over her shoulder once again. She listened for sounds of movement on the floor above her but heard nothing but the tick of the old clock in the hallway.

She took a deep breath to slow her pounding heart. She looked to the left, then to the right, and then behind her again. The night was silent and still as she stepped out of the shadows by the house and into the moonlight. Her feet raced across the impacted snow between the house and the bunkhouse. She flew to the bunkhouse door and knocked louder than she had intended. She was just about to turn around and run back to the house a moment later when Carter pulled open the door.

He took one look at her, noticed the panicked look in her eyes, and then pulled her in the bunkhouse. He looked at the house for signs of movement. Satisfied, he closed the door, turned and crossed his arms as he leaned back against the door. Now that she was here, he didn't think he wanted her to leave.

"Breathe, love," Carter said. "You'll faint if you don't."

Meg glared at him for suggesting that she would do something so undignified, but took his advice. When the room was no longer spinning, she turned to him. That was a mistake. He was still lounged back against the door looking far too appealing for her current degree of sanity.

"I've never fainted in my life," Meg said. "I just didn't want to be caught coming out here. Uncle Stephen might get the wrong impression and we'd find ourselves in a bit of trouble."

"Would it be the wrong impression?" Carter asked as he unfolded himself away from the door.

He took slow, measured steps toward her. She held up her hands to get him to stop. He ignored her. She backed up a few paces and looked

around for something to put between them. The room was distressingly bare save for the bed in the corner.

“I came to give you your Christmas present,” Meg said. His grin turned devilish. “It’s socks, so you can take that grin off your face.”

Carter stopped in front of her and took the bundle she was holding out to him. Indeed, she had knitted him some wool socks. He would make use of these when he was out on the range. More often than not his feet were so cold they hurt by the time a day’s work was completed.

“I made you gloves and a hat to go with it. You can pull the hat down over your ears so they won’t get so cold when you’re out working the horses,” Meg said, hoping that her explanation would somehow add value to the gift.

“Thank you, Meg,” Carter said. He saw her teeth chewing on her bottom lip and her eyebrows were drawn together. “It’s a very thoughtful gift.”

She shrugged and looked like she wanted to cry. “I have something for you too,” Carter said. He went to the trunk at the foot of his bed, opened it, and took out a small box. “I saw this in Stillwater, and I thought you would like it. It plays music.”

The box was small and wooden. It had an engraving of flowers carved into the top. She twisted the key on the bottom of the music box and smiled as the first cords of the Moonlight Sonata filled the air.

“The lady selling me this told me that the fellow who wrote that song was a pretty big deal over in Europe up until about fifty years ago,” Carter said.

“Oh, yes, he was very popular,” Meg agreed. “He is still very well-liked by most music lovers.”

Meg turned and put the music box on the small table near the bed. She looked back at him and unbuttoned her coat, unsure about what to say. She tossed her coat across the foot of the bed and looked around as she for time and tried to gather her thoughts.

Carter watched her as she struggled to cover her nervousness. He had felt the stirrings of passion when she had started unbuttoning her coat and was more than a little disappointed when she did not continue with taking off her dress. He stepped forward, his hands going to her waist. She met his gaze, still unsure of herself.

“I thought I would ask you for a kiss,” Meg said, her voice soft.

He pulled her fully into his embrace. One of his arms wrapped around her waist, holding her tightly to him. The free hand rose to the base of her neck. He pulled pins from her hair one by one, freeing those lovely dark curls. His eyes captured hers as he lowered his head and claimed her lips. She closed her eyes and let herself get lost in sensation.

She tilted her head and opened her mouth under the onslaught of his. Her tongue rose up to meet his. His lips were soft but firm as they danced along her own. Her hands searched out his body. She reveled in the feeling of his hard muscles underneath the coolness of his shirt.

She tugged his shirt out of his waistband and then set about unfastening the buttons. She shoved the shirt down off of his shoulders and let it fall to the floor. The muscles on his stomach jumped at the first touch of her fingers. She tangled her fingers in the crisp hair across his chest and ran her fingers over his nipples. She felt rather than heard his breath catch. She repeated the motion. He growled in response and hauled her even more tightly up against him.

Meg’s knees felt weak as she clung to him. Carter’s hands deftly worked at the buttons of her dress and peeled away the garment. His hands touched each inch of flesh that they uncovered. Chills ran down the length of her spine as heat pooled in her belly.

He picked her up and placed her on the bed. He covered her body with his own before propping himself up on his elbows to look down at her face. Her eyes were filled with passion, her lips swollen from his kisses. Her beautiful hair was fanning out from the pillow and she reached for him.

He stroked her face. His thumb traced her lips. He kissed the bridge of her nose before his lips returned to hers. The kiss was brief.

He would not give her what she wanted.

Not yet.

“Meg, here’s your chance to leave,” Carter said.

“Leave?” Meg asked. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Hell, no. I want to be inside you. If you don’t leave soon, that’s exactly what is going to happen,” Carter answered. He was so hard he couldn’t be any more subtle than that.

“I want that too,” Meg said.

Carter stilled. He studied her face. Her eyes were clear. Gone was the panicked, frightened look he had seen when she first came in the door.

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you think I came all the way out here?” Meg challenged.

It was all the confirmation he needed. His mouth settled on hers again as he claimed her fully as his. His hand worked at the ties to her chemise and pulled the fabric away from her firm breasts. His mouth trailed from her lips down her throat. He shoved the chemise down to her waist as his mouth settled on one erect nipple. He lapped at the tip with his velvety tongue. White hot shots of pleasure shot from her breast down to that secret place between her legs.

He pushed the chemise down over her hips past her knees where it settled in a tangled mess by their feet. He ran his hands down the length of her body as his mouth went from one breast to the other. His hands stroked from her hips down to her thighs. His mouth left her breast and moved down the flatness of her belly as his hands grabbed her behind the knees and lifted them.

Meg was beyond all ability to think. His hands and mouth were doing the most wonderful things to her body. She felt hot and desperate. Her hands ran over his shoulders, across the muscles in his back. She could not stop her hips from undulating underneath him as his mouth trailed hot fire from her breasts to her navel. Good God, who would ever think that would feel so wonderful?

Her breath caught as he continued his descent. She arched against him as a soft moan escaped her, and she nearly jumped off of the mattress when his mouth settled between her legs.

Meg’s nerves were frayed. She thought she was going to explode. She raised her knees up a bit further as his tongue laved the sensitive flesh at her core. He found her most sensitive flesh and flicked his tongue across it. She cried out and arched up against him. She tensed as he inserted a finger into her heat. The momentary discomfort was quickly forgotten as he stoked her passion higher and higher.

Her climax shook her to the core. She cried out as waves of pleasure shot through her. His mouth left her and she felt him kiss his way back up her body. She looked at him through hooded lids and reached for

him. The look in his eyes spoke more than any words could that they were not even close to finished with the night.

He pulled back from her and freed himself from his trousers, quickly divesting himself of the garment before covering her body with his once more. Her mouth went dry at the sight of his manhood, swollen and erect. She knew the fundamentals of what was to happen next, but did not know how he would fit. He seemed a bit too large for her to handle. He did not leave her much time for doubts to creep in. His mouth took hers as his hands started working over her body, reigniting the flame of her passion.

Carter settled between her thighs and pulled her knees up around his waist. He looked down at her face as he guided himself into her opening. He could feel the thin layer of skin guarding her virginity as he eased the tip of his shaft into her. He leaned down to kiss her as he thrust fully inside, capturing her cry of pain.

He grabbed her hands as she to push him away and stretched them over her head. He lifted his lips from hers and kissed away the tear that slipped down her cheek.

“Hush love,” Carter soothed. “Your first time was bound to be painful. Relax your legs so it won’t hurt as much.”

Meg didn’t believe him. She had just gone from feeling incredible pleasure to being ripped apart. She saw his jaw clench and sweat dot his brow. She decided to trust him and relaxed her legs, which were now squeezing his waist. She was not the only one feeling uncomfortable.

Carter watched her as he started to move within her. He shoved her knees wider to stretch her and to try to ease her pain. He watched the grimace on her face fade, to be replaced by a look of bemusement. Carter reached down between them and started stroking the nub of flesh between her thighs. She closed her eyes and moaned. He stroked her again as he quickened his pace, trying to be gentle.

Meg moaned her pleasure, her hips rising up to meet his. He watched as she was swept up in the same torrent of feeling that had overtaken him. He captured her lips as his own climax washed over him. He grunted into her mouth as he spilled his seed into her. A moment later he felt her release.

He collapsed on her, his sides heaving. He felt her shift underneath him and heard her grunt.

Carter lifted his weight from her and rolled to his side. He pulled her with him and wrapped his arms around her. She laid her head on his chest, closed her eyes, and yawned. A feeling of contentment and protectiveness overcame him as he held her as she dozed. He kissed her brow and pulled the ends of the blanket up around their bodies.

“Carter?” Meg asked sleepily.

“Yes, love?” Carter said. “What is it?”

“I’m completely inept,” Meg said as if she were confessing a grave sin.

Carter smiled. “Not at everything.”

“I’ll never survive out here,” Meg said. “I need you to teach me what I need to do.”

This daft woman wanted him to teach her what she needed to know to leave him. And she asked him to do it after making love to him. She should be basking in the glory of their love, not thinking of survival skills. He resisted the urge to throttle her.

Arguing with her would prove useless. She would just get all stubborn on him and insist on doing things her way. She’d probably get herself killed in the process. He had to figure out a way to get her to want to stay with him.

He remembered something Stephen had said that might prove to be his saving grace. He would have to make her think staying with him was her idea.

“We’ll start tomorrow.”

Chapter 26

Meg slept later than usual the following day. Her eyes widened with surprise when she looked at the clock on her mantle. Seven-thirty! She had practically slept the day away. She had wanted to sleep with Carter all night, loving the feeling of being naked in his arms. He would not hear of it. He practically shoved her out of the door as soon as she got dressed. Something about Uncle Stephen having a stroke and grabbing the shotgun. At least he had kissed her goodnight first.

She stretched and noticed an ache in her thighs. She thought of what she and Carter had done the night before to cause that ache. She waited for the familiar feelings of embarrassment and awkwardness to overtake her but they didn't come. She did not feel ashamed or embarrassed about making love with Carter. Thoughts of what his hands and lips had done to her made her shiver and she started to ache in an altogether different, but yet more pleasurable way.

She wrapped her robe around her as she climbed out of bed. The floorboards in her room were cold as she padded over to her washing basin. She saw the dried blood on the inside of her thighs as she completed her morning ablutions. She washed it away before dressing in the trousers and boy's shirt that Philippa had given her.

She braided her hair and put on her boots. Carter had promised to show her more about how to take care of herself out here in the West. She needed the lessons. Meg's resolve waivered at the thought of riding away from Carter never to see him again. She could not see a way to stay with him. He would always be in danger as long as she was near.

She ran her fingers across the music box he had given her. Next to the locket that once belonged to her mother this was now her most prized possession. She smiled at the thoughtfulness of the man who had given it to her. She wouldn't change a thing about him.

Meg shook away her musings. She had lessons to learn. Carter had told her that he would spend much of the day on repairs in one of the barns. She didn't know how she would be able to help without getting in the way.

She entered the kitchen and set the kettle on the stove to make her morning tea. She went to the breadbox as it brewed and grabbed two pieces of bread. She grabbed a knife, the butter, and a pot of jam and sat at the table to have her breakfast.

Angry voices reached her from the end of the hallway. She looked around the corner towards the study. Uncle Stephen was upset and someone was getting a tongue lashing. Her mild mannered uncle was always a gentleman, and rarely became upset, but had an impressive temper when riled. He was riled right now. She did not envy whoever was the recipient of his anger.

Philippa turned the corner and looked toward the study. She turned toward Meg and rushed down the hallway to the kitchen. Her lovely face was filled with awe.

"I can't remember the last time I saw my father angry," Philippa said. "I wonder what Bill did."

Meg suspected that he had done any number of vile deeds. She just could not name what they were, so she shrugged at her cousin and buttered her other slice of bread.

"Could you hear what was being said?" Meg asked, not sure what else to say.

"Yes, but it didn't make much sense. Something about being irresponsible and trying to ruin the family," Philippa said frowning. "Whatever could that mean?"

"I suppose Bill was denying it?" Meg said.

"Yes, of course he was," Philippa said. "He isn't around that much. I'm not sure where he goes when he leaves, but I'm certain that he would never do anything that would cause problems for us."

Meg was certain he would do whatever he pleased regardless of the problems it caused others. Her cousin liked to believe the best about people. It was not in her nature to believe ill of other. She was well-traveled and educated, but rather naïve.

Meg rose and reached for the kettle. She poured her tea and turned to see her cousin now frowning at her. She sipped her tea and waited for Philippa to start asking questions. She didn't have to wait long.

"Why are you dressed like that? You can't possibly go riding today," Philippa said.

"I'm going to be helping Carter," Meg said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I, er... You," Philippa said. She paused, reached up to rub a spot between her eyes. "You're doing what?"

"I'm going to be helping Carter," Meg repeated. "I've come to the realization that I need to learn a lot if I'm going to be living in the West. Carter has agreed to teach me what I need to know."

"What exactly will he be teaching you?" Philippa asked.

"Well," Meg said. Now it was her turn to frown. "I'm not really certain. I need to learn to drive a wagon, but that's out of the question until the snow melts. I need to learn how to shoot and hunt..."

"Hunt?" Philippa interrupted, incredulous. "Why on earth would you need to know how to hunt? Have you ever even held a gun?"

"No, and that's another thing. I need to learn how to shoot," Meg said. She looked at Philippa's shocked face. "Do you know how to hunt?"

"Of course I do. I grew up on a ranch. Riding and shooting and hunting and fishing and roping are all things I just learned how to do over time," Philippa said. "My relatives in England would be apoplectic if they saw me doing any of that, but that's another world over there. Why do you need to learn this all of a sudden? You've been here for months and you haven't said anything about this."

"I was just thinking that it was time I was able to earn my keep," Meg said. She washed out her cup and reached for a towel to dry it. "I've been thinking about the future a lot in the last few weeks. My life in the city did not prepare me for anything but making very little money doing very difficult work that has very little value out here."

"You don't need to work as long as you're with us, Meg," Philippa said.

"Everyone here needs to work. You work. Aunt Bel works. I'm the only one who doesn't," Meg said. "The only thing I really do is knit, sometimes do the wash, and frequently get in the way. I can't be a charity case for the rest of my life."

Another round of angry shouts punctuated her words. She put her cup back in the cupboard and reached for her coat where it hung by the back door. She pulled on her gloves and reached for the cap that was shoved in her pocket. It was similar to the one she had given Carter. She hoped he

wore his today. She could hear the wind whistling between the trees. Anyone caught out in that was likely to end up frostbit.

With a nod toward her cousin, she pulled open the back door and braced herself against the cold as she stepped outside. She found Carter at the far end of the stable. He was working on one of the wagons that had a busted axle. He wasn't wearing his coat. His hands were dirty and his sleeves rolled up to his elbow. Grease was smeared across his left cheek. She heard him utter a curse that made her ears burn.

She walked around the end of the wagon, careful to stay out of his way. By the look on his face, she judged that he was ready to curse again. Instead he stood up, took a deep breath and threw down the tool he was holding. She grimaced, rethinking her plan.

He advanced on her. She took a step back and was stopped short by the barn wall. He put his hands up on the wall on either side of her face and leaned down to take her mouth with his. Surprised, her mouth opened underneath his. He took advantage by deepening the kiss. She responded by wrapping her arms around his waist and pulling him closer.

He broke the kiss. He kissed her cheek, her forehead, and her freckles. He stood back and smiled. In the soft light of the barn, he looked like a lost, dirty angel, come to earth to steal the hearts of mortal women.

"Morning, Meg," he said.

"Good morning," she answered. "What are we doing today?"

"I'm fixing this blasted wagon. You'll be learning how to tie a knot and rope a bucket."

"Rope a bucket?" Meg asked.

"Yep," Carter said, too cheery. "You can't rope a steer or a wild stallion without first being able to rope a bucket."

"This is a survival skill?" Meg asked. She was certain he was teasing her.

"Absolutely," Carter said. "What if you're on the trail and your pack horse runs away. You would have to fetch it back somehow."

Meg had not even considered that she would need to take a pack animal. Of course she would need that. She would probably need all sorts of supplies to make it across the deserts or the mountains or wherever she decided on going. She had no idea what those supplies might be, but she supposed she would get to that later.

Meg watched as Carter grabbed a length of rope off of a peg along the wall. He stood close to her and fashioned a knot in one length of the rope. He then pulled what looked like the center of the knot so that there was a large loop in the rope. He must be crazy if he thinks she was going to fall for this. As soon as she tries to toss that rope, the whole thing is going to come undone.

“Ok, so this is for all intents and purposes the lasso we are going to use today. I’ll show you on a real one once the weather gets better and we can actually try to rope something that moves. I’ve fashioned a slip-knot here, that allows you to adjust the size of the lasso here,” Carter explained.

He handed her the rope and showed her how to hold it in each hand. He put a bucket on a hay bale in the middle of the barn and adjusted the lantern so that she could see what he was doing. His face was serious. She could detect no guile in his tone. So why did she feel so foolish standing here in her trousers with a rope in her hand trying to learn how to lasso a bucket?

“Alright. Now you take this end and swing it like this,” Carter said as he stood behind her and reached around her to grab her arm. “You circle it above your head like this to get some speed. You’ll need the momentum for your throw. Yes, just like that. Now throw it.”

It landed right in front of her feet. She frowned at the rope and then at the bucket. She turned to show her scowl at Carter, who was trying to hide his smile from her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she turned around and started pulling the rope towards her.

“I just need practice,” Meg said. “You can go back to fixing your wagon. I’ll just work on this until I feel like I get what I’m supposed to do.”

“Do you want me to show you again?” Carter asked.

“No, thank you,” Meg said a bit too politely. “When I need your assistance, I’ll ask for it.”

“Suit yourself, but you might want to wear these,” Carter said as he handed her a pair of ugly work gloves. “You don’t want blisters now, do you?”

Carter watched her pick up the shreds of her pride. She sure embarrassed easily, he thought. She really shouldn’t. She had convinced herself that she was inept and needed to learn skills that she probably wouldn’t ever have to use. He was going to play along until she figured out

that she didn't really want to leave him. It gave him an excuse to be around her more.

"Well, while we're both working, we should at least talk," Carter said. "I'll try not to distract you too much."

Meg watched him walk to the far side of the wagon and felt a measure of relief that he was not going to insist on watching her complete this ridiculous task. She prepared to toss the lasso again. It landed just in front of the hay bale this time. She was still ridiculously off target, but was at least closer to where she needed to be. That was progress, wasn't it?

"What would you like to talk about?" Meg asked, hoping he wasn't going to mention last night.

"Tell me why you came here, again," Carter suggested.

Drat!

She didn't want to discuss that with him either. She delayed her answer as she pulled the end of the rope toward her again. She thought back to the day she had come to the ranch and tried to remember what she had told him. She would at least try to be consistent when she hedged giving him a real answer.

"My mother died. I had no reason to stay in Chicago...so I left," Meg said. She tossed the lasso again. It landed in the same spot. She sighed as she started pulling it toward her gain.

"You told me you were from St. Louis," Carter said.

"I never said I was from St. Louis," Meg denied.

"Yes, you did," Carter said, his voice suspicious.

"No, I said I lived in St. Louis before coming here," Meg corrected.

"That was true. But before that I spent almost my entire life in Chicago."

"Why did you go from Chicago to St. Louis?" Carter asked.

"Because my mother died," Meg said. She tossed the lasso again.

Carter wanted to bang his head into the wagon wheel. Was she deliberately talking in circles? He looked around for the wrench he had tossed away earlier as he thought of how to get her to relax enough to tell him the truth.

"What was in St. Louis?" Carter asked.

"St. Louis is a lovely town. There is a lot there," Meg said.

Now he was sure she was hedging. "What I meant was why you didn't come straight here after your mother died? Why stop in St. Louis

for...how long was it?"

"I was there for about three years," Meg said. "I didn't have much money and had underestimated the expense. I worked until I had enough to continue my journey."

"Stephen and Bel would have sent you the money if you had told them," Carter said.

"I know, but I'm not a charity case," Meg said, tossing the lasso again. "At least, I don't want to be one. Besides, I'm not staying here, remember?"

How could he forget? "Where are you going next?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps to California," Meg said with a shrug.

Carter looked up, beseeching the heavens for patience. If he hadn't known any better he would have thought that she was simple-minded. Instead, she knew she had been desperate. He didn't know why. He didn't think he had the patience to wait for her to come around to telling him the truth. He would be dead and buried before he got a straight answer out of her.

"You came all this way with barely any money, no plan to stay, and no idea where you are going next?" Carter asked.

He was asking entirely too many questions. She didn't want to outright lie to the man, but she also couldn't involve him in her problems. She had to figure out a way to handle them on her own otherwise she would be running for the rest of her life. She frowned at the rope in her hand and lifted her arm to throw it.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"I got it," Meg gasped. "See, Carter, I knew I would get the hang of this. Maybe I'll join a cattle drive."

