

A woman with blonde hair, smiling, wearing a blue, long-sleeved, button-up dress with a full skirt. She is holding a wooden box with a glass lens. The background is a scenic landscape with rolling hills, a wooden fence, and trees with autumn foliage. The entire image is framed by a decorative, ornate border.

WESTWARD
HOME AND HEARTS
MAIL-ORDER BRIDES

*Jolie's
Joy*

CAT CAHILL

Jolie's Joy

Westward Home and Hearts, Book 40

Cat Cahill

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Chapter One

OUTSIDE BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS - May 1877

Their situation had grown dire.

As the reality of the moldy loaf of bread and the notice from the bank next to it on the kitchen table sunk in, Jolie Taylor frowned. There had to be a solution to the problem.

“Oh, there you are!” Mama’s voice sounded from the doorway, and Jolie smiled at the sound. As hungry as she was after a morning of sketching and researching the most unusually marked caterpillar she’d found at the edge of their property, she always had time for her mother.

“I was hoping to prepare a meal for us, but it seems the bread didn’t last.” Jolie didn’t know what she hoped would happen—that Mama would extract some long-forgotten coins from her reticule for more flour or announce their cook was returning and required no pay whatsoever—but she didn’t

expect Mama to announce a visitor and usher her into the dusty parlor.

“Jolie, this is Mrs. Milly Crenshaw. Mrs. Crenshaw, this is my only daughter, Jolie Taylor.”

Jolie stood up straight, fighting the urge to smooth her hair or glance down at the state of her skirts. She’d been so busy all morning, she hadn’t given one thought to her appearance. And she certainly hadn’t been prepared to meet a visitor.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Taylor.” Mrs. Crenshaw’s eyes sparkled with warmth, and her smile set Jolie at ease. She grasped Jolie’s hand in hers as if Jolie were her own granddaughter.

“Thank you for paying us a visit,” Jolie said, even though the purpose of Mrs. Crenshaw’s presence was entirely a mystery to her. Mama had a mind like Jolie’s, curious and scientific. Most of their visitors were women of similar personalities, wives of her late father’s colleagues from the university, or independent-minded women who had never married at all.

“I’m afraid all I can offer in the way of refreshments is some water.” Mama sat on the edge of her seat as she spoke, and Jolie detected an uncharacteristic strain in her voice. Despite their lack of funds since her father’s passing, Mama had taken everything in stride. Only recently had Jolie found cause to worry—when there was nothing save for wrinkled potatoes for supper, or when Mama had gratefully accepted a pair of shoes from a neighbor instead of purchasing them new.

“It’s quite all right. I had a hearty luncheon with a friend, and I fear I’ll be neither hungry nor thirsty again until tomorrow.” Mrs. Crenshaw’s friendly manner set Mama at ease, and Jolie decided she liked this new friend of theirs.

Their visitor turned her attention to Jolie, and Jolie found herself sitting up straighter under the woman’s gaze. “Now, Miss Taylor, please tell me about yourself. What sorts of things do you enjoy? Do you have any particular talents?”

What odd questions. Perhaps Mrs. Crenshaw was simply a straightforward person when she wanted to get to know others.

“Well,” Jolie began, clasping her hands in her lap and wishing her skirts weren’t smudged with the charcoal she’d used in her sketching earlier. “I’m partial to science, particularly botany and entomology. Oh, and astronomy! I adore the stars.” Noting the amused expression on Mrs. Crenshaw’s face, Jolie swallowed and rushed to add more suitable hobbies to her list. “I also enjoy reading, arranging flowers, drawing, and needlework. And I’ve recently acquired a talent in baking.” She didn’t add that the latter talent had been learned from necessity.

“You are very accomplished,” Mrs. Crenshaw said, and Mama’s face lit up in joy over the compliment.

“Thank you.” Jolie’s face went warm. Most often, people appeared confused about her love of science, but Mrs. Crenshaw hadn’t batted an eyelash.