"You'd break your neck the first day," Carter said. "Old Ginger, as sweet as she is, isn't a cattle driving horse. You'd be tossed and trampled."

"I wouldn't be tossed," Meg said, now indignant.

"Ginger tossed you in the snow because of a rabbit," Carter said scoffing. "What would she do with a thousand pound heifer coming at her? She'd toss you."

How much of her humiliation had he actually witnessed? "It was the fox that was to blame," Meg said.

Her hands settled on her hips and she spun around to find him leaning with his forearms against the side of the wagon. He was frowning right back at her. What she had done to upset him she had no idea. This man clearly had his moody spells.

“I think perhaps we should discuss something other than my plans for the future,” Meg said. “As you can see, I haven’t quite settled on my final destination. Further discussion is pointless, really.”

“Have you told Stephen yet that you plan to just take off?” Carter asked, ignoring her suggestion. “I don’t suppose he will be too keen on the idea of his niece just taking off to parts unknown alone, with no money, and no plan of what to do when you get there?”

“I doubt he will try to stop me,” Meg said, now doubtful. How had she not considered this? Uncle Stephen was usually mild mannered, but he could be quite firm when he got it into his head that he knew what was best.

“He will,” Carter said. “Anyone who loves you won’t let you just leave without trying to stop you.”

Meg couldn’t help but notice that he had not specified anything about himself in that retort. She was being silly, she knew, and would have died with embarrassment if he had said anything about the time they spent together last night. Still, she had hoped he would have at least thought about their interlude. To a man like Carter that would also mean saying something acknowledging the change between them.

She wasn’t making sense. She wanted him to say something. She wanted him to say nothing. She wanted him to say that he wanted her to stay. She wanted him to let her leave. Caring about someone was turning out to be very confusing business.

“Wouldn’t someone who loves me care more about my happiness?” Meg countered.

“They would be thinking about your happiness in trying to get you to stay,” Carter said. “Do you remember what I said about Gerald and Philippa? That he wouldn’t be leaving her if he really loved her? That goes both ways, you know. Philippa didn’t do anything to stop it, proving she doesn’t really love him either.”

“What could she do?” Meg asked. “I think you are overestimating the power of a woman.”

“No, I just know that particular one very well,” Carter argued. “She’s smart, beautiful, and the craftiest person I’ve ever met. If she had really wanted to go with him, she would have found a way.”

Meg frowned at his profuse praise of her cousin. He had not even acknowledged that she had been able to rope that stupid bucket yet but he goes on and on about how wonderful her cousin is. Perhaps she should be getting her lessons from Philippa.

“The person who loves you will not let you go so easily,” Carter continued. “If you won’t stay, they go with you. That’s how love works. Get it?”

“How do you know so much about love?” Meg challenged. “How many times have you been in love?”

“Once,” Carter said. The answer was simple.

Meg felt like she had just been kicked in the chest by a mule. He had never mentioned any other women to her. He was too much of a gentleman to openly compare her to someone else. Still, he could have said something before now. She would never have thrown herself at the man if she knew he was pining away for someone else. Oh, God. What if it was Philippa? Was he just waiting for Gerald to leave and Philippa to realize that he wasn’t coming back to start his seduction?

It made sense. He was settling down on property directly adjacent to the ranch Philippa had grown up on. He wanted to settle down within an hour’s ride away from where she lived. He had grown up with her, had a pet name for her, and could say nothing but effusive praise for her. Her stomach turned in knots. She felt light-headed. Her mouth started to water.

Carter watched her trying to figure out his words. He thought he had been pretty blunt with her. She looked like she was going to faint. Her skin had turned so pale it was almost translucent. Even in the cold, he could see dots of sweat break out on her upper lip. Her eyes went wide. She was in an absolute panic at hearing him tell her that he loved her. He frowned at her. It was clear she had not wanted to hear that.

“I think our lessons are done for today. Don’t you?” Meg asked. She needed to get out of here. The last thing she wanted to do in front of this man was cry, and she felt dangerously close.

She turned and started toward the door. Would he just let her leave?

“Meg,” Carter said. “We’ll pick your lessons back up tomorrow. Come find me after you have your breakfast.”

She stopped. She did not turn around. He would see the tears glistening in her eyes if she did. She closed her eyes and nodded enough for him to see.

“Tomorrow, then,” she said.

She made it to her room before bursting into tears.

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Chapter 27

Blisters covered her fingers and her arms ached. She spent every morning this week with Carter. He tried to convince her that she needed to learn how to tie knots and throw a lasso. She wasn't so sure, but she only had this winter to learn a few things about how to live in the West. Once she had mastered this, he had agreed to show her more.

She sat atop Ginger and was circling the corral. Carter was having her try to rope the post as she rode by as he was repairing a few of the rails of the corral that had rotted with age. He stayed close to the house this week, letting James, Roger, and Uncle Stephen keep their eyes on the herd. Bill was gone again. She couldn't help the feeling of relief that had come over her at the news.

She felt ridiculous and was certain that she looked just as stupid as she felt. Philippa and Bel had been graceful enough to say nothing about her new-found drive to learn the fundamentals of how to ranch. She had been the recipient of several sideways looks and had seen a few poorly disguised smiles.

Carter confused her. He greeted her every morning with a kiss that made her toes curl and her knees go weak. He then pulled away from her and all but ignored her the rest of the day as he completed his chores except for when he had some ridiculous thing for her to do, like roping fence posts.

She tossed her lasso towards the nearest post and missed. She frowned in turn at the post then at Carter. She wasn't buying his explanation that this was the best way to learn.

Meg pulled on Ginger's reins and stopped near Carter. She leveled a look at him when he smiled up at her. He had been hard at work all morning, but rarely missed making a comment when she felt most foolish. She was done for the day and dismounted.

"I'll be putting Ginger up now," Meg said.

"You haven't roped the post yet," Carter said. He wiped his forearm across his brow.

"Nor do I intend to," Meg said. "I fail to see how this is a useful skill for a woman."

"If you want to head West on your own you might need to know how to do this," Carter said.

“I will simply have to take the coach to a large town. I’m sure I could find employment as a seamstress or as a housekeeper. Heaven knows I know how to clean someone else’s house,” Meg said.

Why hadn’t she considered that before? Her mind was so muddled with doubts about leaving Carter that she had failed to think rationally about this plan of hers. She would have to find a way to make the money to purchase her ticket so she would not break her neck riding a horse across the Rockies. Perhaps she could speak with the owner of the general store about selling some of her needlework. Surely some old widower would want to purchase some embroidered pillow cases. Just because his wife died doesn’t mean that he can’t still enjoy the basic comforts of life.

She opened the coral gate and led Ginger through. She ignored Carter as he called out for her to stop. He had not argued with her, so surely he was in agreement that leaving by stagecoach was the better choice. She was no frontiersman and they both knew it.

Meg was quick about bedding Ginger down in her stall. How long would Carter continue to allow her to ride the horse he had purchased in order to save it from going to the glue factory? She and Ginger had made a peace of sorts, she supposed. Ginger was well-behaved more often than not. Meg had little doubts that Ginger had a gentle nature, but still did not fully trust her. An animal that large was bound to be up to no good.

Meg almost jumped out of her boots when she turned around. How on earth did that man move so silently? Carter was standing right behind her just outside the stall door. His face was still, his eyes intent as they studied hers. He was leaned against the stall door, hands shoved in his pockets.

Meg walked toward him, her steps slow and measured, her eyes locked to his. The air around them grew thick and heavy and dry. Her tongue ran over her lips. Her hand reached out for him, brushed past the panels of his coat to the firm chest underneath. Her hands moved down to the flat of his stomach and around the sides of his waist.

His hands settled on her hips and pulled her close. His head lowered and his lips claimed hers. Passion flared between them. She rose on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. She opened her mouth wider as his tongue slipped between her teeth. Her tongue tangled with his. He growled deep in his throat.

He broke the kiss and pulled away. She clung to him and tried to pull him back into her embrace, hungry for more. He kissed her temple and took her hand, leading her down to the far end of the stable. He stopped by the ladder that led up to the hay loft and turned to grin at her. He motioned to her to climb the ladder. She looked up to the loft then turned to meet his gaze. His smile was crooked and a wisp of blond hair fell over his brow. She resisted the urge to reach up and brush it away, before she turned and mounted the ladder.

She would touch him all she pleased once they were out of sight.

Carter enjoyed the view from below as he followed her up the ladder. He had been burning to touch her for days, but had wanted to wait until she was no longer sore from their lovemaking the previous week. He was enjoying the time they had had together this week, although he was certain that she was catching on to the fact that he was making up his lessons as he went. He had agreed to stay close to the ranch house to do all of the repairs needed in exchange for the other men working the herd. Stephen had agreed because he thought it less likely that Carter would seduce his niece within sight of his house.

Carter was not inclined to correct the man.

Meg had turned as soon as she stepped onto the loft and was ready to rush into his arms. He was pleased that she was as anxious for loving as he was. First he had to see to her comforts. He searched around and pulled a wool blanket out of the tack room above. He spread it over a stack of bales before turning to Meg and holding out his arms.

Meg looked at Carter with a question in her eyes. Carter did not want to waste time pretending he didn't understand.

"I'd hate for you to not enjoy yourself because you have a bunch of hay sticking into your backside. By the time we're finished here, you'd feel like a pincushion," Carter said as he pulled her close.

"How thoughtful of you," Meg murmured as she brushed the hair off of his forehead. Her arms wrapped around his neck and her fingers dug through his golden hair.

His hands returned to her waist as his lips nibbled on hers. She turned her head to allow him better access. Their kisses were light and playful. His hands moved lower across the curve of her hips and around to

her firm bottom. She gasped and he felt a shiver run down her spine. He smiled into her lips as he continued his light assault.

Her hands caught at the lapels of his jacket. He was wearing entirely too many clothes for her peace of mind. He allowed her to push it down over his firm shoulders and toss it aside. His hands returned to her hips as his lips moved downward, trailing fire from her lips to her throat. Her head rolled to one side as he gently nipped the place where her neck met her shoulders. Her nipples hardened and chill ran down her spine.

Her hands reached for the buttons on his shirt. She fumbled with the closures as his firm, warm lips moved over her skin. One by one she released the buttons and ran her hands over the warm skin underneath. The wiry hair tickled her palms. She tugged the tail of his shirt out of his trousers, and he helped by shrugging out of it and throwing it on the floor behind him.

He lifted her shirt over her head and trailed kisses along her collarbone. Deft fingers worked at the laces to her shift which followed her shirt to the floor. He bent her backward across his arm as his lips skimmed each breast. She arched up into him, her limbs heavy. She felt the wool of the blanket on her back as he laid her back. He grabbed her trousers and pulled them down over her lovely firm curves.

He lifted her so that her hips rested on the wool-covered hay bale. He knelt in front of her as he removed her boots and freed her from the confines of the trousers. His mouth found the soft flesh on the bottom of her foot. His hands skimmed up over her calves and around to the back of her knees. He moved upward, his mouth replacing his hands as he hooked her knees over his shoulders, spreading her legs wide. He pulled her forward as his mouth moved up to the soft flesh of her thighs.

Her hands stroked his shoulders as his mouth found her warm, moist center. She cried out and moved against him as he made love to her with his mouth. Liquid heat spread through her limbs and shot down her belly. Her climax came swift and sudden. Her world seemed to come apart at the seams.

Carter stood and pulled her forward, her legs spread wide. He opened the panel of his trousers, freeing his manhood. Meg's hand ran down his chest, across the span of his belly and lower to where his proud member stood jutting out. She licked her lips as she reached for him. Her

hand settled over him. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, allowing her innocent exploration. He was willing to withstand a few moments of torture to allow her pleasure.

Her hand closed around the length of him, testing his weight. He was longer than the length of her hand. Her fingers could barely close around him. His flesh was firm but smooth. She felt captivated by the play of emotions crossing his face as she touched him. She slid her hand up his length and then down to the base and heard his breath rush out.

He grabbed her hand, stopping her play, and kissed her palm. He grabbed her knees and pulled her close to the edge. He reached down between them and felt her wetness before guiding the tip of his shaft into her warmth. He adjusted her legs around his waist as he started to move within her.

Meg leaned back as he started to move to allow him to thrust deeper. She was surprised that there was no pain, only unbelievable pleasure. She reached up to run a hand through her hair. Her hand fell to her breast, now bereft of attention. Carter's eyes narrowed on her breasts, now joggling with the rhythm of his thrusts. Her hand closed around one of her breasts, her fingers teasing the nipple as he had done before. A jolt of pleasure shot through her and she repeated the movement.

His thrusts quickened as he watched her touch herself. His hands dug into her hips as he tried to control his release. She wasn't close enough yet and he wanted to delay his pleasure until she achieved her own. One hand moved from her hip to her lower belly to stroke the nub of flesh at her center. Her head fell back and she moaned; her breath was not ragged and shallow as she climbed higher and higher.

Carter felt her release from deep within her. She gasped and stiffened. She whimpered and shuddered. He thrust deeper and harder, his face constricting as his seed spilled into her belly. She collapsed backward on the blanket as he lowered her legs from around his waist. He leaned over her and buried his head in her breast, nuzzling her flesh tenderly.

Her hand stroked his hair. She felt as if she were floating on a cloud. Ripples of pleasure continued to shoot through her core. Gooseflesh rose on her breast and belly as she became aware of the cold air surrounding them. Strange that a moment ago she felt as if she were standing next to the sun.

Carter pushed away from her and reached for their clothes. He grabbed a handkerchief from his coat pocket and used it to clean up the aftereffects of their lovemaking. She watched as he cleaned her, wondering if she should be feeling more embarrassed at the intimacy of the act.

They dressed slowly, each watching the other's movements. Meg would never tire of watching him move. She looked for a flaw, but could not see one. He had scars, but they only added to his allure. His golden blond hair and sun burnished skin reminded her of the princes she had heard about in fairy tales. His strong arms and chest rippled with muscles and she doubted that he knew his own strength.

She wondered if she had jumped to the wrong conclusion about Carter being in love with her cousin.

She had confused herself again. He had told her that he had loved once, but not that he loved her. He kissed her every morning. He made love to her. He talked to her about his hopes and dreams for the future. He revealed to her the pain of his past. Yet he spoke not to her of love.

She knew she was too chicken to just come out and ask him about it.

Yet.

She said nothing to him of her love either. Why confuse things even more than they already were? She didn't know when she was leaving or where she was going, but she knew he was not going to come with her. She would not ask him because he would always be in danger if he was with her. He would not leave her because he would be giving up his dream of having a place to call his home.

They climbed down out of the loft. He held her hand as they walked through the stables. He pulled her close to him before they walked outside. He lingered over their kiss. She did not pull back. He stroked the side of her face. She leaned her cheek into his palm.

The bell announcing dinner penetrated the silence, breaking the spell that had befallen them. They were slow to part as they stepped outside into the cold.

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Chapter 28

The town was small and had nothing to recommend it to those who were accustomed to a more civilized environment. Molly Beck's boarding house was situated close to the town square, close enough that passers-by often stopped there to have lunch. He had found the information shared over those simple gatherings quite invaluable.

Like most small towns he had encountered, Stillwater was filled with simple people with simple minds. He had to do little else but say that he was passing through from St. Louis to San Francisco to get them to talking. No one bothered to question why he was lingering in town instead of catching the first stagecoach out. Instead, they regaled him with town gossip and the family histories of local families.

In this manner, he learned just how much he had been played a fool.

He had tracked that little hussy across half the continent on a wild goose chase. Some ignorant cow poke in Rockville had deliberately wasted the last two months of his time by telling him that his charge had been seen in Wyoming with a family that were settling in Montana. He had traveled up to Helena and sent out dispatches out through the telegraph wire with her description. He spoke to lazy and incompetent sheriffs from one end of this God forsaken land to the other and had come to the irritating conclusion that he had been told a falsehood.

He was going to get her back. He had invested too much time, energy, and money into cultivating his dream. He had spent hundreds of dollars to pull her closer to him and keep her close. He had made sure she was reasonably educated and skilled, but that she knew her proper place. He would not have her becoming too uppity. He would not have his work destroyed by her running away.

He had removed the people standing in their way. She had not even had the good grace to thank him for that. Her father was an incompetent dolt who was too ignorant to be allowed to live. He felt no remorse in sending that man to his grave. Her mother had been a weakling who stood in his way long enough before he put the pillow over her face while she slept.

Miss Simpson had done the acceptable thing by pretending to be upset. He had allowed her a slight period of acceptable mourning to keep up appearances. He would have a hard enough time explaining to his associates how he married the hired help as it was. He was not going to allow her to present herself as anything less than a well-educated and gentle lady. He had paid for her to be tutored alongside his daughter and she damned well would observe the appropriate mourning period, else he would be displeased.

However, she would not be allowed to extend it without need. He would forgive the slip of sanity she has shown in leaving him without permission to visit family. She was so overcome with grief that she was not in her right mind. Had she simply mentioned the desire for the trip he would have sent a telegram in her name to her relatives informing them of her mother's death. That would have allayed her fears and would not have resulted in needless time spent away from each other.

Of course, she would have to be punished.

The fool who gave her a job in St. Louis had refused to tell him where she had gone when he called on her. He had found her, had cornered her in their little game of cat and mouse, and that idiot wouldn't tell him where she had gone. Miss Simpson enjoyed every bit of their little game, just as he did. The anticipation of seeing each other just heightened the awareness they had for each other. It would be quite grand when they finally were reunited. Though, he was tiring of the game and would close the circle once again and take her back home where she belonged.

She was his. She had always been his. Since the day he hired that nitwit of a father of hers to place bets in the gaming halls, she had been his. He had met with her father in the parlor of the house the family had rented. Everywhere he had looked he had seen evidence of encroaching poverty. The rugs were faded and threadbare, the furniture would have made decent kindling, and the drapes were covered in dust. All evidence pointed to him being a bad gambler, and that was just what he had been looking to find.

He had just settled the matter of assigning Mr. Simpson the accounts to his lumber mill. Mr. Simpson would take money from the accounts, bet it on a race or a poker game, and lose the lot. He would then be able to tell his father that, through no fault of his own a trusted employee

had embezzled the money and run the business into bankruptcy. His father would then allow him to sell it like he had been asking to do for years.

He was a gentleman of leisure, not a farmer or a factory worker or a lumberjack. His destiny was to own businesses that would not leave his hands dirty at the end of a day. He was meant to be a Senator. He was meant to rule over his underlings. Owning a lumber yard was too distasteful to stomach.

He had packed up his papers, shook Mr. Simpson's hand and turning toward the door when a little girl with big blue eyes and scuffed shoes ran into the room. Her mother had come to fetch the impetuous little darling from interrupting the important business taking place. He had looked from mother to child and had seen a striking resemblance. The mother was too old for his liking, her hair starting to turn grey at the temples, and wrinkles starting to line the corners of her eyes. The child would grow up to be a beauty. Terrible that she would grow up living the life of a servant.

He had turned to Mr. Simpson in that moment and insisted that the family move into his estate. He insisted it was only proper. The mother would become a member of his housekeeping staff and he would ensure that this young child would grow up properly educated. He had basked in the effusive gratitude that was bestowed upon him that day. He saw the child duck behind her mother's skirts, not willing to look at him and clinging to her mother's hands, and nodded in approval.

She was already learning to be submissive and he could not have been more pleased.

He could not but be displeased at some of the reports he was hearing about her conduct of late, however. She had come out West to stay with her aunt and uncle, whom she had never even mentioned to him. An unfortunate oversight, that.

Of course, he would never have allowed her the trip even if she had asked him as was the only proper thing to do. How could he ensure her safety from such a distance? Silly girl.

He had heard from the townsfolk that she had attended a dance and had been dressed like a trollop. Of course these ignorant country bumpkins said only that it was a pretty blue dress that matched her eyes and fit her well.

He knew what that meant. It meant that she might as well have been naked for all the flesh she had put on display.

She would have to be punished for that.

He had heard that she danced with almost every man in town, but had saved her waltzes for some handsome cowpoke. The description of the man sounded an awful lot like a man he had seen in Rockville. A simple question about whether the ranch hand was from around these parts confirmed his suspicions. The man had been born in Rockville and had moved in with the Lawson's as a child.

And so he had identified his newest adversary.

He poured himself another cup of coffee and stared out the window. The weather was warm enough for the snow to melt off a bit, unusual for this time of year he had heard from the locals. He would be able to get to her within a few days if the weather held. He needed to figure out a way to remove the rest of the obstacles standing in his way.

He could deal with the aunt and uncle. They must be close to his age by now and would be easy to handle. The family had dismissed most of their hired help, a useful piece of information he had picked up over dinner one night this week. The only real problem would be this young buck who seemed, by all accounts, to be quite taken with Ms. Simpson. He would have to eliminate him with care. Tales of vigilante justice in the West were nothing new and he had no desire to end up being chased down by a posse and strung up by a rope.