“I admit that Jolie’s father and I raised her in a somewhat unorthodox manner, but I ensured she was fully educated in

everything a lady should know,” Mama said.

Jolie glanced at her, and then back at Mrs. Crenshaw. She had the sneaking suspicion that she’d missed some important part of this conversation.

“I’m certain you did, and it shows in this fine young woman. Now, I’ve taken the liberty of bringing a few letters with me. Let me find the ones I believe might be best suited to Miss Taylor.” Mrs. Crenshaw opened her reticule and extracted several envelopes. As she flipped through them, Jolie shot a look at her mother.

Mama’s face went pink, and Jolie had the sinking feeling she wasn’t going to like what she was about to hear. “Are you putting me to work?” She tried to imagine herself toiling in a factory, although Mrs. Crenshaw hardly seemed the sort to run a place such as that.

“Oh, no!” Mama reached over and rested a hand on Jolie’s arm. “I’m securing your future through marriage.”

Jolie blinked at her, uncertain if she’d heard correctly.

“Do you need a moment to discuss this?” Mrs. Crenshaw’s question was directed at Jolie, and despite being taken aback by the purpose of the meeting, Jolie appreciated the woman’s concern for her.

“I ...” Jolie trailed off as she glanced at her mother, who gave her a desperate, pleading look. Her heart contracted. Mama and Papa had always only ever wanted the best for her. Their situation must be worse than Jolie suspected.

“No decisions need be made today,” Mrs. Crenshaw said gently.

Jolie nodded. She needed time to figure out her own feelings and to talk to Mama, but Mrs. Crenshaw seemed kind enough and Mama had gone to the trouble of arranging this meeting. The least Jolie could do was hear what Mrs. Crenshaw had to offer.

“All right,” she said. “Please go on.”

Mama’s relief was palpable as she sank back slightly against the settee.

“As I surmise your mother didn’t tell you, I operate a small matrimonial agency. I only accept requests from gentlemen of the highest character, and so you may rest assured that any of the prospects I present to you can offer a good life.” She smiled at this.

Jolie wasn’t certain about what to say to all of that, but one thing became clear. Mama wanted her to marry someone she’d never met. Jolie had a hard enough time imagining herself as a wife, much less to a man she didn’t know.

“My agency is called Westward Home and Hearts,” Mrs. Crenshaw said, her eyes crinkling around the corners as she spoke.

Westward. The word turned itself over in Jolie’s head as Mrs. Crenshaw continued.

“Now, not all of these men come from the most highly regarded families. Many have worked hard to gain the

opportunities available to them in our territories and western states. But all come with strong references. If I have any doubt, I don't accept the gentleman. And in return, I promise to find them ladies of similar character. And you, my dear, are certainly made of such mettle."

Jolie's heart warmed at the compliment. "Thank you." From Mrs. Crenshaw's smile, she knew the woman saw her as more than a girl from a fine family. More than the daughter of a highly regarded professor of biology, and more than someone who cared only about social occasions and pretty dresses.

"My Jolie is a sensible girl, and any man would be lucky to marry her," Mama said, her eyes shining with pride. But the second Mrs. Crenshaw reached for the envelopes in her lap, Mama's smile twitched, and a shadow of sadness crossed her face. All Jolie wanted to do was run to her and embrace her and promise her she'd never leave.

"Let's see, I think we might start with these three gentlemen." Mrs. Crenshaw extracted three envelopes from her stack and handed them to Jolie. "Read through them and discuss them with your mother. If one seems promising, you may write to him at the address he's provided. I'll return in a few days to collect the other letters, and I'll bring more in case none of these are suitable."

Jolie wrapped her fingers around the envelopes, her heart thumping as Mama thanked Mrs. Crenshaw. They saw her to the door, and as soon as Mama closed it behind her, Jolie ran to her.