First, he needed to draw closer to the family. His newest associate had said that the family was in dire financial straits. Now that was information he could use. He planned to meet with the man holding the debt and broker a deal. He planned to pay off the balance. The Lawson's would then be in his debt and Meg could not refuse to return with him. Enough of her foolishness, it was time to come home. She wouldn't be able to say no. No, he had all of the power and she had none.

He pulled his watch out of his waist coat and checked the time. The wise warrior took the time to know his enemy. He would take even more time to know his enemy's enemies. He would prove a powerful ally to those who meant to punish those who harbored the one he wanted most in this world.

Yes, he would show them the rightness of his actions.

Divide and conquer. That was his plan. He would surround his enemy and scatter them to the four winds. They would weep for their foolishness and rue their indiscretions. That saucy little tart he meant to marry would swallow his wrath and reap the rewards of his generosity in coming to rescue her from her wild ways. She would weep before him and beg for mercy as he snuffed out the life that sought to separate them. He would grant her forgiveness. He had failed her in not teaching her proper submissiveness. He would soon remedy his error.

She would learn.

Chapter 29

Carter could not go on like this. They were drawing too much notice. Stephen had been watching him like a hawk for weeks now. He suspected the older man knew something had happened between him and Meg. The full extent of it was not known, however. He would have been marched down to the nearest chapel with two loaded barrels pointed at his back and an ornery, petulant bride at his side if Stephen had found out.

He was tired of sneaking around. Meg was adamant that they keep their affair secret. She still thought he was just going to let her leave without a word of protest. He had no intention of telling her what he planned to do to keep her. She would only argue with him.

He was spending more and more time away from the ranch. His comfortable little hollow in the woods was taking up most of his time. He would start the expansion to the cabin as soon as springtime came. He had three cows in the barn now and a handful of chickens walking around the yard. It was almost perfect to him.

Carter looked up at the sounds of hoof beats. A shiver of apprehension ran down his spine. Bad news was coming. He spied movements in the trees. Gus's saddle was thrown across the top rail of fence. He reached for the rifle tucked into his bedroll. He moved to the side of the barn and peeked around the corner just as Roger rode into the clearing.

Carter uncocked the rifle and walked around the side of the barn to greet the other man. Roger's face was constricted, his brows drawn together and his lips tight. Tension hummed off the other man, usually stoic and unreadable. He was angry. Carter didn't have to wait long to find out why.

"There was another raid today," Roger said. "This time it was bad. Real bad."

"What do you mean by bad?" Carter asked.

"James and I were out working the herd. Shots were fired. James's horse was shot through the head and went down. He barely kicked free before it fell on him. Only two horses were taken. I pulled James up behind me and tore into the woods, shots still going off. James has a flesh wound across one thigh and in his shoulder," Roger said. He shook his head. "What kind of man shoots at a man's back when he's in retreat?"

“A coward, that’s who,” Carter said. “Was the doctor called?”

“No need,” Roger said. “Miss Philippa is patching her brother up, clucking like a worried hen. Mr. Lawson will be hard pressed to keep the truth from the women folk now. They’re bound to start asking questions.”

“Who was it doing the firing?” Carter asked. He meant to find out and go after them.

“There were two men,” Roger said. “Neither one was from around here I don’t think...not that I know of, at least.”

“Only two? That’s pretty bold,” Carter reflected. “What direction did they ride off in?”

“To the North,” Roger said. “I took James back to the house and followed them to the Kennedy’s land line. I can’t say I’m really all that surprised to see Mr. Monroe waiting there with his shotgun ready for me. He called me some things not worth repeating and his finger looked like it was itching to pull the trigger.”

“He’d like nothing more to kill a freed black man, Roger,” Carter warned. “I heard once he was an overseer of a plantation in Louisiana before the war. I can’t imagine that he’d take too kindly to a man given his walking papers like you were. Stay clear of him.”

“Yes, sir,” Roger said with a nod. “I intend to do just that. I said my apologies and backed away. I’m half surprised I don’t have a hole in my back.”

“Monroe is the one we need to watch, Roger,” Carter said. “I don’t know how much the Kennedy family is behind all of this, but their help is doing everything they can to kill the Lawson ranch. You and I are the only help left. We’re both obliged to this family for taking us in when we were weak and in need. The ones who left just needed a job. Monroe underestimates what we will do to protect this family.”

“Is that brother of yours still around abouts?” Roger said.

“He is,” Carter said. “He’s keeping an eye on Bill for the most part. Bill is still the worst gambler this side of the Continental Divide. Porter is doing what he can to keep him alive long enough to figure out who he owes the most money to.”

“That boy is going to be the ruin of his poor father,” Roger said.

“He will,” Carter agreed. He turned to go saddle Gus. He was needed at the ranch. His dream of building a home of his own would have

to wait until the family he loved was safe. He owed them too much to leave them now.

They made quick time back to the ranch. He studied the tracks in the snow where the skirmish had taken place. The two shooters had picked a strategic vantage point with plenty of cover and a wide open shot. The attack had been too close to the house for his liking.

Carter met Roger's eyes, still smoldering with anger. They rode back to the house in silence, each man lost in his thoughts. Carter put Gus in his stall in the stable and turned to find Roger bedding down his own horse.

"Roger," Carter started. "After dark I'm going to need a favor."

"After dark?" Roger asked, curious.

"Yes, you should wait until after dark to leave the ranch. When you do, stay near the tree line as long as you can. With that black beast you ride, you won't be seen very easily unless you make a lot of noise," Carter said.

"What will you be needing me to do?" Roger asked.

"Go into town and find the back stairwell to the saloon. My brother is renting one of the rooms above right next to where the girls like to do their entertaining," Carter said. "Knock at the back door and send a message up to Porter having him come with you back to the ranch. All you need to say is that there's been trouble and I need him here. He's a man of few words and won't ask questions."

"I don't like being away from the ranch too long with there being so much trouble around here," Roger protested. "I have a woman to look after too, you know."

"Bring Jeanette to the house," Carter said. "I'm going to go have a few words with Stephen and then I'm going to see what I can do to put a stop to this madness."

Carter straightened away from the stall door where he had been leaning and strode out of the barn towards the house. He took the stairs on the porch two at a time and burst through the front door. Meg was hurrying down the hall with a pitcher of water in one hand and a stack of linens in the other. They made the briefest moment of eye contact before he climbed the stairs and went straight to James's room.

James was lying on the bed, his shoulder bandaged and the covers pulled up to his waist. Bel was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding

James's free hand and fretting something fierce. Stephen was standing by the window with a look on his face as dark as a thundercloud. Philippa was squeezed up on James' other side, holding a cup up to his lips that he was doing his best to dodge.

"Dang it, Pippa," James said in disgust, "I'm not a bloody invalid and I don't need your tonics shoved down my throat."

"It will help with pain," Philippa argued. "You won't heal properly if you're in too much pain."

"Get it away from me," James growled.

"Stop your fussing and drink," Philippa retorted. "I'm smarter than you and you can't run from me. You're going to lose this battle."

"For the love of Almighty God, stop your bickering," Stephen said. "James you are the only man alive who would grouse so much at someone trying to help you."

Philippa sat back with a superior gleam in her eyes. She was brought up short when Stephen turned and caught her eye.

"And you, stop nagging him. You've cleaned him up and wrapped his wounds. Let him decide if he's going to swallow that disgusting tonic you like to mix up. I swear on my father's grave you like to make it as gag-inducing as possible," Stephen said. He noticed Carter standing in the doorway. "Bel, my love, Philippa, you'll have to excuse us now. We have business to discuss."

"Oh no, you don't," Bel said standing. Her hand rested on her hips as she met her husband's angry glare. "This is my son too and I have every right to know what's happening to this family."

"It's an isolated incident, Bel," Stephen said.

"Isolated?" Bel challenged. "My son got shot a quarter of a mile away from my house. This is after months of the hired help 'running off' or quitting or whatever it is you would have me believe. Months have passed since the pantry was well-stocked. Half the herd is gone, and yet there is no money to buy fabric to make curtains or for Philippa to buy a proper wedding gown. I've put up with the deception long enough, Stephen, and I will have the truth now."

"Mama, what are you saying?" Philippa said, her face had grown pale.

“I’m saying we’re broke,” Bel said. “If you just take the wool off of your eyes and put your feet back on the ground long enough to think about something other than Gerald, you would see the rightness of my words.”

“That can’t be,” Philippa said. “Papa, tell us straight.”

Stephen shoved his hands in his pockets and hung his head, his brows drawn together. Carter saw the weight of the world land on the shoulders of the other man. He seemed to age ten years before his eyes.

“Carter stand aside and let Meg pass. She might as well hear this too. It concerns us all,” Stephen said.

Carter had not heard her approach, so wrapped up was he in the drama unfolding in the room in front of him. He stepped back as he turned to let Meg in the room. She still held the pitcher and the linens. His eyes met hers as he reached to take the stack of linens out of her hands. He read the worry in her eyes and wished he could do something to erase the ugliness she was about to hear.

Meg put the pitcher on the table beside the bed. Philippa sat the cup she was still holding near James’s face on the same table and reached for the pitcher. She poured water into a bowl and dampened a towel. She ran the wet cloth over her pale face. Carter could see her tremble from across the room.

Meg returned to Carter’s side by the door. She did not take that position out of need to be near him, he knew, but because she wanted to keep herself as separate from the rest of the family as possible. She didn’t feel like she belonged even after all this time.

Bel’s hands fell from her hips and she clasped them in front of her as her eyes narrowed on her husband’s face. She was showing a rare display of spirit, but it was long overdue. Stephen needed to catch hell from someone whose opinion mattered to him.

“Now, Stephen,” Bel commanded.

Stephen took a deep breath. He reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, his head still hanging down.

“It’s been going on for about two years now,” Stephen said. “I first got words of his gambling problem around the Christmas before last.”

“What are you talking about?” Philippa asked, rising from the bed and taking her place beside her mother. “Who has a gambling problem?”

“Your brother, Bill,” Stephen said. “It was not long after I put his name on the deed to the ranch. I thought I would pass my life’s work on to my oldest son and he would carry on our family name as the best horse breeders in the West.”

He broke off with a bitter laugh, “He had other ideas. It seems he was just waiting for his chance to get his hands on my money.”

“Two years, Papa?” Philippa asked. “Why did you not put a stop to it?”

“By the time I found out about it, he had run up enough bills using the ranch as collateral that I had no legal leg to stand on. The bill had to be paid, and that exhausted everything we had. I told him that it was enough and that it would be a cold day in Hell before I paid off another gambling debt. He seemed properly subdued at first.

“Six months later I started getting letters from him asking for money. He said he had gotten himself into trouble again and hired thugs were going to kill him if he didn’t pay them. I sold off a few horses and paid them,” Stephen said shaking his head. “I couldn’t live with the thought of my son being hurt if I could do something to prevent it. So, I paid his debt when I told him I would no longer. That only seemed to encourage him.

“Last year around Christmastime I heard he mortgaged the ranch to pay off his debt,” Stephen said. “I flew into a rage, tracked him down to that whorehouse over in Sweetwater and dunked his head in a barrel full of water until he sobered up. I dragged him to the bank and to the attorney’s office and had his name take off of the deed to the ranch, which is now heavily mortgaged. I also told him that day that he would have to earn his way back into my Will and my good graces. You will notice we don’t see much of him around here lately, so I suppose he’s not too concerned about earning back my trust.

“We had good year and I had a little surplus built up by then. I sold off some more of the herd and got us mostly out of the water,” Stephen said.

“And yet, here we are again, in dire straits,” Bel said. It wasn’t a question. Her face was drawn in disappointment and anger, but her eyes relentless in their determination to find out the truth.

“Last Spring, just after Philippa’s engagement was announced, I started getting more letters from Bill, saying the same thing as before. I

ignored them. He made his bed and he can lie in it, or that was what I was thinking at the time,” Stephen said. “Then the disappearances happened. The first time we thought that it might be a drifter passing through stealing the horses or maybe Indians coming off the reservation. Then it happened again. And then again.”

“That many horses disappearing had to be traceable,” Philippa said. “Why didn’t you just follow them to get them back? Horse thieves are not welcomed here.”

“I thought perhaps it was Bill’s creditors coming to collect and that if I turned a blind eye and let them take enough to pay off the debt it would work out in everyone’s benefit. They would get the money owed to the, Bill would be spared, and I would not have to swallow my pride and admit defeat,” Stephen said.

“How bad is it now?” James asked.

“We’re months away from losing everything,” Stephen said. “The bills just keep rolling in and every few weeks there’s another raid. At this rate I’ll have to sell the ranch by May. I was hoping to delay it until Gerald got back from his schooling. Philippa at least would have some place to go.”

“Oh, dear God, Papa,” Philippa said. “Shirley Kennedy will never allow Gerald to marry me if it becomes known that our family is heading to the poor house.”

“Another part of the reason that only Carter and I knew the full extent of the damage your brother has done to this family,” Stephen said. He buried his hands in his face, unable to bear the shame of his actions and the anger he saw in his wife’s eyes. “And the damage I have done in allowing it.”

“What can be done to fix this?” James said. “And why would you tell Carter and not me, your own son?”

“Carter has distance from this. He won’t get so wrapped up in his emotions. You and Bill have never gotten along. This would only have made the breach worse,” Stephen said. “You would have wanted to run off and confront him and chances are that you would have both ended up shooting each other. Carter is level-headed. You’re not.”

Carter watched James as he heard his father give excuses for why he chose to confide in the hired help instead of his son. He saw a flash of

pain shoot through James' eyes. Whether it was from his wounds or his father's words, he couldn't tell. He supposed it didn't really matter.

"We're going to put a stop to this," Carter said. "Today they crossed the line. This has to end."

Stephen nodded. "We're outnumbered, but I agree with you. Once they go after one of my sons in order to punish the other, they have gone too far."

"Why is the law not involved?" Meg asked. "Surely the Sherriff will be willing to help."

"The Sherriff in Stillwater is the most useless man alive," Carter scoffed. "If he has to leave his card games and his wife's apple pie, he's not willing to do much about anything. Both Stephen and I have gone to him to report the thefts. He grunted and helped himself to another slice of pie. That was the extent of his response."

Meg stepped closer to him, her eyes searching his. Her brow crinkled as she lifted her chin, challenging him. "What makes you so certain that you can stop them? They've been getting away with this for months."

He cocked an eyebrow as he looked down at her, meeting her challenge. "Stephen didn't want any of this to be known. I had a job to do... one that I desperately needed to keep for the moment. I wasn't about to go rogue and take on this mess by myself. I'm not stupid."

"But you're going to run off now and possibly get yourself killed," Meg said. She was furious at his recklessness. How dare he be so foolish?

"We can help," Philippa interjected.

"You'll stay home where you belong," Stephen said. "Now is not the time for you to go gallivanting around the countryside."

"Gallivanting?" Philippa said, incredulous. "I do no such thing."

"You will stay here. You will conduct yourself like the lady you were raised to be, and you will burn those blasted trousers you like to wear," Stephen said, ignoring the way she just stomped her foot. "I've been too indulgent with my children. That is going to end today."

"I'm one of the strongest trackers within the nearest three counties in any direction. No one is a better horseman than me, either. I can shoot better than any man around, Papa. You know all of this is true," Philippa said.

“And as soon as you step foot off this property, you will have a target on your back,” Stephen said. “If you want to help, stay here and show Meg how to shoot as well as you do, and let the men take care of the rest.” He raised his hand as he saw his daughter prepare to protest. “I will not allow you to leave this ranch without one of us as an escort.”

“So the women are prisoners here as the men-folk go off to play the hero?” Philippa asked. Her face was red and her fists were balled at her side.

Stephen ignored his daughter’s anger as he turned to Carter. “After dinner, we’re going to sit down and figure out our plan. We won’t go into this unless we know what we’re doing and to whom.”

“I already know who is doing it,” Carter said. “You just haven’t been ready to hear it.”

“I’m ready now.”

Chapter 30

“Are we really doing this?” Meg asked.

“Absolutely,” Philippa said. “My father wants me to be the ever-obedient daughter, and that’s exactly what I intend to be.”

Meg thought she looked about as obedient as Lucifer. Sure, her cousin was dressed in a pretty yellow day dress and her hair was artfully coifed, but the expression on her face was mutinous. Three days had passed since Uncle Stephen had taken a firm hand with his children and Philippa was still smarting from the insult.

The weather had turned unseasonably warm. The snow had melted and the skies were clear. Philippa insisted that she teach Meg how to shoot her rifle. Meg’s protests were ignored, as everyone in the family deemed it was a splendid idea.

Meg was outnumbered.

Carter spent hours with Uncle Stephen in the evenings. Philippa and Meg took turns trying to eavesdrop but could make out little of what was being said. Meg had no idea what the men were planning and she didn't like being ignorant of what was happening. Carter had been distant with her and when not in the study hatching seemingly nefarious plans with her uncle he was nowhere to be seen.

"Upon further reflection of my situation, I'm not sure this is a skill I will really need," Meg argued.

"Nonsense," Philippa countered. "You want to live in the West you need to know how to handle a gun. Now, enough arguing."

Meg admitted defeat as she accepted the weapon that was thrust into her hands. As her cousin explained to her the proper way to hold the weapon, load and unload it, as well as the proper way to fire it, she realized how foolish she had been. For weeks, she had convinced herself that she would be able to saddle a horse and ride off into the sunset without looking back. Never mind the fact that she was broke and had no idea where she was going, she also had no idea about how to defend herself. Worst of all, she found that she no longer wanted to leave.

She wasn't certain that changed anything, though.

"Meg, you need to concentrate." Philippa's voice penetrated her reverie.

"Sorry," Meg apologized. "I find that I'm starting to rethink some of my decisions."

"Well, rethink them as you shoot that can of beans off of the fence post over there," Philippa said pointing to the far side of the yard.

"I think I should get a little closer," Meg said as she eyed her target. One look at her cousin's stern face and she relented. She raised the butt of the gun to her shoulder, looked down the barrel of the gun, and pulled the trigger. The rifle had quite a kick. Now her shoulder ached and her ears were ringing.

The can didn't move an inch.

"What were you aiming at?" Philippa asked.

"The can," Meg said.

Philippa looked at her and then looked at the can. She shook her head and sighed. "I think I should explain to you exactly how you use the

sights.”

Meg listened as Philippa further instructed her. She followed her cousin’s instruction as they were explained to her. The can still didn’t move. Her shoulders slumped in defeat. She lowered the gun from her shoulder and turned back to look at her cousin. Her attention was caught by movement near the house. The object of her distractions walked out the front door and mounted his horse. Without even so much as a glance in her direction he spun his horse around and galloped off to the south.

“He’s avoiding you,” Philippa said. “But why?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Meg said.

“Are you admitting that you care for him?” Philippa asked.

“Are you meddling?” Meg countered.

“Absolutely,” Philippa said, unapologetic. “The air crackles when you are in the same room with him. Did you notice?”

Did she notice? Her heart raced and her mouth went dry when she was near him. Her palms felt sweaty and her knees went weak. Everything but Carter faded from her vision when he was near. Did she notice? How could she not?

“Did you notice that Bill came home this morning?” Meg asked.

“He was in the study with Uncle Stephen and Carter when you came down for breakfast. I didn’t hear any shouting this time so perhaps he stayed out of trouble.”

Philippa ground her teeth together and took a deep breath. “I cannot believe my father kept all of this from us for so long. It’s infuriating.”

“Do you think Gerald knows about any of this?” Meg asked.

“No,” Philippa said. “His mother would have never agreed to continue with the wedding plans if she knew, and he would have told her if he had discovered the truth.”

“When will you tell him?” Meg asked.

“I won’t,” Philippa said. “The wedding will go on as planned. I won’t let Bill’s mistakes come between me and the man I want to spend the rest of my life loving. Carter and Papa will figure out how to dig us out of this mess. No one who isn’t a part of this family needs to know.”

Meg understood a warning when she heard one, but she could not help but protest once more. “I think this is an ill-advised scheme, Philippa. It screams of dishonesty.”

“What Gerald doesn’t know won’t hurt any of us, and that is all I will say of the matter. Besides, now that Bill is home I have my escort to Gerald’s ranch. His sister received a catalog from St. Louis. We are going to pick out my china patterns,” Philippa said.

“How long will you be gone?” Meg asked.

“If I can drag Bill out of the study, which I don’t believe will be a problem since his ego is probably flayed by now, we should get there by lunchtime. I expect I’ll be back in plenty of time for supper,” Philippa said.

Meg felt a chill go down her spine. She reached out and caught her cousin’s hand as she turned to walk away.

“Philippa, I feel uneasy. Perhaps you should wait to pick out your china patterns another day,” Meg said.

“Oh, nonsense,” Philippa said. “It’s less than ten miles from this house to theirs, and I’ve traveled the distance a hundred times. Don’t worry so much, Meg. Nothing is going to happen.”

Meg watched her cousin walk away and prayed that she was right.

Chapter 31

“The good news is that there are no more than thirty of them. The bad news is that there are only two of us. We need more help,” Porter said.

“Four. There are four of us. Stephen will come with us, so will Roger. James still has a lot of healing to do, so he’s laid up for at least another couple weeks,” Carter said.

“Four, then. We could still need more help,” Porter said. “Besides, that leaves the women home alone.”

Carter scoffed. “Despite what Stephen Lawson thinks, the women in that family are far from helpless. Philippa can outshoot any outlaw, and

God help you if she decides she wants to start throwing knives. Belinda is the kindest woman I know, but she's downright fearsome when she's riled. Philippa comes by her spirit honestly."

Porter wasn't quite so convinced of the ladies' prowess. "Just about every man can overpower a woman if he gets a grip on her."

"Well then we need to make sure they can't get close enough to do that," Carter said. "Tonight..."

He broke off at the sounds of a horse approaching. He looked out the front window and cursed. He spun on his heels, yanked open the door, and stomped out into the yard.

Meg reined in her horse and dismounted. She tied Ginger's reins around the porch railing and turned to Carter, who glowered at her from the front porch. She looked beyond his shoulder to the handsome man leaning against the inside of the front door grinning. She wondered what the joke had been.

"Are you insane?" Carter asked. "You are, right? You must be. That is the only reason I can think why you would deliberately put yourself in harm's way."

"I did no such thing," Meg said, indignant.

"Where is your escort?" Carter asked with his arms spread wide.

"You ran off before I could ask you, so just blame yourself. I followed pretty quickly behind you and I have the rifle with me," Meg said.

"The rifle you just learned how to shoot," Carter said. "How are your lessons going, incidentally?"

She ignored his tone. "Not well, to tell the truth. I consistently shoot three feet up and to the left of what I'm aiming at. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"You're aiming three feet high and to the left," said the man standing behind Carter.

"Stay out of this," Carter said across his shoulder.

"Oh, not a chance. This is just proving my theory about men and women," the man said.

Carter rolled his eyes. Meg was curious about who this man was. He was clearly someone who knew Carter well, or he would not be trying to wind up Carter. Men didn't tease each other, she was certain.

"What is your theory?" Meg asked as she looked around Carter.

“That they really just don’t go very well together. Sure, women are fun to play with from time to time, but I’ve yet to see a man and a woman who really like each other when all of their clothes are on.”

Meg gasped and felt her face flame. Carter’s face was equally red, but she doubted that he was embarrassed. His fists were clenched and so was his jaw. He turned to the other man and spoke in a low voice.

“Leave.”

The man smiled and punched him in the ribs as he walked past. “See you tonight, little brother.”

“Brother? Carter, is that really your brother? Tell him to come back. I want to meet him properly. Shame on you, why didn’t you introduce me?” Meg asked.

He could not believe that she was actually lecturing him about his manners. He was furious with her and she had the gall to lecture him. He grabbed her wrist and hauled her into the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

“Why are you here, Meg?” Carter demanded.

“Why are you avoiding me?” Meg countered.

“Why would I be avoiding you?” Carter asked.

“Are you upset with me about something?”

“Why are you answering all of my questions with questions?” Carter asked, exasperated.

He walked toward her. Within the confines of the cabin she felt the force of his anger. She took a step backward with each step he took toward her. She looked around in desperation when her back hit the wall. She knew he would not hurt her, but judging by the look in his eyes he really wanted to.

“I’ve wanted to see you all week, and you’ve acted like I don’t even exist,” Meg said. She had not meant to sound so petulant.

“So, you’re going to risk your neck when there are violent criminal stalking the area just because you think you’re being ignored?” Carter said as he placed his hands on either side of her head and leaned toward her. He looked as though he wanted to glare her into submission.

“Well, when you put it that way, it sounds rather rash of me to come out here?” Meg said. Her chin rose up a notch as she looked into his eyes. Maybe she could just bluster her way through this.

“Rash? Idiotic more like,” Carter said.

“You don’t have to be insulting, you know. I came out here because I missed you, but if you’re just going to yell at me, I’m going back home,” Meg said. She pushed against his chest, trying to move past him. He wasn’t moving. She felt trapped.

Taking advantage of her nearness, Carter slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her firmly into his chest and nuzzled the side of her neck. She pulled back and glared up at him. He was trying to throw her emotions off balance and he was succeeding admirably. They both knew it.

“What are you doing?” Meg asked through clenched teeth.

“Well, since you’re such a stubborn little piece of baggage and unwilling to follow simple instructions, I thought I’d dole out a little punishment. Tsk, tsk, tsk. After all, disobedience does require discipline,” Carter said.

He slid his hands from her waist to her firm buttocks, squeezing them the way he knew pleased her. She gasped.

“Discipline? You’re insane, Carter, if you think I’m going to stand for this,” Meg said. She ignored the chill that ran down her spine. His hands were working the best kind of magic on her frayed nerves. If he kept this up, she would forget her pique.

“Oh, I’m perfectly sane, my love. But I agree, you should definitely not be standing for this,” Carter said.

Before she knew his intent he picked her up and turned towards the bedroom. He looked into her eyes, waiting for her protest. She thought about pushing him away and resuming her lecture, but his eyes fell to her lips and she forgot to breathe.

He put her on her feet beside the bed. His lips claimed hers, devouring her. His anger was fueling his passion. She wrapped her arms around her neck, fingers tangling in his hair, melting into his embrace.

Carter pulled the pins holding together her chignon. Her hair fell in a dark curtain around her shoulders. He stroked his hands down her back. She felt the buttons of her dress being released one by one. His lips traveled from her lips to her jawline and down the exposed length of her neck as he peeled her dress down from her shoulders. She fought to free her arms from her sleeves, eager to resume touching him as his lips continued their downward journey across her collarbone and to the valley between her

breasts. She grasped his head with one hand as his lips laved a trail to her nipple. Her other hand pulled at the hem of his shirt, pulling it up over his shoulders and baring the muscled expanse of his torso.

He sank down to his knees in front of her, trailing kisses down the flatness of her belly. He pushed the fabric of her dress down past her hips, letting it pool on the floor at her feet. His hands gripped the firm mounds of her buttocks as he pulled her center toward his hungry lips.

Meg's head fell back as his mouth found her mound, a moan escaping her lips. She gripped his shoulders as her hips started moving with the rhythm of his tongue. Meg could feel the pressure building within her. She was wild with desire and gasping for breath. Her knees felt weak.

She cried out with frustration when he pulled his mouth away from her. His mouth claimed hers in a kiss of pure possession. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hitched one leg around his hips, desperate to get ever closer to him.

"Lie down on the bed," Carter commanded.

She didn't even think about arguing. She moved to the center of the bed, propping herself on her elbows as she leaned back and watched him remove the rest of his clothing.

He was a magnificent sight to behold.

She licked her lips as she reached out to encircle his manhood with her fingers. She felt him jerk at her touch and heard the sharp intake of his breath. Her hand moved along the length of him, reveling in the smooth texture of his skin. The spongy tip glistened as she spread the drop of pearly liquid that seeped out of the tip.

Unable to resist, Meg leaned forward and kissed his shaft. Carter groaned, his hand dug into her hair. She felt a surge of power knowing that she could please him as he had done to her. She shyly took the head of his cock into her mouth as her hand continued to stroke the length of him.

Carter started to thrust his hips toward, his hands still tangled in her hair to guide her as she pleased him. She flattened her tongue to take more of him into her mouth as she looked up at him. Their eyes locked together. The hunger she saw in his eyes as he watched her pleasure him made her core start to throb.

Carter pulled her away from him and pushed her rather roughly down to the bed, blanketing her body with his own. His lips met hers as he

settled between her thighs. Meg wrapped her legs around his hips, arching up to meet him when she felt the tip of his cock at her wet entrance.

He slid into her fully in one thrust. The tempo he set was fast, his hips slamming against hers. She matched each of his thrusts with one of her own. He raised himself up to his hands, his gaze falling to where their bodies were joined. Meg's gaze followed his. The sight of him thrusting in and out of her sent her over the edge. Waves of pleasure crashed over her as she cried out her release.

She could feel Carter swell inside of her. His breath was ragged as he thrust into her deeper and deeper. He groaned and tensed above her. She felt the warmth of his seed filling her.

Carter was trembling as bad as she was when he collapsed onto the bed beside her. He pulled her into his arms and drowsily kissed her temple. She draped her arm across his chest, her legs tangling in his. She laughed with sleepy amusement.

She saw him raise an eyebrow in question and grinned up at him in response.

"I was just thinking that we should fight more often," Meg said. "This really wasn't a bad way for us to make up."

He laughed heartily at her suggestion and pulled her closer.

"Most definitely, my love," he murmured. "Anytime."

She rested her head on his shoulder and yawned. Her eyelids felt as heavy as the rest of her body. Within minutes, she was asleep.

Carter held Meg as she slept with her head on his chest and her legs tangled with his own. He stared up at the ceiling, his brow furrowed. He had been furious when she showed up here unescorted. The thought of her setting out on her own, putting herself in danger, was too terrifying for him to calmly accept. She was aware of the risk, or at least aware of part of the risk, and yet she had taken the chance just to come here to see him.

Why?

He couldn't believe that it was just because she had been feeling neglected. Sure, he had not had as much time for her in the last couple of weeks as he had before, but she would not have put herself at risk just for a little attention. She would never be that reckless.

She made no mention of what her feelings were for him. He knew the feelings were there or she would never have given herself to him. It was

clear that she was holding back, though. Whatever happened in her past was enough for her to deny her love for him.

By God, he wasn't going to stand for it much longer.

"Meg, love, it's time to wake up," Carter said, his voice soft. His hand started to rub circles along the length of her spine.

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled softly. He couldn't resist claiming her lips. He trailed kisses across her mouth, teasing and gentle. She sighed as he lifted his head and looked down at her.

"Are you going to tell me the truth about why you came all the way out here now?" Carter said. He rolled over, trapping her body beneath his as she frowned up at him.

"I told you why," Meg said. "I wanted to see you."

"You knew you were taking a risk," Carter countered. "I can't allow you to risk yourself like that."

"Allow!?" Meg said, her eyes flashing a warning. "You're not really in a position to allow or disallow anything from me, you know?"

"I'm your lover. I'm the man you love, and I'm the man who loves you," Carter said, his arms tightening around her waist as she tried to push away from him. "That gives me a little bit of say into what you do."

"You might be my lover, but you're not my father and you're not my husband," Meg said, pushing against his chest. He wasn't moving.

"Let's remedy that, then," Carter said.

"What?" Meg asked. "What are you saying?"

"Marry me," Carter murmured.

Meg closed her eyes and turned her face away. Carter held his breath, his heart pounding. "Absolutely not," Meg whispered.

Carter felt like he had just been kicked in the chest. He released her and sat back on his heels. Meg sat up and pulled her knees up to her chest, not meeting his gaze.

"Why not?" Carter asked. Every muscle in his body tensed. The pain of her rejection swirled with the anger at her recklessness. He felt dangerous.

"I just can't," Meg whispered. "It's too dangerous."

Carter stood and grabbed his clothes off the floor. He pulled them on in angry, jerking movements. He tossed her dress and undergarments to

her and watched as she stood on the far side of the bed and started pulling them on. She watched him like one would watch a coiled snake.

“Ah, I suppose we’re referencing your mysterious past,” Carter said. He was not able to keep the bite out of his words. “Well, don’t you think it’s time to tell me exactly what it is you’re running from?”

Meg’s eyes fell to the floor; her fists were clenched at her sides. She shook her head in denial. Carter wanted to shake the answers out of her, but dared not touch her for fear of hurting her.

Instead he crossed to his chest of drawers and yanked open the top drawer. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and tossed it onto the bed.

“I’m assuming it has something to do with this,” Carter said.

He watched as she slowly lifted the paper and unfolded it. Her eyes became as big as saucers as she read the wanted poster. Her face drained of all color. She swayed on her feet and had to reach out to the headboard to steady herself.

“Where did you get this?” Meg asked.

“I’ve had it for weeks. I ran into someone handing these out just outside town when I went to visit my brother,” Carter said.

“Oh, God,” Meg said.

“Who is he and why is he looking for you?” Carter demanded.

“I can’t tell you,” Meg said.

Carter cursed long and fluently. His patience was at an end. “Meg, I need answers. If this man is looking for you, and you’re running from him, it sounds like he’s dangerous. We’re already in a heap of trouble because of Bill’s choices. Don’t let yours cause even more trouble.”

“Can’t you see that’s what I’m trying to avoid?” Meg cried. “That’s why I’m running away. He is dangerous and he won’t stop looking for me. I don’t want you to get hurt. He’s hurt so many people trying to get to me. I love you too much to let him get to you too. Can’t you see that’s why we can’t be together? I have to leave. God, I never should have come here.”

“Yeah, you love me so much you can’t even be honest with me. You love me so much you reject my marriage proposal. You love me so much you have to run away,” Carter said. “I have news for you, Meg, that’s not love. When you love someone you stand by them, you fight for them, you don’t hurt them and you sure as hell don’t abandon them.”

“I’m sorry that I hurt you, Carter,” Meg said.

“Answers, Meg,” Carter said. He crossed his arms across his chest. “Give me the answers.”

“I don’t want you to get involved with this,” Meg said.

“I’ve been involved since the moment I first laid eyes on you. You don’t have a choice about me getting involved. That’s my decision,” Carter said. “I need to know what I’m fighting so I have a chance to live through it.” He raised his hand to stop her protest. “If, after we deal with this idiot who has you so terrified, you still want to leave, I will personally take you wherever it is you want to go. You will never be able to make it out there on your own, and we both know that.”

Meg wiped away the tears that spilled over onto her cheeks, and her lips trembled. She sank down onto the bed and looked up at him with a look of such despair he had to turn away.

“It all started when I was a child. My father was a good man, but he made some really terrible financial decisions. He became indebted to a man named Thomas Peters. He was hired to embezzle money for Mr. Peters. Then we went to live in Mr. Peter’s home. My mother was the housekeeper and I was his daughter’s companion. My father lost all of the money he got his hands on. Mr. Peters demanded every cent be repaid, plus interest. My father didn’t have anything to give him. My mother and I didn’t know about any of this until after Papa died. He threatened to send my mother to debtor’s prison to pay off my father’s debt,” Meg said. Her voice was low and halting. Tears streamed down her face unchecked.

“My mother was able to get him to agree to let her work off the rest of Papa’s debts as part of his household staff. We had nowhere else to go.

“I never liked Mr. Peters. I didn’t like the way he looked at me. I didn’t like the way he always seemed to be near me. He didn’t give two figs about his daughter but he became fixated on me. He sent me to school with his daughter and spent more time talking to the instructors about my education than Imogen’s. He bought me clothes that were the latest fashion and appropriate for a girl much older than I was at the time. It was almost like he was grooming me to become the exact woman he wanted,” Meg said.

“Did he ever try to touch you?” Carter asked. His voice was deadly calm as he asked the question.

“Not until I was seventeen years old. He cornered me in the dining room one night and kissed me. My first kiss was with a man who was three times my age and who I never wanted any attention from,” Meg said, her face filled with shame. She shuddered at the memory. “I pushed him away from me but he grabbed me, tore my dress, and tried to fondle me. I was able to break free, run to my room and lock the door before he caught up with me. About a week later, my mother got sick with a fever. He left me alone for a while I tended to her.”

Meg took a deep breath and met his eyes. “She was getting better. Mr. Peters tried to kiss me again one afternoon after I left her room and went to get new linens for her bed. I rebuffed him again. I only wanted to get back to my mother. She needed me,” Meg said. “The next time I went into her room she was dead. The doctor later claimed that she died of the fever, but I don’t believe that. The fever had broken the night before, you see.”

“You believe she was murdered,” Carter said.

“Yes, although I had no proof at the time. I left as soon as I possibly could. I gathered what little money my mother and I had been able to keep as well as the few valuables we had. I sold anything I could of ours to get the money for a ticket to St. Louis. I had to sneak away in the middle of the day when Mr. Peters was in a meeting otherwise I know he would never have let me leave,” Meg said.

“And once you got to St. Louis?” Carter asked.

“I was able to obtain employment as a companion for an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Martin. It was difficult work but I enjoyed it. I stayed there for a nearly three years before Mr. Peters found me again. He tried to convince my employers that I was his runaway daughter, but they didn’t believe him and sent him away. That night, the house caught fire. I was able to help Mrs. Martin to get out of the house and was about to go back in to get Mr. Martin out when the roof collapsed.”

Carter shook his head to rid himself of the image of Meg running into a house engulfed in flames to save an old man from burning alive. He feared he might never get rid of that image.

“A week later Mrs. Martin died. She was leaving her dressmaker’s shop after ordering her mourning gowns and was run down by a carriage. Witness said that the horses were spooked and the driver couldn’t get

control of them. No arrests were made because the carriage just up and disappeared. The description of the driver was quite similar to that of Mr. Peters. I left St. Louis that night. I brought only what I could carry and traveled under the name of Rebecca Waters. I tried to stay away from bigger cities until I figured out where to go next. Out of desperation, I thought of Aunt Bel. She was my mother's sister and has always been such a comfort. I made my way West," Meg said. "He won't stop looking for me. He has been obsessed with me since I was a little girl. If you get in his way, he'll kill you too and I won't be able to live with myself if that happens."

Carter let the silence stretch out between them as he considered her words. The fear she felt was written all over her face. He could see her trembling from across the room. His anger sharpened to fury as he witnessed her terror. He clenched his jaw, fighting to maintain control. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of her pale face and wide eyes. When he looked at her again, he saw her flinch.

He walked to his bureau and yanked open the top drawer. He dug through his stack of shirts and pulled out a small bundle of fabric. He untied the knot that held the ends together and pulled out the smallest gun she had ever seen.

"I know you haven't gotten the hand of shooting yet, but I want you to keep this with you at all times. Sew pockets into your dresses or put it down the front of your chemise for all I care, but you need to be able to protect yourself if something happens."

"Carter, I don't think I would be able to actually point that at someone," Meg protested.

"You should never point any gun at anyone you aren't prepared to kill," Carter said. "But if that son of a bitch does show up at Southfork, and I'm not around to take him behind the woodshed for you, you need to be able to send him packing. This little derringer doesn't have much range, so you'd have to be close to him. Only use it if he's coming after you."

"Carter, I can handle Mr. Peters. I've been handling him for my entire life. You're the one I'm worried about here."

"Meg, I'm not a sick woman and I'm not an old man. I will be much more difficult to kill than the others," Carter said.

"He won't challenge you openly. He's not stupid. He will wait until you're vulnerable or when you're not looking. He'll hire someone to do it

for him or he will use some other kind of trickery,” Meg said with a note of desperation in her voice.

“So your plan is just to keep running from him for the rest of your life...never get close to anyone? Seems rather grim to me,” Carter said.

“I don’t know what my plan is beyond this moment,” Meg confessed. “I thought I would travel from place to place every few weeks. Eventually I thought I would travel long enough he would just give up, but I know that’s not really true.”

“Come on. We’re leaving,” Carter said.

“Where are we going?” Meg asked.

“Back to the Southfork. You are going to stay there. I mean this, Meg. Don’t you dare leave. I need to catch up with Porter. We were on to something big when you showed up. We know who is robbing the Lawson’s blind and now trying to kill them. After we deal with them, we’ll deal with your Mr. Peters,” Carter said as he turned and yanked open the door. He all but threw her up into the saddle. Gathering the reins of his horse, he mounted and turned to her.

“Don’t argue with me about this, Meg. I’m in no mood to be nice right now.”

Neither of them said a word the whole ride back to the ranch.

Chapter 32

Meg tugged on Ginger’s reins, stopping in the pasture on the South side of the house. Her eyes were fixed on a horse racing down the North hill. She looked around for any sight of the rider. She saw no one.

“Carter!” Meg said pointing. “Something’s wrong.”

“What?” Carter asked, his gaze scanning the horizon. “Is that Daisy?”

“I think so,” Meg said. She saw the side saddle on Daisy’s back. A chill ran down her spine. “But where is Philippa? She would never leave her horse like that.”

“Bill’s horse is up at the house. We’ll check there first. It could be that he was supposed to bed down both horses and decided not to. He’s lazy

enough to just turn her loose like that,” Carter said. His expression revealed that he doubted his own words.

They hurried to the house. Daisy had made her way to the side of the house and was walking toward the corral. Carter dismounted and went to grab Daisy’s reins. He saw the satchel that Philippa had tied to the back of the saddle with her sewing. He spun around, looking for Philippa, his heart sinking.

“Meg,” Carter called to her. “Go upstairs and see if she’s in her room.” He tied Daisy’s reins around the hitching post by the porch as Meg turned to run up the stairs.

Carter rushed into the house, calling Philippa’s name. Meg appeared at the top of the stairs, wide eyed and pale. She shook her head. He cursed and called her name again.

“Carter, what has come over you?” Bel asked as she rushed out of the parlor.

“Where’s Philippa?” Carter asked.

“She went over to the Kennedy’s. Bill had gone with her, but she was taking a long visit so he came back. Don’t worry, he’ll go back to get her before supper,” Bel said.

“Where is he?” Carter demanded.

“He’s in the study with Stephen,” Bel said, following him down the hall.

Carter didn’t bother knocking. He opened the door and pinned Bill with a chilling look. Bill jumped out of his chair and took a step backward, his hands coming up in front of him in defense against the anger on Carter’s face.