“I can’t leave you,” she said, her head buried in Mama’s shoulder. “You’re all I have left, and I ...” She was all Mama had left too, but a great gulp of sadness made her unable to speak the words. She couldn’t leave Mama and go somewhere so far away.

“I know.” Mama’s hand ran a circle over Jolie’s back, the way she always did when Jolie had been upset as a child.

“Is it really all that bad? Our situation here?” Jolie leaned back to see Mama’s expression.

The fine lines on Mama’s face—ones Jolie had never noticed until her father’s passing—deepened. “It is. I loved your father deeply, but he never had a mind for business, and I’m afraid that extended to our family’s funds.” She sighed, and Jolie thought she could feel every ounce of her mother’s pain. “The bank will take the house and our land by the end of summer.”

Jolie tried not to let her surprise show. Mama was worried enough; she didn’t need to add to that. “We can find another home. I can ... I can find work, and you could take in laundry and—”

Mama shook her head. “I have it all arranged. My cousin in New York has an extra room and need for help at their shop. It will be good for me, to be somewhere else. But that’s no life for you, my Jolie. You’d be unhappy in the city.” She placed her hands on either side of Jolie’s face, and tears stung Jolie’s eyes.

“I want to see you married to a good man, living a life in the country where you can pursue all that you love, with children

and space for them to grow up. None of that will happen if you come with me.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Jolie said fiercely. “All I want is to be with you.”

Mama shook her head sadly. “That may be what you want now, but in five or ten years, you’ll have wished you chose differently. And so I’m choosing for you, now.”

Tears streamed down Jolie’s face, but deep in her heart—as much as she despised acknowledging it—she knew Mama was right.

And as she melted into Mama’s arms again, she decided she would make the best of it. She would give it her best effort, but if the man was a brute, or the territory was too dangerous, or her heart simply ached too much—she would leave it all behind and return to the only family she had left.



Chapter Two

NEAR CREST STONE, COLORADO — September 1877

This couldn't be the place.

Cade Harris shifted in the saddle and leveled his gaze at Sam Mahoney, the hunter and town butcher who'd agreed to take him to the ranch.

"It's not much to look at, is it?" Sam said unnecessarily.

"You sure this is the place?" Cade eyed the half-built house. There weren't any cattle in sight, and it looked as if his brother had abandoned the place long before his death last month.

"I am. I bought some beef off Lucas in June. He was having a rough go of it then, if I remember correctly."

Cade frowned at the long spikes of grass that grew up between the boards of the house. Sam's words shouldn't have surprised him. Nothing had ever come easy for Cade or his

brother. Lucas had at least taken a chance at turning his life into something good.

“I was sorry to hear about what happened to him,” Sam said.

Cade nodded. He didn’t dare say anything. That crease in his heart was still too raw, and he didn’t trust his voice not to shake when speaking of Lucas’s death. So he chose not to speak of it at all. Instead, he rubbed a hand over his chin and urged his horse forward.

“You suppose anyone in town is looking for work?” he asked Sam over his shoulder as he inspected the house more closely. “I could use some help getting these buildings done before it snows.”

“Plenty of men in town looking for work,” Sam replied. “I can put the word out for you, if you want.”

“I’d appreciate that.” With a couple of men to help—and nature’s cooperation—it could be done.

“I ought to head back. The missus will be serving up supper soon. You sure I can’t talk you into coming back into town tonight? Rose has a chicken roasting.”

Cade shook his head, ignoring the rumble in his stomach. “Thank you for the offer, but I want to be here to get started early.”

Sam nodded, and they said their goodbyes. Cade found the corral surprisingly intact and turned out Old Brown before he began a more thorough inspection of the partially built structures.

Lucas hadn't owned the property for long. Cade had gotten a letter from him in April, stating he'd gotten title to the land through a fortunate deal from a man who needed to sell quickly. He smiled slightly as he remembered Lucas's words. His brother decided that this was exactly the sign he needed to put down roots. He planned to build up a ranch, make an income, and perhaps even start a family.

Cade had read the letter by lantern light on a pallet in a tent, somewhere along a new rail line in the mountains southwest of Denver. He remembered the moment specifically because it had sparked something inside him too. If his older brother could make something of himself, perhaps Cade could too.

He'd pondered the thought over and again in the months that followed—until he'd gotten another letter. But this one had been from an attorney in Cañon City, informing him of Lucas's death and his inheritance of this piece of land in the Wet Mountain Valley.

Cade shaded his eyes from the sun, looking around the land and shoving the painful thoughts of his brother from his mind. The lawyer had indicated there were cattle—not many, but a decent start to a ranch. There were none in sight now, and Cade hadn't seen any as he'd ridden along the eastern property line with Sam earlier.

He drew in a breath and let it out. The cattle were long gone. Either run off or rustled or claimed as abandoned property by some other rancher. After all, Lucas had been dead for two months, and no one had arrived to claim this place—until now.

He'd be starting from scratch with the livestock, but at least the skeletons of buildings were there. All he had to do was finish them. But for tonight, he needed to concern himself with a fire and some water. Cade returned to where he'd dropped his belongings outside the corral. Sam had indicated there was a creek less about a mile or two to the west, near the base of the towering mountains. He'd warned it would be running low this time of year, but it was plenty to subsist on.

Cade gathered two canteens and debated whether to walk or resaddle Old Brown. The sun hung low in the sky, but there was still plenty of daylight left to make it to the creek and back.

Just as he'd made up his mind to walk, a small cloud of dust arose in the direction of the road and railroad tracks that ran to the immediate east.

Cade strode toward the road, canteens slung over his shoulder. It was likely a neighbor, and the sooner he got to know the folks living nearby, the better. Perhaps the man would have information about what had happened to Lucas's cattle.

As he lifted his hand in greeting, the horse and rider slowed, he caught a flash of pink. His brow furrowed, and as the dust began to clear, he got a better look at the rider.

It was a woman.

He blinked at her, all words gone from his mind. Despite the dust covering her pale pink traveling cloak, she was awfully pretty. With blonde curls coming loose from beneath her

sensible hat and an innocent, heart-shaped face, she looked as if she belonged somewhere grand. Certainly not flying down this road in the wilds of Colorado on horseback.

And yet the fact that she was doing just that intrigued Cade more than he wanted to admit.

“Good evening,” she said with a smile just as sweet as he’d expected.

“Good evening,” he replied. He ran a hand down the old shirt he wore beneath his unbuttoned coat, suddenly aware of how ragged he must appear. “I’m Cade Harris. I’m taking over my brother’s place.” He jerked his head toward the scene behind him and ignored the shot of pain that clamped his heart when he mentioned Lucas. “Do you live around here?”

The woman’s eyes widened. They were blue, he realized. The color of the sky high up in the mountains on a clear day. “I’m Miss Jolie Taylor,” she finally said. Her gaze moved toward the half-finished buildings and then back to Cade. “I’m ... I’m sorry, did you say your last name was Harris?”

Cade nodded. “Did you know my brother, perhaps?”

“Well ...” Her cheeks reddened beneath their coating of dust, and Cade wondered if he’d stumbled upon one of Lucas’s dalliances instead of a neighboring rancher’s daughter. Not that he blamed Lucas one bit. Miss Taylor was quite the sight for a lonesome man. “I’m looking for a Lucas Harris. Is he your brother?”

“Was,” Cade said, emotion stinging the edges of the word.

“Was?” Miss Taylor tilted her head, clearly confused.

Cade took off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, and put it back on as he tried to figure out the least painful way to disappoint this woman. “I’m sorry, ma’am. My brother passed on in July. I apologize you didn’t know.”

Miss Taylor’s face went ashen. “He ... he’s ...dead?”