“Why the hell are you here and not with your sister?” Carter demanded.

“Carter, calm down,” Stephen said. “He’s getting ready to go back to bring her home.”

“It looks like he’s too late. Her horse is here, but where is she?” Carter demanded, turning back to Bill. “Where is she?”

“She supposed to be at the Kennedy’s. It’s not my fault if she ignored my order and came home on her own,” Bill said.

“We have to go look for her,” Carter said. “Daisy was running around the house, still saddled. Philippa would never treat her horse that

way. Something has happened.”

Stephen stood up, alarmed. “We’ll go now. Bill, tell James that he will have to stay here with Bel and Meg. He won’t be much use to us wounded like he is. Carter, go get Roger. We’re going to go get her.”

Bill looked like he wanted to argue, but clamped his mouth shut when both men turned to him. Carter half hoped he would resist. He really wanted to an excuse to haul off and punch Bill.

Carter left the house with Stephen by his side. He glanced at Meg as he passed by her on the porch. The look on her face bespoke her confusion and anxiety. He spun to her and grabbed her hand.

“Stay here,” Carter said. “Promise me that you will be here when I get back.”

Meg looked in his eyes and nodded. “I won’t go anywhere. Not yet. Are you going to look for her?”

“Yes, and we have to leave now,” Carter said.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and saw Porter cantering towards the house from the South. He must have been waiting to follow him back.

Roger rode out of the barn, leading the horses he had saddled for Bill, who reluctantly gained his mount.

“What’s the plan?” Roger asked.

“We ride over the North hill. Either she was thrown or she ran into trouble,” Stephen said as he turned his mount and dug his heels into its flanks.

Carter would later remember the scene that lay ahead of him in his nightmares for years to come. Porter had intercepted the group before they crested the North hill. Several yards away, four horses grazed without their riders. He caught sight of Philippa lying motionless on the ground, her yellow dress torn, covered in blood, and raised over her hips, where Harold downs knelt between her knees.

Roger pulled hard on his reins, drawing his rifle and taking aim. He would not risk hitting Philippa so he took aim at Arnie White, the bastard standing behind Harold stroking his crotch as he watched Harold rutting between Philippa’s thighs. The rapport of the rifle echoed across the hills,

followed by a high pitched scream as the bullet found its home in the chest of its target.

Harold raised himself up in alarm, and turned to meet the threat. Philippa stirred beneath him. Carter saw a flash of silver as she swung her hand across Harold's waist, followed by a scream of pain and rage. Harold fell onto his back, doubled over in agony. Blood spread across his torso as he held his crotch where his now severed member once was.

The two remaining members of the group, Cletus Jones and John Wallis, both had their guns drawn. John must have known that they were woefully gunned, but he stood his ground, took aim, and fired. Stephen's horse reared and screamed. Stephen tried to kick free of the stirrups as his horse went down but was not quick enough. Carter heard the sound of crunching bones as Stephen's mount fell on top of him to the ground and drew its last breath, followed by Stephen's own cry of agony.

Cletus trained his rifle on Philippa. Carter did not doubt for a moment that he would murder Philippa in cold blood if he was desperate enough to try to save his own hide.

"Well, boys, it seems we have a standoff," John said as he reloaded his rifle.

"You don't leave here alive, Wallis," Carter said.

"Well, that's fine, but we're taking this pretty little morsel with us when we go. She sure was good for a lay," Wallis said. Turning his beady little eyes to Bill, he continued, "We warned you, Billy, didn't we? You didn't pay up and neither did your old man. We warned him that we would take what he values most if he didn't give us what we wanted."

"So you decided to attack my sister?" Bill asked.

Wallis grinned with smug satisfaction. "It was a bonus that she was still a virgin. I wondered about that with the way she was always sniffing around Gerald Kennedy's boots. I assumed the little trollop would have been used goods well before this."

"Wallis, shut up before you get us all killed. We're going to take our wounded away," Cletus said. "You take yours. We'll just call it a day."

"You're out of your mind if you think you're riding away from this," Roger said.

"Pipe down, darkie. No one asked you," Wallis said, his face flushed with rage.

“Let us take our wounded,” Cletus said again. “I won’t shoot her if you just let us take them. You can have her and get that horse off your boss there. He’s going to lose that leg, though.”

Carter glanced at Philippa. Her face was swollen and purple. Her temple had a bump on it that worried Carter. Her eyes were open, but lifeless. He knew that head injuries were tricky and could kill a person with little warning, or leave them permanently addled. She needed a doctor, and quick, or she might not live through the night.

As much as he wanted to kill each one of these bastards with his bare hands, he needed them alive. They were a part of a game that was not yet over and Carter needed to know where the rest of the players were waiting. He swallowed his disgust and hated himself for the next words he spoke.

“Drop you weapons and get out of here,” Carter said.

“Ah, but you see, we might need our weapons, so we’ll be taking them with us. You never know when one might have to shoot their way out of trouble,” Cletus said.

“You have one minute to be out of my sight, Cletus, or I’m going to put a bullet through your brain,” Carter said.

Cletus took him at his word. He helped pull White to his feet and shoved him towards his horse, all the while keeping his rifle pointed at Philippa’s head. Wallis grabbed Harold and slung him over his horse. They mounted and backed their horses towards the tree line, rifles at the ready.

Carter dismounted and ran to Philippa. His heart was in his throat and tears blurred his vision as he knelt down beside her and reached for her.

“Oh, Pippa, I’m so sorry,” Carter said. “I should have been here sooner.”

The instant he touched her she jerked away and screamed in terror. Her eyes were wild as she flailed her arms to push him away. He knew she was lost to reality in that moment, so great was her fear.

“Ssshhh, Pippa, I’m going to take you home. We have to get you out of here,” Carter said, his voice low.

“NO! Don’t touch me!” she cried. She turned away with a whimper.

He sat back on his heels and rubbed his brow. He hated hurting her. He hated that he was causing her panic. He hated that the hell that he was

going to put her through if he touched her again.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Roger was pulling Stephen away from his horse. Stephen's face was constricted with pain, but his eyes homed in on Philippa's quivering form. Her body shuddered and she began to sob.

"Roger, get him home and then run into town to fetch the doctor," Carter said. At Roger's nod of understanding, he turned to his brother. "Porter."

It was all he needed to say. Porter's eyes had not left the tree line. His brother stood nearby, his fists clenched at his sides. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he ground his teeth in barely suppressed rage. He mounted swiftly and turned to Carter for an instant.

"Do you remember when we were boys and I was teaching you how to track me?" Porter asked.

"Yes," Carter said.

"Good. Get them home and taken care of, then follow me," Porter said.

Carter turned back to Philippa. "Pippa, I'm going to have to ask for your forgiveness for what I'm about to do. I wouldn't hurt you for the world, but you're going to fight me and injure yourself further. One more bruise won't really matter at this point," Carter said, knowing she was not really hearing a word he said.

His fist clipped her on the chin, sending her into unconscious oblivion. He scooped her up in his arms and mounted his horse. He set a punishing pace back to the ranch, thankful that Philippa was lost to all feeling. His horse had not fully stopped before he dismounted and turned to run up the steps.

Meg ran down the stairs to meet him. She stopped short at the bottom of the stairs, her expression stunned as she caught a glimpse of her cousin.

"My God, Carter," Meg cried. "What happened? First Roger brings in Uncle Stephen with a broken leg and now you bring Philippa in looking like she's been trampled."

Carter half wished that that was all they were dealing with here. "I don't think you want to see this, Meg," Carter said as he started up the

stairs. “Roger is riding into town to get the doctor. Why don’t you wait here so you can get him what he needs when he arrives? Where’s Bel?”

Meg ran up the stairs after him. “She’s tending to Uncle Stephen. He’s in terrible pain. What happened to her?” She repeated. She pushed past him at the doorway to Philippa’s bedroom and ran to turn down the covers on the bed. “I’ll go get towels and water. We need to get her cleaned up.”

“No, you stay here. She’ll do better having a woman taking care of her. I’m sure the last thing she wants to see is any man,” Carter said, his voice harsh with grief and anger.

He could not meet Meg’s eyes. Guilt overwhelmed him. If he hadn’t taken the time to search the house, if he had left when he had first spotted Daisy trotting across the field rider-less, he might have gotten there in time. If Philippa knew, she’d never forgive him. Hell, he wouldn’t even deserve it.

A small sound escaped Meg’s lips as her eyes fell on her cousin lying curled up on the bed. She had rolled to her side, her knees drawn up, her hand covering her bruised face. Meg saw the tears on the bodice of her gown. Philippa’s eyes were open, unblinking, unseeing.

Meg’s vision blurred and she felt hot tears rolling down her cheeks. Her jaw trembled as she swallowed back a sob of denial. She moved slowly to the side of the bed, careful not to startle her cousin.

She knelt at Philippa’s side and brushed back the hair from her forehead. Philippa flinched at her touch.

“Ssh, Pippa, it’s only me,” Meg said, her voice soft and trembling. “I’m going to take care of you.” She turned back to look at Carter standing by the doorway, his fists clenched at his sides, his face stricken with anguish. She wanted to go to him to wipe away the pain, but her cousin needed her more. “Carter, please leave the towels and fresh water outside the door. I’ll take care of her.”

Carter nodded and turned to open the door. He hesitated and looked back. “I’m going to be gone for a while, Meg. It might be a few days, it might be longer. I hate to leave you with this mess, but I’m going after them.”

Meg shook her head in denial. This couldn’t be happening. This was the stuff nightmares were made of and she was living it in broad

daylight. A murderer was stalking her every move. Her uncle was screaming with pain in the next room. Her beloved cousin was lying next to her broken in body and spirit. Now the man she loves is riding away from her in search of a madman.

“You can’t do this alone,” Meg argued.

“I won’t be alone. I’ve got my brother,” Carter said. “Don’t worry about me; just focus on taking care of Pippa.” With that command, he walked out the door.

Blast the man for being so protective. What she loved the most about him, his fierce loyalty to those he loved, is what was also most terrifying to her. What kind of monster attacks an innocent woman half a mile from her home in the middle of the afternoon? No one with any conscience, with any degree of moral fiber, could dare commit such a heinous act.

Meg’s breath caught in her throat. Are these the same people who shot at James? Meg felt uneasy at the thought that the two attacks were connected. She knew that Bill had angered some gamblers and they were seeking retribution. It made no sense to her why they would target the family in such a way. They had nothing to gain. Killing Bill’s brother and raping his sister does nothing to get them the money owed to them.

This seemed more personal than that. Why attack Philippa in such a way if not to incite anger? She was innocent. Honor existed even amongst thieves and criminals, or so she had always been told. No, this act was deliberate.

As Meg stared at the empty doorway, she prayed that they had seen the worst of this. She feared that Carter was riding into a trap. She prayed that she would see him again.

Chapter 33

The next few hours were the most exhausting of her life. Carter thoughtfully brought up the tub from the wash room off of the kitchens and then carried several buckets of hot water up the stairs so Philippa could bathe, having come to the conclusion that a sponge bath would not be sufficient for her needs.

The water was cold before Meg was able to get her cousin into the tub. Philippa remained on the bed, still as a stone. Meg had to pry Philippa's fingers away from her dress to remove it, which was no easy task given that her cousin remained unmoving, offering no help with lifting her weight off the bed so Meg could dispose of her soiled dress. Her petticoats and chemise came next, followed by her garters. Meg was out of breath by the time she stood back to inspect the damage done to her cousin's body.

Philippa's face was swollen and bruised. Her bottom lip had been split open. She was covered in bruises. A long scratch ran down the length of her chest. Meg knew by the condition of her gown that the scratch likely came from a knife that was used to tear the bodice open. Blood stained her inner thighs.

She heard a knock at the door and turned to see Bel slip into the room. Bel's stricken expression landed on her daughter's still form, huddled on the bed. She gasped, tears filling her eyes. She bit down on her knuckles to keep from crying out.

“Aunt Bel, please go see what is keeping the doctor,” Meg asked, her voice soft.

When no response came, Meg looked over at the older woman. Bel was frozen in place, her eyes not leaving her daughter. Meg rose and stepped close to the older woman.

“Aunt Bel?” Meg whispered. “I need you to snap out of it. Philippa would hate to know that you were just standing there staring at her like this.”

She reached and pinched her aunt’s arm. “Bel!”

Bel turned to look at Meg in surprise.

“Pull yourself together. You and I are the only ones left to take care of everyone, and I can’t do it on my own. Is the doctor still with Uncle Stephen?” Meg asked. At her aunt’s wordless nod. “Fine, then. Go ask him what I should do for Philippa. She’s not going to let him near her.”

Bel nodded and backed out the doorway.

Meg returned to the bed. She dipped a cloth in the cool water and started washing the blood and dirt off of Philippa’s face. The swelling on the left side of her temple worried Meg. Her hair was matted with blood and dirt. Meg could not be certain about whether it was the blow to her head that was keeping her from awareness or if she was shutting out the world because she could not bear to face reality.

“Pippa, I need you to get into the tub. We’ll get you nice and cleaned up and you’ll feel better,” Meg crooned. Philippa just blinked and turned her face away.

Meg rewet the cloth and started washing Philippa’s arms. She was careful to keep her movements slow and her touch light as to not frighten her cousin. She then moved on to wash the dirt off of her feet and calves.

Philippa came to life the moment Meg touched her thighs. She bolted straight up off the bed screaming. Meg jumped back off the bed and nearly tripped over her own feet in her haste to give Philippa some room.

Philippa was half way across the room before she realized where she was. Her eyes were as round as saucers, her face ashen. She looked around her bedroom, confusion written across her face. She was trembling so hard she looked as though her knees would buckle.

Meg took a hesitant step toward Philippa, her arms held wide, palms up. She did not mean to frighten her cousin any more than she

already was. “Pippa, it’s me, Meg. You’re home. You’re safe. I want to help.” She said.

Philippa’s emerald eyes met hers. Meg held her gaze as she moved slowly towards her. Philippa wrapped her arms around her waist, her face constricting in grief and horror as full awareness of the day hit her. Meg caught her as she fell forward.

Meg eased Philippa down to the floor and held her as she sobbed. Meg’s eyes overflowed with tears unchecked as she bore witness to her cousin’s nightmare. She whispered nonsense words meant to comfort. Whether they were heard, she would never know.

Philippa exhausted herself crying. Meg helped her into the tub and washed the grime out Philippa’s hair. Philippa pulled her knees up to her chest and bent her head forward. She barely moved as she was washed from head to toe. Her eyes had taken on that glassy, distant look that frightened Meg.

Meg helped her into a clean nightgown and brushed and braided her hair before tucking her into bed. She tried to get Philippa to drink a glass of water, but she would only accept a sip or two before she turned away, curled into a ball on the bed and started weeping.

Meg decided to go see what was keeping the doctor.

Chapter 34

Carter tracked his brother for three days before catching up with him in a deep canyon. He had had to backtrack twice, losing several hours and frustrating himself to no end. Porter could track a fish through the

ocean if he were determined to do so. No one could track Porter unless he wanted to be found.

Carter would have to remember to talk with his brother about leaving better clues when he had someone friendly following him.

Carter was unfamiliar with this part of the mountains. He had never traveled this far Northwest. The canyon cut through the mountain range, the river at the bottom slowly carrying away bits of the earth over time.

He and old Gus had a heck of a time navigating their ways up the old goat path that Porter had chosen to get them up the side of the mountain. He had to fight down a wave of nausea as he looked to his right, where the path ended just a scant yard way from Gus's hooves.

He swallowed hard as he looked away, tightening his hands on the reins and urging Gus down the path. He turned his thoughts to punching Porter in the jaw when he caught up with him for picking such a precarious route. It was much more pleasant to think about that than about him plummeting to his death.

Carter followed the trail for another quarter mile before the grade evened out and the path widened. He saw a small line of trees above him to the left and turned his horse in that direction. He told himself it was so that he could have some cover. If he was being watched, he would be an easy target. It had nothing to do with his fear of heights. Nothing at all. He knew he was lying. He wanted to get as far away from the edge of the cliff as he could before he lost his breakfast.

Carter found Porter cozied up between two impressive boulders about a quarter mile away.

"It's about time," Porter said.

"I lost your trail a couple times along the way. You could have tried to keep in mind that you wanted me to find you, you know."

"Right. Next time I'll hang up signs that says 'Carter, turn left here.' Would that suit you?" Porter scoffed.

Carter ignored his brother's sarcasm. He looked down at the canyon below, looking for signs of movement.

"They're down river a few miles. Go ahead and bed down old Gus. I've got to show you something. We'll go on foot."

Cater knew that his brother was concerned about the sound echoing down the cliffs. Still, he was bone tired, covered in dust, and hungry. It

seemed to him that he would have to wait a while to see to his own comforts.

Carter took the saddle off Gus and brushed the dried sweat out of his coat. He changed into his moccasins and grabbed his gun and his canteen. He found his brother sitting beneath a tall Aspen, his feet crossed at the ankles, eyes closed. He appeared to be sleeping, but Carter had the feeling that his brother was as alert as ever. As he approached, his brother opened his eyes, immediately scanning the forest around them. His actions were so causal Carter knew that he wasn't even aware of it. A lifetime of looking out for danger had taught Porter to always be aware of his surroundings.

"I met an interesting man in Stillwater the other day," Porter said.

"You've been spending a lot of time in town recently," Carter asked. "A little too populated for your tastes, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well...I never cared much for town life, that's true, but even I need show my face in public sometimes. I needed some supplies," Porter said by way of explanation. A grin spread across his handsome face. "That and I heard there's a lonely widow in town who is mighty friendly," he shrugged. "She worried me a lot less than the saloon girls."

Carter crossed his arms and looked down at his brother. "Are you going to explain?"

"The rumors are true...she is friendly." Porter smirked at Carter's long-suffering sigh, shrugged. "It was the morning of the day Miss Lawson was attacked. I was leaving the lovely Widow Watson's house and passed by your Sherriff...what's his name?"

"Randy Nelson," Carter supplied. "The most useless lawman west of the Mississippi."

"That's him," Porter continued. "Well he was tripping over himself trying to make nice to a US Marshall who just rode into town."

"What is a US Marshall doing in Stillwater?" Carter asked.

"I wanted to know the same, so I went up to the good Sherriff and introduced myself. I made sure to note the string of thefts at the ranch. He didn't say much, but that Marshall did seem to be a little confused as to why the Sherriff hasn't done anything to investigate," Porter rose to his feet, stretching as he stood. "Turns out, there's been a string of stage coach

robberies in recent months. Some of the coaches were carrying the mail, others just passengers. A few people have been shot.”

“Doesn’t seem like something the US Marshall’s would get involved with,” Carter said.

“It is when the robbers are also suspected in a couple bank robberies,” Porter said. “This Marshall thinks that at least one of the suspects has spent time in Stillwater recently.”

“I haven’t heard of any newcomers in town,” Carter said. “That would have spread like wildfire through the town gossip chain.”

“Precisely,” Porter said. “Which means that the Marshall likely thinks it’s someone who lives nearby...someone who needs a lot of money and who spends a lot of time away from home.”

Realization dawned on Carter and he began to curse fluently under his breath. Porter let him vent his anger for a minute before speaking again. “It’s just a suspicion, Carter. There’s no proof that Bill Lawson is involved in anything more than gambling.”

“I think I might shoot him on sight if I ever see that bastard again,” Carter growled. “Gambling is bad enough. If he is involved with bank robberies, it will kill Stephen and Bel. How much damage can one son do to a family?”

“Probably about as much damage as a father can do,” Porter said his voice soft and full of meaning. “I thought you should know. I think we’ll be seeing this Marshall again. I’m hoping he sticks around long enough for us to bring in these fools hiding out here.”

“Do you think we can manage? Wasn’t your last count around thirty men?”

“Well, now, some of them have run off,” Porter said.

“Run off?” Carter asked. “I suppose you had something to do with that?”

“That might be the case,” Porter said. “I had three days to kill time while you were lollygagging around the countryside. What else was I supposed to do?”

“I guess I was wrong, then,” Carter said. “I suppose we’ll handle it.”

“Easy,” Porter said. “I was rather surprised to figure out how few of them there are involved in this.” He turned and started weaving himself

through the forest, knowing Carter was right behind him. "We need to get going so we don't lose the light."

He followed Porter down a goat path down the side of the canyon wall. He belatedly realized that he still owed Porter a punch in the jaw for his choice of trails. Once he was finished dangling off the side of this mountain, he would have a serious talk with his brother.

Porter looked at him with a quizzical look on his face. He saw the corner of his mouth turn up just before he turned away, shaking his head.

"You're looking a little green there, baby brother," Porter said.

Carter wasn't about to admit his weakness to his brother. He would never hear the end of it. Sure, he planned to beat the tar out of Porter, but that was just harmless fun. Falling off the side of the mountain wasn't harmless. Nor was it fun.

They trekked down the side of the canyon wall. Reaching the bottom, they hurried along the river, staying close to the bank as they followed it around a bend. A split in the rock to the right led away from the river. Carter peeked around the opening and could hardly believe his eyes.

He started counting. Forty-seven. Forty-seven horses were being kept in this hideaway in the canyon. Every one of the horses was carrying the brand of the ranch and were so thin that their ribs were showing.

How did they get here? It seemed a strange coincidence that they were discovered now, so close to where the men that attacked Philippa were hiding out. He didn't like coincidences.

"I don't think the Sherriff will want to embarrass himself by failing to punish known horse thieves with a US Marshall looking over his shoulder," Porter said.

"It will be quite the job for the two of us to drive them out of this canyon," Carter said. "We have to leave them here. We can come back for them later after we find Harold Downs and his crew."

"They kept moving the herd back and forth between a couple different places. The horses all look half-starved. These fools haven't enough sense to cover their tracks, much less the crime they committed," Porter said. "Anyhow, I thought it was a fine coincidence, finding these horses tucked away out of sight as they are."

Cletus Jones and John Wallace were local drifters, most recently in the employ of Mrs. Shirley Kennedy. She did not want her son to marry

Philippa Lawson. She never came out and said it outright, but it was as plain as day to everyone who bothered to look. The only question was how far she was willing to take her desire to sabotage the wedding.

Harold Downs had been cultivating a rivalry with Stephen Lawson for the past twenty-five years. In the past it was carried out by minor annoyances...tavern brawls between the ranch hands on Saturday night in Stillwater. Spreading rumors that were easily proven incorrect while in town. Taunting the Lawson women when they were in town doing their monthly shopping. Annoying, certainly, but never before threatening.

So what had changed? Carter had his suspicions, but he had no proof.

Yet.

He looked at his brother, his eyes hard. Porter correctly read his look. It uncommon for every trace of humor to leave Carter's face, but when it happened the effect was chilling.

"Interesting development, don't you think?" Porter asked.

"Interesting, indeed," Carter answered.

They climbed back up the canyon walls. Porter turned towards the tree line, using the shadows for cover. Carter followed, trusting his brother's judgment.

Porter turned and motioned to Carter for silence, pointing at the distance. Carter looked in the direction his brother was pointing and saw movement to the left. A figure emerged in the distance. He recognized Cletus Jones in an instant. He watched as the other man turned and started to urinate on a tree.

When he finished relieving himself, Cletus turned and walked deeper into the forest. Porter tracked him through the trees, the pine needles on the forest floor muffling the sound of his steps. Carter followed at a distance, careful to move quietly. In the fading afternoon light, Carter saw Cletus join John Wallis by a campfire. They would not be able to get close enough to listen in on the conversation without being seen. Until they scouted the area thoroughly to see if there were others in the area, they could not chance a confrontation.

Never go into battle without knowing the enemy's numbers.

Porter motioned for Carter to follow. They slid back into the woods, making no sound in their retreat. Porter took the high ground and motioned

to Carter to retreat deeper into the woods. He hesitated for a moment, not wanting to leave his brother alone with their foes. He was forced to concede that his brother was far more experienced than he in the ways of sliding through shadows. More than anything, his amateurish presence might alert the others that they are there, hastening the fight that was sure to come.

Carter retreated half a mile into the forest. He found a rock outcropping near a small stream and settled there to wait. At dusk, Carter heard a low whistle a moment before his brother emerged from the tree line with a look in his eyes that sends a chill running down Carter's back. He looked like some wild berserker of days gone by. Carter had long suspected that Porter was the most ruthless of his brothers. Now he knew for sure. He knew Porter had a plan, and he did not envy their adversaries.

An hour after sunset, the brothers, having settled on their plan of attack, circled their prey in opposite directions. Carter saw three horses tied outside a cabin in the woods. John and Cletus were not alone. He recognized one of the horses as belonging to Harold Downs. He hoped the old codger had not died from his wounds. Carter wasn't sure if he would prefer to live or die after being castrated, but that bastard deserved to suffer.

He approached the cabin from downwind to avoid stirring up the animals. He clung to the shadows outside the cabin and crouched down below a window to the rear of the structure. Easing upward, he peaked into the window. A single lantern was lit and placed on a table next to a cot in the corner. Even through the gunk on the window, Carter could see that Harold Downs was in a bad way. He trembled and thrashed about on the cot, near mad from fever. His son, Boyd, paced back and forth near the front door, his expression alternating between panic and rage. Carter could barely make out the sleeping form behind the front door. He couldn't see who it was, but he could hear the snores echoing through the cabin. Boyd would have no help from that quarter.

"Daddy, I'm going to go kill every one of those sons of bitches," Boyd says. "I swear on all that's holy, they're all gonna die."

Harold gave no response to his son's threat. Whether he would have tried to talk his son into or out of his plan, Carter would never know. He would have to do something about Boyd, though. He wasn't about to leave this unfinished. He considered his options. He had never killed a man before and had no wish to do so now, certainly not in cold blood.

He considered his options a moment longer before he shrugged to himself and decided to just stick with what he knows best. He made his way over to where the horses were tied, this time making no effort to avoid upsetting him. Indeed, it's what he was aiming to do. He grabbed a lasso that was draped over the saddle horn of the largest animal. He recognized Harold's bay gelding. A pity that such a fine animal belonged to such a brute. He untied the lead lines from the hitching post and gave each of the horses a sound smack on the rump, sending them trotting off into the trees.

He was looping the lasso across his shoulder when he heard the front door of the cabin open. He stepped back into the shadows and reached for his rifle, holding it in a two handed grip. He waited.

"What the hell?" Boyd yelled. He stepped off the porch, looking as though he would chase the horses. He turned back to the cabin. "Billy! Get your lazy ass up! The horses ran off. I told you to tie them up good. Danged good-for-nothing kid."

Boyd stomped around the side of the porch where Carter was waiting in the shadows. Carter raised the rifle. He couldn't see Boyd's exact location, but knew by the sound of his boots crunching in the grass that he was approaching fast.

A dark form appeared in front of him. Carter knew he was seen in that moment. He didn't think. He didn't hesitate. He slammed the butt of his rifle into Boyd's temple.

Boyd's body landed in a crumpled heap at Carter's feet. He knelt down and felt for the pulse at the base of his neck, breathing a sigh of relief when he found it. Boyd would wake up with one hell of a headache, but he would wake up. Carter figured he'd be spitting mad when he reasoned through what had happened.

Carter took the rope from around his shoulder and made quick work of hogtying Boyd Down. He dragged the unconscious man onto the porch and leaned him against the cabin. He then stepped into the interior of the cabin and tied Billy up in a similar fashion. Neither man would be able to work through his own ropes well enough to help the other. Harold, unless touched by a healing angel in the middle of the night, would be of no help either.

Carter then turned and continued on into the woods. He found Cletus and John's camp and realized that his brother had gotten there before

him. Porter stood in the clearing, near the fire. His pistol was trained on John. Cletus sat, eyes wide, clutching a dagger that was lodged deep in his shoulder.

Carter nodded at Porter as he came into view. Porter, of course, looked outwardly bored with the whole situation. Carter knew that his brother's attention was honed in to that moment with razor-like precision.

"Well, now that we're all here, the party can get started," Carter said. "I found the cozy cabin where they're keeping old man Downs. I've got to say, he's not looking so great these days."

"He'll get better and then he'll gut you," Cletus spat.

Carter scoffed. "I doubt he'll have the balls. Oh, that's right. Philippa Lawson made sure of that after he raped her."

"That hussy had it coming. Traipsing about like she did wearing men's clothing. Yeah, we've seen her in her breeches. No self-respecting woman would ever be seen indecent like that," Cletus said.

Carter took a threatening step forward, his face mottled with suppressed rage.

"I told him to shut his fool mouth earlier," Porter said, stopping Carter in his tracks. "He's too stupid to know a threat when he sees it."

"I can still shoot you with my free arm," Cletus said.

"I wasn't aiming for your arm, fool. I was aiming for your throat," Porter said.

Carter kicked Cletus's gun out of his reach and knelt down to poke at the knife protruding from his shoulder. Cletus flinched away and glared at him. Carter smiled back.

"I suppose you two are going to start explaining yourselves soon," Carter said.

"And if we don't?" Cletus asked, still defiant.

In answer, Carter reached up and twisted the knife slightly. Cletus screamed in pain. Carter's smile was cold and did not reach his eyes. This was the first time in his life that he had enjoyed being cruel to another living being.

"Let's try this again," Carter said. "We found the horses, all forty-seven of them that have gone missing from the Lawson's ranch in the last six months. Less than two miles away, we find you camped here. Harold

Downs is dying in a cabin half a mile from here, and his two idiot sons are hogtied on the porch. Pretty big coincidence, if you ask me.”

“Well, who asked you?” Cletus said.

“Shut up, Cletus, before you get us both killed. This one looks like he has an itchy finger,” John said.

“Good advice,” Porter said. “Now which one of you wants to start by telling us who exactly is behind all of this?”

Cletus and John exchanged a glance. Neither one of them spoke.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Porter said. “I’d prefer the easy way, because my little brother there gets to feeling ill at the sight of too much blood. I don’t mind it so much.”

“You see,” John started, “We do all this work on the side. Mrs. Kennedy would be livid if she knew that we were doing extra work for someone else, but she don’t pay so good. So, we hooked up with Mr. Downs a year or so past. He’s got an axe to grind with Lawson’s oldest son because of gaming debts. That’s why we took the horses. Mr. Downs planned on selling them at auction if Lawson didn’t pay up. Problem is that everyone knows the Lawson’s brand, so Mr. Downs couldn’t sell them without papers. Then he started talking about getting revenge. Downs isn’t the only one wanting to put the Lawson’s in their place, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Porter asked. “It seems unlikely to me that you wouldn’t know who he was cozying up to in the last few months.”

“As I said, Lawson has more enemies than he thinks,” John said.

“Like Shirley Kennedy?” Carter asked. He didn’t miss the guarded look that entered John’s eyes. “Let me see if I can put this all together. Shirley has always objected to the union of her son to Philippa Lawson. Instead of outright forbidding it, she hired you lot to terrorize the Lawson’s, using Bill’s gambling debt as a rather convenient excuse to team up with an already known rival. Stephen Lawson was so good at hiding his family’s financial troubles that Gerald was none the wiser and ran off to St. Louis with the grand idea of finishing his schooling and returning home to his beautiful bride-to-be. Shirley sees one last chance to thwart the lovebirds and hires Harold to ruin her, pretty much guaranteeing that the wedding will be called off by either party. How am I doing?”

“Nice story, there,” Cletus said, “but you’ve got a lot wrong.”

“I thought you didn’t know the details,” Carter said.

“I don’t know nothing about no weddings. I know we played you like a fiddle though. You’re all getting what is coming to you, starting with those hussies you left at home,” Cletus said.

A cold chill ran down Carter’s spine. He couldn’t name his fear, but he knew who he felt it for.

Meg.

Chapter 35

A storm was coming. Meg heard the wind howling through the treetops as she lay in bed trying to forget the horror of the last week. She pulled the edge of the coverlet and tucked it up around her chin as she squeezed her eyes shut tight. A distant rumble echoed through the valley. It was not loud enough to drown out the echoes of her thoughts.

She was the only functioning person in the house. Uncle Stephen lay in bed racked with fever. The doctor wanted to take his foot. Uncle Stephen was able to suitably intimidate him enough to abandon the idea even while he was incapacitated with his injury. The doctor set it as best he could, gave Aunt Bel instructions to care for the injury and then rode back to town.

Philippa, well, Heaven help her. She has not spoken a word since she was carried broken and bloodied into the house. She neither ate nor bathed. Meg was not sure she was even aware of what was happening around her. She lay in bed, curled up on her side and staring blindly into the distance. When she slept it was in fits and start and she nearly always woke up screaming in terror. That was the only sound she made.

Aunt Bel was walking around like an exposed nerve. She tried to divide her time between Stephen and Philippa, but was not much use to either one to be honest. The one reaction that Philippa would give was to Aunt Bel. She would go into Philippa's room and burst into tears. Unable to face the weight of her mother's grief and pity, Philippa would turn her face into her pillow and pull her covers up to her ears.

Bel was not much more helpful with Stephen. He caught a fever on the third day. Meg silently thought that it might have been better for the doctor to have done the amputation, lest gangrene set in. Meg kept the broken leg elevated and checked the bindings. She spooned gruel into his mouth every couple of hours. She mopped his brow with a cool cloth and spoke to him during his lucid moments. Bel would come into the room, promptly burst into tears, and have to be shuffled back out into the hallway.

Thankfully James's wounds were mending enough for him to start doing some light work around the house and helped Meg by carrying fresh water in from the well. He sometimes sat with Stephen and tried to keep the fever down. He could not bring himself to check on Philippa yet.

At first, Meg was overcome with compassion for her aunt. How else was she supposed to respond when her family was falling apart around her and she could do nothing to change it? Anybody would be devastated. Meg would remember that as she struggled to take care of the others and let Bel have her time to grieve. After the first couple days, it became more trouble than it was worth. Her attempts to soothe Bel's feelings and show tenderness were soon replaced by her giving her a little shake and telling her to go get ahold of herself.

She was not quite sure what she would have done without Roger and Jeanette this week. Roger kept the horses fed and happy, helped out with going to town to get extra supplies, and kept watch over them at night. Jeanette continued with her normal duties as their housekeeper and took on the role as nursemaid for the injured Lawsons.

Meg had stayed so blasted busy this week that she hadn't had time to fall into despair. Between taking care of Aunt Bel, nursing Uncle Stephen, trying to get a response from Philippa, and trying to keep the house running, she was exhausted. She woke before dawn and worked straight through past sunset. She fell into bed and was out before her bed stopped bouncing.

She dreamed about Carter every night.

She thought about him often through the day. She wondered how far he had to travel and how long he would be gone. She said a prayer for his safety at least ten times every day, fitting them in between chores. She watched for him on the horizon every time she glanced out the window. She missed the sound of his laughter. She missed the way his golden hair shined in the sunlight. She missed the way his eyes shone when he looked at her. She missed so much about him it made her heart ache.

She couldn't consider the possibility that he was in danger. Not real danger. Not the kind that you don't come back from. No. He would be home soon.

She had to believe it.

She heard something scrape against a window downstairs. She lifted her head, straining to make out any other sounds. She closed her eyes and pictured the garden outside the door of the study. A large bush was located just to the left of the door. It must just be the bush blowing against the window in the wind.

She put her head back on her pillow and closed her eyes. She needed to get some sleep tonight. She had a lot to do tomorrow, starting with stripping the linens from the beds and starting the wash. She wasn't sure what she was going to cook for dinner, but there was a decent slab of venison in the smoke house that she could use. She saw some potatoes left in the storehouse that looked like they had not turned. Maybe she would make a stew.

Great. Now she was just thinking about her to-do list tomorrow. Focus, Meg. Get some sleep.

She rolled onto her back and pushed the covers down to her waist as she stared up at the ceiling. Was that a creak she just heard? It must just be the house settling. No need to spook yourself, Meg. Stop inviting trouble. She wondered if Carter was still awake. She wondered if he was thinking about her. She wondered if he dreamt about her every night, too.

Alright. That was definitely a noise. She sighed as she threw the covers off of her and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She would never get any sleep until she went to see what was making the noise. It's probably just one of the cats that got in. Poor thing was probably trying to get out of the rain. But wait, it wasn't raining yet. Okay. It was just looking

for a place to hide. Animals could feel a storm coming, right? She thought she had heard that somewhere.

She grabbed the dressing robe from where she had draped across the corner of the bed. Rising, she tied the belt around her waist, her ears still straining to make out the sounds below. A prickle of unease ran up the back of her spine. She hesitated for a moment before she turned to her bedside table and opened the top drawer. She grabbed the derringer that Carter had given her for her and shoved it in to the pocket of her dressing robe. She hoped she would be able to keep her wits about her enough to avoid shooting the cat. She tiptoed to the door and tilted her head towards the staircase. She eased the door open and stepped into the hall. She looked to her left, then to her right before turning to the staircase.

She grabbed the banister with her right hand and lifted the hem of her nightgown with her left. Before her foot hit the first step, she heard the groan of the floorboards in the study. Someone was in the house. Whoever it was did not belong there or he would not be skulking around down below. She wondered where Uncle Stephen kept his rifle before she realized that the gun cabinet is in the study.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and turned towards the study. A sliver of light showed through the crack at the bottom of the door. She stopped at the study door and listened for signs of movement.

Silence.

She took a deep breath as she reached for the door handle and hoped that their guest was alone.

The door squeaked as she pushed it open. Her eyes homed in on the man sitting behind Uncle Stephen's desk. Her breath left her body in a whoosh. She froze. Her blood ran cold as she met the cold steely eyes of her nemesis.

Thomas Peters was reclining in her uncle's favorite leather chair, his polished boots stacked on the corner of the desk and crossed at the ankles. He had not bothered to take off his hat when he came inside, but he had pushed it back off of his brow. His jacket was unbuttoned, his red brocade waistcoat the color of blood in the dim light. She saw the chain of her father's pocket watch clipped to the pocket on his right side. The same pocket watch she sold to purchase her train ticket out of Chicago. He must have been close on her heels to find it.

She shuddered at the realization of how narrow her escape had truly been.

Mr. Peters uncrossed his arms as he studied her. He held an half smoked cigar between his teeth. Thankfully the nasty thing was not lit. His presence was unpleasant enough without adding that filthy stench.

She pushed the door open so that it rested against the wall. She did not want to block a potential exit. Light spilled out into the hallway, her shadow tall and distorted. She could hear the ticking of the grandfather clock in the parlor echoing through the stillness of the night and felt her palms grow sweaty. The hair on her arms stood on end. Her lips parted and she could feel the air entering between her teeth. She shifted her stance, ready for flight. Her eyes scanned the room, noting that her nemesis was alone.

The corners of his lips were upturned. She wouldn't call his expression a smile. No, it was far more sinister than that. It was more a baring of teeth, like a predator does when he is showing dominance over its prey. No warmth was in his eyes, just a cool calculation and something else...

Rage. She saw rage, barely suppressed, underneath his calm façade. She had dared to leave him. She had challenged his authority by having a will of her own. She had thwarted his plans and made him look foolish, the only unforgiveable sin in his estimation. The hand that rested on the edge of the desk curled into a fist. She raised an eyebrow at him letting him know she knew of his wrath. He opened the fist and laid his palm flat against the desk, his eyes daring her to speak of his near loss of control.

Meg decided that she would just have to fumble through this until she figured out a way to get away again. How she was going to keep him quiet enough to distract the family, she did not know. She couldn't put them at any more risk than they had been these past few weeks. Guilt flooded through her at the thought that she had been too complacent about leaving.

"Well, I see you have finally found me," Meg said. Her chin rose a notch as she met his eyes. She folded her hands demurely in front of her. "What is it you want this time, Mr. Peters?"

He took the cigar out of his mouth to inspect it with a look of practiced amusement. He shook his head as if she were nothing more than a foolish, misbehaving child, the smirk very much still in evidence.

"Margaret, Margaret, Margaret. Shall we really play this game with one another? My love, you must know that I have come to bring you home." He turned to meet her eyes once again. He saw the shudder before she was able to suppress it. His smile broadened, and this time she knew it was genuine. He was enjoying her discomfort. "You've been very naughty."

"I have no home, Mr. Peters," Meg said. "I left your employ because it was time for me to find a home."

"Oh, come now," Mr. Peters said. "Enough of this playing hard to get. It was amusing at first. Nay, it was damned attractive, but I've had enough. There's nothing left keeping us apart."

"Apart from what?" Meg challenged. "Are you still harboring the delusion that we were ever anything more than an employee and a servant? Tsk, tsk. I was hoping that you had recovered from your infatuation."

"Margaret, are we really going to play this game?" Mr. Peters queried. "You belong with me. No, you belong to me, and we both know that this is true." He lifted his booted heels off of the desk and sat forward, bracing his elbows on the desk. He clasped his hands together and rested them on the ink blotter as he regarded her with measured impatience. "After all I have done for us to be together, one would think that you would show a little gratitude."

"Gratitude?" Meg asked incredulously. "You killed my mother. I have my suspicions about my father's sudden death as well." Meg felt her control slipping. She took a breath and counted to ten before continuing. "You are a cold-blooded murderer. You killed that nice couple in St. Louis. How many other skeletons have you left in your wake?"

"Tsk, tsk. I would hardly call the deaths of either of your parents murder, young Margaret. Your father was a clumsy buffoon and stepped in front of a racing carriage. Few would survive that. Your mother was a weak woman, in spirit and in body. The weak die. That is all."

"You deny responsibility?" Meg challenged. "You openly lusted after me, I rejected you, then suddenly my parents both met with untimely deaths," Meg said. She resisted the urge to fold her arms across her mid-section. Such a protective gesture would be seen as weakness. She needed strength.

"I deny groundless claims of violence. Gah! Murder? How gauche! Such acts are beneath me," Mr. Peters said. He raised his hand to halt her

objection. "I've been in love with you for many years. The first time I laid eyes on you, I knew you would be the only one for me."

"You're sick," Meg said. "The first time you laid eyes on me I was an eight year old child."