Cade frowned as he tried to ignore the pain that immediately rose at her harsh description. Had Lucas been serious with this lady? She looked about ready to faint from her horse. Her hands gripped the reins and she squeezed her eyes shut.

When she swayed just slightly, he moved forward until he was standing beside her. “Let me help you down.”

She didn’t make a sound, so he placed a hand on each side of her waist and held onto her firmly as he pulled her from the horse.

She didn’t fight him. In fact, she gripped his shoulders to steady herself. Her glazed blue eyes barely seemed to notice him, but Cade was acutely aware of the pressure of her hands against his shoulders and the feel of her waist under his own hands. Some wild part of his mind wondered what it might be like to pull her close to him.

He let go of her as soon as she felt secure on the ground, mentally berating himself for even entertaining such thoughts when this woman clearly must have meant something to Lucas.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She shook her head, her gaze coming back to focus on him. “What happened to Mr. Harris?”

Mr. Harris. They couldn’t have been that close if she referred to Lucas so formally. Perhaps she’d had feelings for him that weren’t reciprocated. “It was in late July, so far as I know,” he started slowly. “The fellow who came with a delivery of lumber found him. He was ...” Cade trailed off, smarting before he’d even spoken the truth.

Miss Taylor watched him, her eyes round and sorrowful, and he hated that he had to speak of something so violent to her. Particularly when he could hardly acknowledge it himself.

Cade swallowed, shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers, and forced himself to say it. “He’d been murdered.”

Miss Taylor didn’t gasp, as he thought she might. He didn’t have to reach out to keep her from crumpling to the ground. She didn’t press a hand to her mouth, and her eyes didn’t fill with tears. Instead, she blinked at him, and then a shadow of fear crossed her face.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“I don’t either. I didn’t know until I received word from an attorney in Cañon City. Last I’d heard, no one knew who ... caused his death.” He couldn’t bring himself to say *murdered* again. Not in front of Miss Taylor, and not to himself either. The thought of anyone taking his jovial, kind brother from this earth was more than Cade could bear sometimes.

Miss Taylor clasped her hands together as the lowering sun set the blonde tendrils of her hair to a bright gold. If Lucas hadn't paid her any mind when she clearly cared for him, the reason was lost on Cade.

The curiosity got the better of him. "Miss Taylor, I don't mean to be indelicate, but may I ask how you knew my brother?"

She pressed her lips together as the fear returned to her eyes. "I didn't. Not in a traditional way. We wrote to each other. I ... Well, I was meant to marry him."



Chapter Three

MR. HARRIS—THE *other* Mr. Harris—stared at her a moment. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. You met Lucas and exchanged letters and ...?”

Jolie shook her head, loosening a few more of her curls. She must look a fright after riding such a distance from town on horseback, but that was the least of her worries now. “No, we never met. Mr. Harris had written to a lady I met in Boston. Mrs. Crenshaw. She has a matrimonial agency and—”

“A *matrimonial* agency?” Mr. Harris raised his eyebrows as if he’d never heard of such a thing.

“Yes. She collects letters from men out West who are in need of a wife, and she finds ladies such as myself who also wish to marry.” Jolie paused. How could such a thing have happened? She knew she ought to mourn the loss of the man who was supposed to be her husband, but the truth was, she hardly

knew him. She felt sad about his death—and particularly about the circumstances—but the all-consuming fear of what she would do next was foremost in her mind.

“I’ve heard of such arrangements,” Mr. Harris said, drawing her attention back to him. “But I never thought ...” He trailed off, and she wondered what he’d wanted to say. “You were meant to marry Lucas?”

She nodded, and the unfortunate situation she found herself in rose like a panic. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

Mr. Harris’s skeptical gaze softened. “Do you have a place to stay in town?”

A lump rose in Jolie’s throat. She couldn’t speak, but she shook her head.

“Where do you come from?” he asked, tilting his head.

“Massachusetts,” she managed to say. The memory of home, of the house she’d shared in the country outside of Boston with Mama and Papa, of family, choked off any further explanation. A year ago, she’d had everything she could have wanted. And now ... Here she was, somewhere by herself on the frontier, with no family, no friends, and nothing to her name.

Jolie had never felt so utterly alone. A sob wracked her body, demanding to be let out, and before she knew it, she’d squeezed her eyes shut and tears streamed down her cheeks. Tears for what she’d hoped for with this marriage, tears for

Papa, tears for Mama, tears for her home, tears for the life she would never have again.

A hand awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. “There, it’s all right,” Mr. Harris said.

He didn’t know. How could he? Another sob made her shake, and before she could react, a pair of arms had wrapped themselves around her shoulders, and she found her face pressed against Mr. Harris’s shirt. She was so hungry for someone to show her some kindness, that she breathed in the leather and campfire scent of him and let herself cry until she had nothing left.

His arms were still wrapped around her when her eyes flew open. What was she doing? She didn’t know this man, and here she was, letting him hold her close as if *they* were the ones to be married.

Jolie nearly choked on her embarrassment before quickly pulling away. To his credit, Mr. Harris dropped his arms immediately.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pressing wayward tendrils of hair behind her ears and swiping at her blotchy face to remove any trace of remaining tears. “I shouldn’t have—I mean, I apologize for falling apart like that.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” he said, his voice a little deeper than it had been before. His brown eyes appeared a little darker, and his countenance had changed. But as hard as Jolie tried, she couldn’t read it. He cleared his throat and tugged at the edges of his coat.

She took another step backward and looked around at a landscape that was equal parts beautiful and foreboding. The sun looked due to set within half an hour. There was no way she'd make it back to town before dark, and the thought of riding through this valley at night made her shudder. Nighttime at home was different, more familiar, safer. But this valley looked as if it hid all sorts of dangerous secrets.

"I should leave now," she said. Somehow her voice didn't shake when she spoke even though her heart felt as if it would burst from her chest.

"To ride back to town?" Mr. Harris straightened, his eyes sharper.

"Yes." She didn't know what she would do once she arrived. She had a bit of money, not much, and she could only hope it was enough for a night or two of lodging. What she'd do after that, she didn't know. She couldn't afford the train fare back East, and Mr. Harris—the one she'd meant to marry—had paid for the fare to come here.

"You won't make it back before dark," he said, standing taller now.

"I know." Jolie straightened too, trying to make herself look braver than she was.

"No, absolutely not."

She stared at him a moment, incensed. "Are you forbidding me from riding back to town?"

He frowned at her. “I am. You’d be foolish to go riding through this valley alone at night. You’ll stay here, and you can return in the morning.”

Jolie would have laughed if she wasn’t so irritated by this man telling her what she could and could not do. “Where exactly do you propose I stay?” She swept her hand out toward the partially constructed buildings.

Mr. Harris tapped the toe of his boot on the ground. “I’ll build a fire.”

She stared at him. Most men she’d known would never propose to have a woman sleep on the ground outside. Just the two of them, alone. Jolie swallowed, considering her options.

“It’s trust me and sleep on the ground, or take your chances with the bears and wildcats and bandits. Not to mention the miners who come down from their camp once in a while looking for amusement.” Mr. Harris crossed his arms, as if he couldn’t care one way or the other about her decision.

There was no real choice, and Jolie finally gave a short nod. “All right, I’ll stay here.” After all, she’d meant to marry his brother, who by all appearances was an upstanding gentleman. Surely this Mr. Harris was the same.

She hoped.

Pressing her shoulders back, she reached for the reins of the horse she’d spent precious coin on to rent in town when she’d finally figured out her intended wasn’t coming to get her. “I’ll

turn out my horse and work on building a fire. I don't suppose you have anything we can eat?"