"And a beautiful child you were. I knew you'd be an even more beautiful woman, and I was right. I needed to carefully cultivate you into a lady and that was no easy task, mind you. Do you know how difficult it is to turn a gutter snipe into a queen? I do. I saw it happen. And then that ungrateful wretch left me."

"I ran away from a mad man. I never wanted you. I never will," Meg said. She felt her shoulders rise up a notch. Her hands curled into fists at her sides. The sound of rushing water filled her ears. She began to tremble. "You don't know what love is."

"Do you?" Mr. Peters asked, looking bored. "Who but me would ever have you, as disobedient as you are?"

"I do know love. Greater than you could imagine. I know the love a faithful daughter has for her mother and father. I know the love of wonderful friends who protect me from harm. I know the love of a family that would take in a frightened orphan girl without question and give her the home she has dreamed of her whole life," Meg said.

"How very touching," Mr. Peters interjected.

Meg pictured Carter's handsome face, his chiseled jaw and his warm brown eyes. She felt her expression soften, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "And most of all, I know the love of a good man. I know the love of a man who will sacrifice himself for those he loves, who taught me how to ride a horse and dance the waltz. I know the love of a man who makes my knees weak and my heart race. I feel safe with him, never afraid. I can laugh and cry and not worry about offending him with my silliness. He wants me to have an opinion and to tell him what I want in life. And when I say that I'm leaving, he asks me to stay instead of trying to force me."

"Ah, a true paragon," Mr. Peters said. "So, where is this man of perfection? Not here, certainly. Not when you are most exposed. If he loved you as much as you claim, why would he not see to your protection?"

"He's out sleeping in the bunkhouse. I was on my way out to pay him a visit when I saw the light on in here and came to investigate," Meg

lied, her expression even.

Mr. Peters shot to his feet, his face twisted in rage. "Never lie to me again, Margaret. You will not like the outcome." He did not raise his voice, but his words rang out like a bullet into the night. "We both know that he and his Mountain Man brother went out tracking the band of thieves that have been stealing horses, hoping that one of them will lead them to whoever it was that got a taste of that trashy cousin of yours."

Meg's eyes fell to the rug beneath her feet, her mind grasping at a detail that was as elusive as shadows. Something was wrong with what he just said, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Her mind raced, details of the last several weeks flooding through her mind like a kaleidoscope.

A suspicion crept into her consciousness, a thought too terrible to countenance. "Wait...what are you saying?" Meg asked, confused.

"I'm saying that you're all alone here with the exception of a couple invalids and one useless woman," Mr. Peters said. "I took care of those darkies out in the outbuildings." He scoffs. "We should have let the South keep them."

"Roger and Jeanette? Oh, no! Please, you didn't hurt them did you?" Meg pleaded. "I swear, if you've harmed anyone in this family..."

"But my dear, they are not in the family," Mr. Peters said, his voice once again smooth. "And what do you imagine will be my punishment for so great a sin?" His eyes held hers. He smiled wickedly at her, his eyes cold. His chin dropped a notch as he started taking measured steps forward.

Meg thought he looked like a bull preparing to charge. She steadied herself, preparing for attack. Meg cast about looking for a way to stop his progress. "I get the feeling you're more involved with the troubles we've been having than you're letting on."

"Oh, no, my dear. I'm just taking advantage of the situation. I didn't cause your useless cousin's gambling problem, nor did I have anything to do with theft. I simply capitalized on an already festering hatred by some very accommodating neighbors," Mr. Peters answered.

She took an involuntary step backwards. "How did you capitalize on it?" Meg asked.

"I will never tell all of my secrets. Let's just say that Lawson's enemies were very accommodating when I suggested that I would need a way to distract the men while I whisk you away back home."

Meg froze for a moment. Her heart felt as if it was going to beat right through her chest. "It was you, wasn't it? You had James shot. Did you have Philippa attacked too? For what? For revenge?"

"I had nothing to do with the woman being injured. She is far too unworthy of my notice. I came here to take back what is mine," Mr. Peters retorted. "The troubles in this family just made it very easy for me to use their inattention to my advantage. The fact that your uncle will be lame for the rest of his life is just a bonus." He continued his trek across the room. "Now, enough of this. It is time for us to leave."

He started towards her. She shoved her hand into the pockets of her robe, clasping the cool end of the derringer. The weight of it on her palm helped to soothe her, a reminder that she was not as completely powerless as she felt. She took a deep breath as her eyes rose to meet him. She would give him one more chance.

"Mr. Peters, leave now. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if it is what is required of me," Meg warned.

She was not prepared for his laughter. He stopped in his tracks just more than an arms-length away from her, holding his sides as his guffaws echoed through the bottom floor of the house. He removed his hat and wiped the sheen of sweat covering his brow on his arm sleeves. "Oh, my dear Margaret, what a wonderful sense of humor you have," he chided. "How could you ever hope to harm me?"

She pulled the derringer out of his pocket and aimed it at the place where she thought his black heart would be located. "With this, Mr. Peters," Meg answered, pulling back the hammer. She felt a vague satisfaction when his smile faded. He stood there with pursed lips, evil intent clearly written in his eyes. "Make no mistake about it. I have been trained very well how to take care of myself. You frighten me no longer."

"Put the gun down, Margaret, or I will really give you reason to feel fear," Mr. Peters warned. Every bit of his charming façade disappeared.

Meg heard footsteps coming down the hallway above them towards the stairs. Meg broke eye contact for the briefest of moments to track the movement above them.

He lunged forward. His arm reached out to grab the gun out of her hand. Her finger reflexively tightened on the trigger.

The shot rang out.

Mr. Peters jerked backwards, a gurgling sound rising from his throat. Blood squirted from the severed artery in his neck. Meg jumped out of the way, eyes wide with horror at what she had done. His hands rose to his throat as he fell to his knees. The whites of his eyes were visible around the outside of his irises. He gasped for breath as he crumpled to the floor at her feet.

Meg heard the sound of running footsteps. Aunt Bel ran into the room, her shotgun at the ready. "Good God, Meg! What has happened?"

Meg stood trembling, the smoking barrel of the gun that she still held tightly in her hand now pointed at the floor. "He...he...was coming... after me," Meg gasped out. "He was going to take me back. He...I think he hurt Roger...and Jeanette." She could not drag her eyes away from Mr. Peters' body as it writhed on the floor, clinging stubbornly to life. His breath started to rattle, his legs began to twitch. "I think he would have killed everyone here to get to me."

"Who is this man?" Bel asked, as she propped the shotgun against the door jamb. She knelt down beside him, inspecting his wounds.

"This is Thomas Peters," Meg answered, grateful that his body is now partially blocked. She wished that she could not see his face. His mouth kept opening and closing as if he was trying to speak. She imagined that he was confessing the last of his sins. No man wanted to face his maker without some kind of absolution, this one most of all. "This is the man who is responsible for the deaths of my parents and at least two other people. This is the man who has terrorized me for nearly my entire life."

Meg could hear Mr. Peters gasp. His breath whistled out of his body. He did not draw another breath.

A far-away look entered his eyes as death took him. Meg thought she could feel a moment when the air around her became lighter, full of hope. She closed her eyes, now aware that tears were streaming down her cheeks. Guilt and relief warred within her. Guilt for having taken a life, relief that she had now been given her own.

Bel used her thumb and forefinger to close his eyes. She turned slowly to look up at Meg. "It was self-defense, Meg."

Meg nodded stiffly. "I'm going to run out to check on Roger and Jeanette." She turned toward the door and then looked back at her aunt quizzically. "Why did you have the shotgun?"

“I heard a noise. It woke me. Then I heard voices down here arguing. I recognized yours but I didn’t know the other,” Bel said. A look of immeasurable sadness crossed her lovely face. “So much ugliness has touched my family in the last few weeks I just couldn’t take any more. So, I grabbed up Stephen’s shotgun and came to rescue you.” She clasped Meg’s hands in her own. “I’m glad you turned out to be the hero in your own story, Meg. So often we women feel like we need to have someone else save us.”

Meg turned and walked out the front door. She was halfway across the porch when she stopped and burst into tears.

Chapter 36

They had each of the men trussed up like a Christmas goose and slung across their own pack mules. Carter felt a twinge of disappointment as they rode way. He had really wanted an excuse to shoot someone, but his foes had not been feeling very accommodating and had not even drawn their guns out of their holsters. He'd been half tempted to string them both up from the trees by their ankles and leaving them there for the buzzards and had proposed the idea to Porter, who seemed more than willing to go along with the plan. Porter never had been able to stomach a bully, and Cletus and John definitely fit the bill.

He had come to his senses before they grabbed the rope, however, and decided that he would let them face their day in court. He suspected with the US Marshall nosing around town that they would actually be brought up on charges this time. Sherriff Nelson would have a hard time explaining to the good people of Stillwater how he could turn a blind eye to a couple of horse thieves who were caught red-handed. Stealing a horse was a still hanging offense in many parts of the West, and stealing forty-seven horse would get them a trip to the gallows at the edge of town.

Carter had no intention of saying anything about Philippa's attack to the Sherriff. The last thing he wanted was for her to have to face her accusers in court. He had heard stories of women being accused of taunting and tempting the men who raped them, and the men being acquitted of the charges. She was tormented enough right now without being told that she had been asking for abuse. No, he would let her make that decision for herself.

Carter shot a look over his shoulder at Cletus and John. He got a small measure of satisfaction out of the fact that he had been able to give them both a good punch in the jaw. He must remember to go back to the cabin in the woods to check on how old Harold Downs was doing. With any luck, he was dying a very slow and painful death.

They rode into Stillwater shortly before noon feeling like avenging angels. They went straight to the jail, dismounted, and each one yanked one of the captives off of the mules. They didn't even try to be gentle. Almost as if on cue, the brothers gave the other men a kick in their backsides to get

them moving. Cletus turned to spit at Carter in defiance. Carter dodged the spittle with ease and smiled at Cletus just to be contrary.

Sherriff Nelson was sitting behind his desk, doing his best to give the impression of a serious lawman as Carter and Porter strode through the door. Sherriff Nelson had been speaking to the tall, dark haired man sitting in the chair by the window looking bored enough to go to sleep. He broke off mid-sentence as when he noticed Cletus and John covered in dust with their hands tied behind their backs.

“What is the meaning of this, Carter?” Sherriff Nelson asked. He looked irritated at being interrupted. Carter couldn’t help but notice that the man by the window looked a little relieved.

“Sherriff Nelson, I believe you know my brother, Porter,” Carter said. At Nelson’s nod of acknowledgement, Carter continued, “He and I have conducted a citizen’s arrest. I expect you to do your duty and see that these men are charged with horse theft and attempted murder.”

“Now, look here,” Sherriff Nelson said rising from his chair, his face red. “I know these men, and they are no thieves.”

“We caught them red-handed. Over the last several months both I and my employer, Stephen Lawson, have come to you repeatedly asking for you to investigate the disappearance of dozens of horses off of the ranch. You refused to do your duty,” Carter said, his voice sharp with anger.

“You had no proof that the horses were stolen,” Sherriff Nelson said indignantly, looking over at the man at the window who was now quite interested in what was being said.

“No proof other than the tracks leading away from the ranch,” Carter said. “It is your job as Sherriff to investigate and find proof. Forty-seven horses carrying the Southfork Ranch brand were stolen in the last year. Porter and I found these men last evening in Deadman’s Canyon guarding a herd of forty-seven horses. Would you like to take a guess at what brand each one was carrying on their hind flank?”

“Can’t prove that they stole them,” Sherriff Nelson said. “They could have just found them there. You need more proof.”

“Circumstantial enough for you to lock them up while you start your investigation, though.” This came from the man at the window.

Carter noted the look of annoyance on the stranger’s face. He could only assume that this was the Marshall. He was a large man with a strong

build and younger than Carter had assumed. He was sun-kissed enough to suggest that he spent a fair amount of time outdoors. His dark eyes were focused on the Sherriff, his mouth was drawn into a straight line.

Sherriff Nelson turned to glare at Carter, not pleased that his incompetence was in full-evidence to the Marshall. "You also said attempted murder. Who are you talking about?"

"James Lawson. He was shot while working the range at Southfork," Carter answered.

"You can't prove which one of us pulled the trigger, you can't," Cletus said.

"Cletus! Shut your fool mouth before you get us strung up," John said in a harsh whisper.

The Marshall rolled his eyes to the ceiling before closing them with a pained look on his face. He rose from his seat and held out his hands to the Sherriff. "Give me the keys to the holding cells."

Sherriff Nelson cast about as if looking for a reason to deny his request. He must have then recognized that it had not been a request. He took his time with opening the drawer on the right side of his desk and taking out a set of keys. He handed them to the Marshall without meeting his eyes.

The Marshall strode to the far wall, where the three cells were located. They were all empty, so he went to the first one on the left opened it and then turned to Porter. "Bring the one who likes to confess his crimes in front of witnesses."

Porter nudged Cletus along. He walked into the cell and turned to glower at the Marshall. "I ain't done nothing wrong. You got no call to put me in here," Cletus blustered.

"You all but admitted that you were there when Mr. Lawson was shot. Even if you didn't pull the trigger, you were there, you didn't stop it, and you didn't report it later. That makes you an accomplice," the Marshall said. "Now turn around and I'll cut your bonds."

The Marshall pulled an impressive hunting knife out of his boot and cut the ropes holding Cletus's hands. Cletus rubbed his chafed wrists looking sullen.

The Marshall went to the cell on the far right opened it, and nodded to Porter, who caught his meaning. Porter turned and grabbed John by the

scruff of his neck and hauled him over to the cell. The Marshall locked him in and cut his bonds then turned to the Sherriff.

“I think I might stay in town a few days,” he said.

“You said you were going to leave in the morning, that the man you’re looking for clearly isn’t here,” the Sherriff said.

“Well, you know, I’ve been on the road a long time. A few days of rest won’t do me any harm, I suppose,” the Marshall said. “Besides, you had invited me over to dinner later this week. I think I might take you up on the offer.”

The Sherriff looked like he wanted to object, but he pursed his lips and gave a brief nod. “Me and the missus would be delighted to have you.” He then turned and stalked towards the door. “Now if you’ll excuse me, it looks like I have an investigation to do.” He yanked open the door and stalked out.

Carter was enjoying himself immensely and was almost sorry to see the Sherriff go. He chuckled to himself and walked over to shake the Marshall’s hand.

“You must bet the US Marshall I’ve heard about,” Carter said. “I’m Carter Ellis. As I said before, this is my brother, Porter.”

“Robert Jenson,” the Marshall said, shaking first Carter’s hand, then Porter’s. He nodded to the door the Sherriff had just walked through. “Has he always been so useless?”

“Yes, always,” Carter said. “Although I’m not convinced it so much uselessness, or even laziness, but more outright corruption. I have a feeling he’s in the pockets of at least one of the big ranching families in these parts.”

“But not of that of your employer,” Marshal Jenson said.

“Hell no,” Carter scoffed. “Stephen Lawson is far too honest to ever bribe a man of the law.” He shrugged. “Who knows...maybe he and his family would not have had their recent misfortune befall them if his morals were looser.”

Marshall Jenson’s eyes became guarded. “Yes, perhaps. Many times the innocent suffer first when foul deeds are being done,” he said, his voice soft. He shook head as if to clear it and met Carter’s eyes. “I’m in town on another matter, and need to leave as soon as I can, but I’ll stay close by for the next few weeks. It seems that your Sherriff will only due

his sworn duty when he has to, and with me around...believe me...he has to.”

Carter smiled in acknowledgement and extended his hand again. “Well, Marshall, thanks for your help today. I owe you one. If you’ll excuse us, we need to go round up the herd and drive them back home before they all run off.”

Marshall Jenson nodded and followed them out into the afternoon sun. He leaned casually against the door as the brothers mounted their horses. As he rode away, Carter had a strong suspicion that he had not seen the last of the Marshall.

Chapter 37

Meg had been relieved to find Roger and Jeanette injured, but alive. Jeanette had a nasty bump on her head. Roger had a gash along the right side of his chest from where Mr. Peters had tried to stab him.

Roger told her that he had left to use the privy and had come back to find Jeanette knocked out cold next to their bed, not seeing Mr. Peters waiting in the shadows of their cottage. When he knelt down to check her injuries and try to revive her, Mr. Peters tried to clobber him too. Roger, recognizing the threat, stood to confront his attacker, who had underestimated the sheer size of his opponent. He panicked, fumbled for his knife and tried to stab Roger. Roger easily deflected the first attempt, and only succeeded in diverting the location of the second. He had staggered just enough for Mr. Peters to land a blow to his temple with the heel of his knife. Roger regained consciousness just in time to hear a shot being fired up at the main house.

He staggered out of his cottage holding his pounding head in his hands. He was the only able bodied man at the ranch and felt responsible for seeing to its protection. His head hurt so much that it made him feel sick to his stomach, but he was certain that that was gunfire he heard. He found Meg running across the yard towards him. She was crying so hard when reached her, it took him a minute to understand what she was saying. After assuring her that both he and his wife were alive and relatively unharmed, he turned and ran up to the house.

Meg found Jeanette sitting at her kitchen table holding a cold compress to her temple. Meg went to offer her help, but was in such a state of panic over having killed a man that it was Jeanette who ended up comforting her.

She was not sure when Roger dragged Mr. Peters out of the house. She knew he started building a box for him sometime around dawn. She could not bring herself to look at either the box or the man inside of it, lest she lose control again.

She went about her morning chores but she could barely remember anything she did. Somehow she had gotten the cow milked, the chickens fed, breakfast cooked and delivered to Uncle Stephen, James, and Philippa. She went back later to collect the dishes. Uncle Stephen's appetite seemed

to be coming back, she was pleased to note, and James had eaten every last crumb. Philippa's tray remained untouched.

Aunt Bel had been hard at work this morning, as well. She carried pail after pail of water into the study along with several bars of lye and a scrubbing brush. It was nearly noon before Meg snapped out of her stupor enough to realize that Bel was scrubbing the blood stains out of the carpet.

Meg turned at the sound of hoof beats approaching the house. She ran to the window, hoping to see her blonde avenging angel. She was disappointed to see that it was only someone delivering the post.

She went out to greet the rider. "Good morning, Mr. Jones. I see you've brought the post."

"Yes, ma'am," the rider said. "I heard Stephen and James ran into some trouble last week. I hope they're recovering nicely."

Meg accepted the letters and paid the postage fee. "James will be as good as new in just a few days. Uncle Stephen will take a bit longer, but he's doing better each day."

"There's news around town that young Miss Lawson is also laid up. Is she injured too, or did she catch an illness?" Mr. Jones asked.

Meg pursed her lips and tried to hide her disapproval at his snooping. She had no idea how the news had been spread already. The last thing Philippa needed was for the town gossips to get wind of her misfortune. The truth would probably come out one day, but Meg was determined to contribute no further to her cousin's humiliation.

"Miss Lawson will be right as rain shortly, rest assured," Meg said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really must be getting back to my duties. Good day." She then turned and mounted the steps onto the porch. She knew that she was being rude. She didn't care.

Mr. Jones got the point that his questions would not be answered. He tipped his hat, wished her a good day, and then turned his horse back towards town. Meg wondered what stories he would come up with to tell to the gossips about his visit to Southfork. She was under no illusion that he would keep his mouth shut.

Meg flipped through the correspondence in the front hallway. Most of it was for Uncle Stephen and was likely business related. One letter was from Philippa, her name and address written with a strong masculine script. Finally, a letter from Gerald.

Meg tossed the letters for Uncle Stephen on the table in the hallway, hanging on to the letter from Gerald. She started up the steps, hoping that a letter from her beloved would lift Philippa's spirits, while also thinking that his timing stinks.

Meg knocked at Philippa's door. She got no answer from within, but she had not been expecting one either. Philippa had not spoken a single word in the six days since her attack.

Philippa was lying on her right side facing the window, her legs pulled up to her chest and her hands folded beneath her chin. Her eyes were open but Meg doubted that she was seeing anything in this room. Sunlight streamed through the window along with a soft breeze that lifted the curtains.

She walked to the bed and sat on the edge. She reached over to brush the hair out of her cousin's face. Philippa did not acknowledge her presence in any way.

"The post just arrived. There's a letter from Gerald here," Meg said.

Philippa didn't move, but Meg knew she was listening. Tears welled up in her cousin's eyes, turning them a brilliant blue-green.

"Come, cousin, let me help you sit up. You will want to read this as soon as you can. I'm sure he is eagerly awaiting your response," Meg said. The next moment felt like an eternity. She started to think that her cousin would lie there forever, staring blindly into space, but then she saw the smallest of movements.

Philippa moved as if her limbs were weighted down with stones. She unfolded her legs tried to push herself upright. Meg reached for her and helped her sit up. She piled pillows behind Philippa's back and helped to straighten out the covers over her legs.

"There now. Here is the letter," Meg said, handing the letter to Philippa. "Would you like me to stay or do you want some privacy?"

Philippa's hands were in her lap. Her fingers held the letter loosely and she looked at it without expression. She shook her head ever so slightly and licked her lips.

"No, stay," Philippa whispered so softly that Meg had to strain to hear.

Meg murmured nonsense sounds intended to soothe her cousin and then removed herself to look out the window. She heard the crinkling of

paper behind her as her cousin opened the letter. Meg waited there as Philippa read through the message and wondered how she would tell her fiancé what happened after he returns.

Meg peeked over her shoulder and saw Philippa folding the letter. It must not have been very long for her to be done with it so quickly. Meg walked back to the bed. Philippa handed her the letter when she was within arm's reach.

"Please get rid of this," Philippa requested. "I need to go back to sleep." She then turned away from Meg, curled up on her side, and clenched her eyes tightly shut.

Meg stared stupidly at the letter in her hand. Why on earth would Philippa want to get rid of it? Meg looked down at her cousin pretending to sleep and knew that this letter was not bearing good tidings. She knew it was inappropriate, but she went into the hallway, unfolded the letter and read.

Dearest Philippa,

I pray this letter finds you in good health and happiness. I pray also that you will forgive me for not sending word before now, and for the unhappiness I am sure to cause to you today.

First, I feel I must tell you of my journey. The stagecoach was frightfully dull and uncomfortable, as I am certain you will recall from your past travels. On board I met a Dr. and Mrs. Sanders of Denver. They were traveling with their teenage son, Bernard, to

visit family in New Orleans. Just outside of a little town in Kansas, a young woman named Susan Bennett joined us. Her parents had recently perished from cholera and she was on her way to St. Louis to live with her grandmother.

I must say that Miss Bennett and I felt a kinship immediately. It was as if I had known her for years. By the time we reached St. Joseph, she had confessed the same to me. When we reached St. Louis I knew I could not go on in my life without her. I asked her for tea the next day, and for her hand in marriage the following day. We were married on the third day of December.

Along with this letter, I will be posting a letter to my mother. I fear that she will be shocked at my behavior, as I am sure

are you. I apologize for any pain this has caused you, but I feel that it would have been a great sin against God to refuse to accept such a love when it is offered. I pray that you someday find a man who will love you as passionately and completely as I love my Susan.

*Please forgive me,
Gerald*

Meg stifled a gasp, horrified by Gerald's treatment of Philippa. How dare he go traipsing off across the country, leaving Philippa behind, and then marry the first woman he sees outside of Colorado! Carter had been right about Gerald all along, she now realized.

Meg crumpled the letter in her hand, wishing she could throw it at Gerald. She stomped down the stairs cursing him under her breath. She walked to the kitchens and tossed the letter into the stove. The fire was not lit, but the letter would be destroyed. She was unaware of the tears streaming down her face.

"Goodness, Miss Meg," Jeanette said as she walked through the kitchen door. "Whatever has happened now to upset you so?"

Meg couldn't suppress the half sob, half laugh that rose from her throat. "What else needs to happen, Jeanette? In the last week, one cousin has been shot, one cousin raped, my uncle broke his foot and may lose it, I killed a man who has been terrorizing me for most of my life, Carter has run off to God-knows-where, and now Philippa has received dreadful news from Gerald."

"What news from Gerald?" Jeanette asked.

Meg told her the contents of the letter. By the time she finished, Jeanette looked as angry as Meg felt. "I never did think he was any good. You can always tell, you know. It's in the eyes," Jeanette said. "A man can say all the pretty words he wants, but his eyes will always speak the truth. If you want to know how a man feels about a woman, pay attention to how he looks at her. Like how my Roger looks at me, and how Mr. and Mrs. Lawson look at each other, or how Mr. Carter looks at you." She smiled when Meg's eyes rose to hers in alarm. "Oh, yes, Miss Meg. We all know there's something between you two. You're not hiding it at all well. Like I said, it's all in the eyes."

Meg smiled. "Carter once said the same thing to me."

"And I wouldn't say he's 'God-knows-where,' he was just here not an hour ago," Jeanette said as she opened the pantry door and took out a sack of flour.

Meg watched Jeanette start mixing together the dry ingredients to make bread, trying to sort out what was being said. "What do you mean? He was here an hour ago? Where did he go?" She asked. Why didn't he come to me?

"Oh, he was just here to get the dogs. He said he and his brother need them. He also told Roger to make sure he had the corral gate open," Jeanette said. "Roger thinks he might have found a few of the missing horses."

Meg nodded, not trusting herself to speak around the lump in her throat. She had done more crying in the last day than she could remember ever doing before in her life. It felt foreign to her to feel so vulnerable. She missed Carter so much it hurt, and he had ridden onto and off of the ranch without even letting her know he was safe. The hurt was quickly replaced with anger. Well, if he was going to be an ornery jackass, she would just give him what-for. Maybe he should fret about her for a little while for a change.

Seeing the look on Meg's face, Jeanette cautioned, "Don't go jumping to conclusions, now. He's been off chasing outlaws. He'll be coming home to you, you'll see."

Meg nodded again. She knew he would be coming home.

She also knew that she wouldn't be here when he got back.

Chapter 38

Carter took a quick detour across the Kennedy's ranch on his way back to Dead Man's Canyon. Porter had ridden ahead of him when Carter stopped to get Jack and Jill. The two brothers would have a devil of a time driving forty-seven horses by themselves. Luckily, Carter just happened to own the two best herding dogs in the county. Porter would find and keep an eye on the horses the best he could until Carter caught up with him.

But first, Carter needed to have a little chat with Shirley Kennedy.

She was waiting on the front porch when he rode up on the house, her arms crossed under her breasts. Her beady eyes stared down at him with contempt and he could see her nostrils flaring from fifteen feet away. Her lips were pursed.

He thought she looked like she was sucking on a lemon.

"Get those filthy mongrels off my property," Shirley commanded. "If either one of them spooks my chickens it will end up with a bullet between its ears."

"Yeah, well," Carter began as he lifted his hat to her in greeting. He paused a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow before continuing. "You shoot my dogs, I shoot you. It's only fair, really."

She took a step forward, her arms falling to her sides, with a look of stark indignation on her face. "How dare you come onto my property and threaten me! You have gone too far and I plan to go to the law about this," Shirley threatened. "Now get out of my sight."

"Oh, I'll leave, Mrs. Kennedy," Carter said. "I thought you might be interested in some of what I have to say before I go, though."

"Little of what you have to say could ever possibly interest me."

“Oh, I think this time you’ll feel differently,” Carter said. “Two of your ranch hands, Cletus Jones and John Wallace, are now in jail awaiting trial for attempted murder and theft...specifically, raiding the Lawson’s land and stealing forty-seven horses.”

“Two rogue ranch hands, both of whom I had dismissed earlier this month, incidentally, are hardly something I concern myself with,” Shirley said.

“Well, ma’am, they seem to believe that they are still in your employ,” Carter responded. “Both of them are known close associates to Harold Downs, who has long held enmity against Stephen Lawson.”

“Again, none of my concern,” Shirley interjected.

“Certainly,” Carter said, solicitously. “However, Cletus and John were with Harold when he attacked and assaulted Philippa Lawson. Don’t bother acting surprised or concerned, Mrs. Kennedy. We both know that you’re neither of those things.” Carter noticed that her expression went from mock horror to unconvincing boredom. “The attack happened immediately after she left your home, where she was planning her wedding to your son. Now, you can pretend that you were happy about the union all you want, but I’ve seen the look on your face when Philippa wasn’t looking. You loathe her.”

“Well, I won’t deny that I never favored the match. I always felt my Gerald could have done better. It was an infatuation on his part, nothing more. I wish he could have seen that a year ago before he proposed to her. Nobody really believed it was a love match,” Shirley said.

“Philippa Lawson did,” Carter said simply.

“It makes no difference now. The engagement ended the moment Gerald married in St. Louis,” Shirley said. Seeing that he was taken aback she continued, “Haven’t you heard? No? A pity, that.”

“You’re right, it comes as no surprise to me to hear that he is a faithless fool,” Carter said. “It should come as no surprise for you to hear that I know what you have done. I can’t prove it yet, but the truth always comes to light.”

“I haven’t a clue as to what you’re talking about,” Shirley said.

“And if you say that enough times, I’m sure you’ll actually start to believe it,” Carter said. He turned Gus and tapped his flanks, calling to Jack and Jill as he rode away.

He found Porter taking a nap near the river at the bottom of the canyon. He was reclined back against a boulder, his hat down across his eyes to shield the sun.

The dogs reached the herd and started to round them up at Carter's command. Porter leapt to his feet and mounted his horse. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you, old man," Carter taunted, "but there's work to be done. You can catch up on your beauty sleep later. Lord knows you need it."

Porter shot him a look that promised retribution for that jibe. Carter didn't wait around to hear his retort. He was too busy to get back to the ranch, get the horses corralled and his face washed. Then he planned to give Meg a big sloppy kiss.

The horses prove accommodating to moving out of the canyon. Carter figured they were eager to get back to good grazing land given that many of them were unacceptably thin. Who knows how long it has been since they've been allowed enough to eat.

As predicted Jack and Jill performed their jobs well. The dogs were gentle enough with the herd to avoid agitating them over much, but were aggressive enough to keep them in formation as they traveled to higher ground. Carter saw a mare strike out at Jill, but she was nimble enough to dodge the blow. He would have to remember to find her a good bone to chew on when they got home.

They left the canyon ten miles northeast of border of Southfork. With a fair amount of luck and two good dogs, the brothers drove the herd into the corral shortly after dusk.

Carter looked at the house and saw that it was dark. Meg must have turned in early tonight with the rest of the family. She would have been up since dawn, and doing the work of three people. She had to be exhausted.

He was bone tired himself, hungry, and in desperate need of a bath. He went to the well, filled up a pail with the cool water and carried it into the bunkhouse. He washed himself and changed into a new set of clothes that were still in his trunk. He then went to the kitchen and grabbed the rest of a loaf of bread that was wrapped in a towel on the kitchen counter. He then grabbed a fair chunk of venison that must have been left over from dinner. Porter walked in the back door, a fresh pitcher of water in his hands.

He poured two glasses and sat down at the table. Carter sat down and split the bread and hunk of meat in half. They didn't even bother to light the lantern before he sat down at the table to devour the meal.

His body was now clean and his belly now full. He was half-tempted to go upstairs and sleep next to Meg. He knew he would be utterly useless tonight for anything more than snoring in her ears, though, which meant that she wouldn't get much rest. Casting a sorrowful glance towards the front of the house, he decided to go sleep in his lumpy bed in the bunkhouse. His reunion with his lady love would have to wait. He stacked the dishes in the sink and walked back into the night, his brother following close behind him.

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow. He woke when it was fully light outside. He sat up on his cot, groggy and unfocused. He shook his head waiting for the cobwebs to clear before standing up and stretching his sore muscles. He saw that Porter was still in the cot next to his. He knew he would not be seeing Porter for a while, such was the nature of his brother's untamed ways. He showed up when he thought he was needed, and disappeared again when he felt the job was done.

Carter wondered if Porter would ever understand that he would always be needed.

He entered the house through the front door and noticed at once how empty it felt, as if all of the light and laughter had fled this home. He started towards the stairs, but stopped when he saw through the open door of the study that Philippa was sitting behind her father's desk, her gaze riveted on something she was reading.

He walked into the study, careful to avoid startling her. She looked up at his entrance, but her eyes did not rise to meet his. He noticed that she still wore her dressing robe, cinched tight at her waist. Her hair was in a messy braid. Her face was pale and dark circles under her eyes marred the perfection of her skin.

"Hey, Pip," Carter said softly. "How are you fe-..." He cut off at her sharply raised hand.

"Don't, Carter," Philippa said, her voice hoarse. "Don't ask me that. You don't really want to know how I'm feeling."

Carter was surprised and pleased with her anger. He much preferred it to the near catatonic state she was in when he last saw her.

“Alright,” he said. “I won’t ask you that. I will sit down and annoy you, though.” He sat in one of the chairs facing the desk and just then noticed what she was reading. “Are you reading the ledgers?”

Philippa nodded, her face bland. “Four hundred and fifty-seven dollars, Carter.”

He blinked. “What?”

“That’s how much Bill owed. Papa had paid off all of his other debts. I paid the rest, or so Harold Downs said just before...” Philippa trailed off. She swallowed hard and shook her head. “My innocence was worth four hundred and fifty-seven dollars. I wonder if that is even the going rate these days.”

The sadness in her eyes broke his heart. “Don’t talk like that, Pip,” Carter said.

“Why not? Isn’t that what people will say? I know it will get out somehow, some day. What use am I now to any of them?”

“Not everyone will judge you harshly for this, Pip,” Carter said. “The people who really care about you won’t listen to or be swayed by the gossip.”

Philippa just shook her head. She turned towards the window. “You found our horses, I see. Where did you find them?”

Carter gave a brief summation of his adventure in Dead Man’s Canyon. He left out anything about his suspicions about Shirley Kennedy.

“There’s a US Marshall in these parts and I think he will make sure Cletus and John get what’s coming to them. Harold Downs is now a wanted man...when he surfaces he will be arrested for conspiracy to commit murder and larceny,” Carter said. He saw that she was holding her breath. “If you name him your attacker and bear witness against him, it will have to be your choice alone. I will say nothing of it to no one.”

“Thank you,” Philippa said. “Incidentally, we’ve had some excitement here too.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Philippa responded. “A man named Thomas Peters showed up here the other night.” She saw Carter sit forward, but still would not look into his eyes. “Meg woke up in the middle of the night to find him here. He wanted to take her back to Chicago. Mother told me that he murdered Meg’s parents and at least two other people because he was obsessed with

her and wanted them out of the way. Anyway, they got into a tussle and Meg shot him through the neck.”

“What?” Carter said, jumping to his feet. He saw Philippa flinch and sat back down. “I’m sorry...I didn’t mean to frighten you. Is Meg alright?”

“Yes,” Philippa said, her voice shaky. “She was unharmed... distraught, but unharmed.”

Carter took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing thoughts. The thought of Meg being here all alone with a madman made him feel queasy.

“Turns out, that it was all his fault,” Philippa said.

“What was all his fault?” Carter asked.

“All of our troubles over the last year. Yes, Bill ran up a lot of debt, but Mr. Peters set up all of the thefts and, you know...what happened to me. He found out about the raids and paid off Harold Downs to find more men who were willing to do more than just steal from us. That’s when James was shot.”

“How do you know this?” Carter said.

“Mama heard much of their argument and told me what was said,” Philippa said. “He really was pure evil.”

Carter didn’t bother to correct Philippa’s misunderstanding. The truth would be far too painful for her to hear. She needed a little time to heal from her trauma. He had no intention of adding the pain of betrayal on top of the humiliation she was already feeling.

The thefts started a year ago, before Meg had even left for Colorado. Thomas Peters would have been dogging her trail in St. Louis. Carter wondered if he had somehow learned of the Lawson’s troubles with their neighbors to the North. From what Meg had said about him, he thought it might be possible. He was sneaky and cowardly enough to wait until Meg was left unprotected to try to get her back. He may have had taken advantage of the situation, but he had not planned it.

Carter realized that this meant that Meg was free. She would feel no more need to run. The man she was running from was dead, and she had killed him. This though led to another and a moment later Carter was in a near panic.

“Where’s the body?” Carter asked.

“Roger built him a box and buried him near the river. None of us think there’s any point in telling Sherriff Nelson. It’s not like he’d do anything anyway,” Philippa said. “Don’t worry, Carter. Meg is safe now. This won’t come back to her.”

Carter relaxed back into his chair. Philippa was still staring at the top of the desk. He knew he could not help her. Only time could do that.

“I need to go now, Pip,” Carter said. “I have a need to go kiss your cousin.”

Philippa’s lips turned up at the corner in the saddest smile he had ever seen. “Tell her she can have my wedding dress. It’s the most beautiful dress I’ve ever seen and it won’t take much to alter it to her size. Someone should get some use out of it.”

“Someday you might like to wear it.”

Philippa scoffed. “You never liked Gerald courting me, Carter, and we both know it. Turns out, you may have been right about something. He was married to a woman he met on the stagecoach before Christmas. I got his letter yesterday.”

“I’m sorry, Pip,” Carter said. “I truly wish I had been wrong about him.”

Philippa just shook her head sadly. Carter rose and leaned over the desk to kiss the crown of her head. “I love you, Pip. You’re the closes thing to a sister as I’ll ever have.”

He watched a tear slip down her pale cheek. Her lips were trembling when she whispered, “Meg left yesterday. She went home.”

Carter spun on his heal and stalked towards the door, determined to leave and find her and drag her back to the ranch.

“Carter!” Philippa called. He paused by the door to look over his shoulder. “She rode to the South.”

“Why South? Damned fool woman has no sense of direction. Stillwater is to the West.”

“She didn’t go to Stillwater. She’s going home,” Philippa said, her eyes finally rose to meet his and a wry smile teased her lips. “I see I need to spell it out for you: your home is to the South, Carter.” She paused to let that sink in. Her smile matched his own. “Did you really believe she would ever leave you?”

Chapter 38

Carter saw a thin line of smoke rising above the treetops, right over the space his little cabin was located. He let out a relieved breath that he had not even been aware he was holding. The tension in his shoulders eased a bit with knowing that she was safely tucked away.

He would have to remember to have a little talk with her about running off and scaring him nearly to death. He would make sure to do that just as soon as he finished kissing her senseless. That rather pleasant thought became another, and he found that his mind had made a rather salacious turn. He tapped his boots into Gus's sides to hurry him along.

Carter rode into the clearing and saw Meg pull back the curtains near the front door. He grinned at her and saw her reach up to pat her hair into place. He had every intention of messing it right back up for her. He winked at her and turned to lead Gus into the barn.

Ginger poked her head over the stall door and nickered softly in greeting. He patted her neck as he walked by her and took Gus to the next stall. He removed the saddle, gave him a good brushing, and left him a big pile of oats. He strolled out of the barn in time to see Jack and Jill chasing a fat hare into the trees.

Meg was waiting for him on the front porch. He was so danged happy to see him that he almost overlooked her glaring at him. He stepped up on the porch and reached for her.

"Give me hell after you welcome me home, Meg," Carter said a second before his mouth claimed hers.

She resisted only a moment before she found her arms rising up to circle his neck. She had planned to prove a point, but she could not remember for the life of her what it was now. His hands and mouth were doing the most wonderful things to her insides.

She didn't know exactly how it happened, but the next time she opened her eyes, they were standing inside the cabin, her back up against the front door. She vaguely remember her feet leaving the ground sometime after he kissed her. She'd figure it out later. Right now she was too preoccupied with peeling off Carter's shirt.

She felt a tug on her braid a moment before her mahogany locks fell down around her shoulders. She grabbed Carter's neck and pulled him forward, rising to meet her kiss. They melted together in a tangle of limbs, peeling layers of fabric away from sensitive skin.

Carter lifted her and pressed her back against the door. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he entered her, and they started to move together. Their kisses became frantic as tension built. Her cries of passion mixed with his. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders and he groaned in both pain and pleasure. Meg arched against him and cried out a final time as she found her release. Carter's thrusts became more powerful, driving deeper until he finally joined her in ecstasy.

Carter held onto her tightly as their breathing evened out and their heartbeats slowed. He leaned forward to brace them against the door and wasn't sure either one of them could stand up totally on their own. He felt his member slip from inside her as she lowered her legs to the floor. He raised his head and looked into her sapphire eyes, now glowing with satisfaction. He couldn't resist going in for another taste of her swollen lips.

This kiss was as gentle as the one before it had been passionate. The tenderness in his touch brought tears to her eyes. She reached up and stroked the stubble lining his jaw.

"Welcome home, my love," Meg said softly. "I've been expecting you."

Carter felt some of his previous irritation come back. "Next time you run off, please leave a note. Better yet, just stay where I put you."

"Put me?" Meg asked, her eyes narrowing in challenge.

"You have a tendency to run off, Meg," Carter reminded her. "I thought you had left me."

"Well, when Jeanette told me that you stopped at the ranch to get the dogs without even letting me know you were there, I thought about it. Only for a moment," she qualified when she saw the muscle in his jaw tighten. "I killed Thomas Peters."

"Good," Carter said. "If any man needed killing, it was him. I'm sorry I left you alone and unprotected, Meg." He stroked his fingers through her hair, relishing the silky texture. "I'm sorry that you had to face him alone. I would have come to find you immediately had I known when I stopped at the ranch that there had been trouble."

“I wasn’t totally unprotected,” Meg said, wryly. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever use it, but that derringer you so inappropriately gave me the last time we made love here came in handy.”

Carter smiled. “Told you so.” He ignored the little smack she gave to his shoulder for that taunt. “I knew you’d need it sooner or later if you stayed out here.”

“You wanted me to be able to protect myself,” Meg allowed. “I’d never thought of that before. I always just ran away from trouble because I felt so powerless. I wanted to protect everyone around me by drawing the danger away from them, but I never considered for a single moment that I should be looking out for myself as well.”

“Now you have no more reason to run away,” Carter said. “Are you going to marry me and love me forever?”

“Never doubt it, not for a single moment,” Meg said, smiling up at him.

Carter kissed her brow, then the freckles on her nose, then her lips. He pulled her tightly into his embrace and held her tight, knowing that he would never let her go.

The End

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