Mr. Harris appeared stunned for a moment. Then he laughed and held out a hand. "I'll take the horse and fetch some water. And yes, I have a some meat and cornmeal I purchased in town. I'll retrieve it for you."

She followed him toward where he'd set his saddlebags and what looked like a bunch of blankets all rolled up. Looping the horse's reins over his arm, he opened one of the saddlebags and stood, handing her a bit of flint and a pocketknife. "I'm interested to see this fire you intend to start."

Jolie raised her eyes. It was a challenge. He didn't believe she had the knowledge to start a fire. In fact, he likely assumed she was some kind of dainty flower from back East who didn't know much at all. She smiled at his back as he rode off toward what she assumed was a water source on her horse.

Mr. Harris didn't know much about her at all—and she couldn't wait to show him how very wrong he was.



Chapter Four

THE RIDE TO AND from the lazy Silver Creek was an easy one, and Cade didn't rush it. Even though he was itching to return and see how much trouble Miss Taylor had gotten herself into. After all, he ought to give her extra time to try to suss out how to get that fire started. He wondered if she even knew how to cook, although he hoped she did because he was awfully hungry.

How Lucas had chosen this woman—and how she'd agreed to marry him—was something beyond that which Cade could imagine. He hoped she had family she could return to back in Massachusetts. Although considering she'd agreed to travel so far to marry a man she'd never met made him feel more uneasy in that regard.

Because what sort of woman in a comfortable situation would agree to such an arrangement?

Cade continued to ponder Miss Taylor's circumstances as the horse took its sweet time returning. It was certainly better than thinking about why Lucas had agreed to the arrangement, which would only make him think about the gaping loss in his life.

The scent of cooking meat tinged the air, making his stomach rumble before he realized the cause. He urged the horse along a little faster.

He laughed out loud as the orange light of the fire came into view against the dusky sky. Miss Taylor had succeeded. Somehow, beyond his wildest hopes, she'd made a fire and started cooking. And, he remembered as he dismounted, she'd ridden this horse all the way out here from town.

Miss Jolie Taylor was no shrinking violet.

"I do hope you're hungry," she said when he returned from corralling her horse.

"I am." He had only the one small frying pan, which now held sizzling beef over the coals. Miss Taylor leaned over the fire and flipped the meat with an expert touch.

"So how was this supposed to work? Your arrangement with my brother, I mean," he asked, curiosity getting the better of him as he settled himself on the ground.

Miss Taylor sat back, kneeling beside the fire. She smiled wistfully. "I don't precisely know. Mr. Harris was to meet me at the depot. Then I suppose we would have gone directly to the minister or a judge."

“But instead you arrived to find no one there to collect you.” Cade’s heart smarted at the thought of Miss Taylor’s assured nature faltering upon learning her intended hadn’t come to retrieve her. He watched her as she speared the meat from the pan, setting it onto his single tin plate, as the tendrils of her hair hid her expression from him. “Most women would have assumed the fellow had changed his mind and gone to the nearest reputable boardinghouse.”

She looked up at him then. “I am not *most women*, Mr. Harris.”

“I can see that,” he said before thinking. “I apologize, I meant that as a compliment.”

Miss Taylor smiled. “And I took it as such.” With her cloak wrapped around her hand, she removed the pan from the fire. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll save this grease to fry up cornmeal for breakfast.”

Cade was hardly going to complain about that. After she set the pan aside, Miss Taylor picked up the single plate with its accompanying fork and knife and handed it out to him.

Cade held up his hand. “You eat first.” He was ravenous, but he wouldn’t be caught shoving food into his mouth while a lady sat hungry.

“Thank you.” Miss Taylor began to slice the beef.

As she ate, he stretched his legs out and looked up at the stars that were beginning to show in the night sky. The stars had always fascinated Lucas. At one point, when they were

children, he'd borrowed a book from a teacher at school and committed many of the constellations to memory. The only one Cade could remember was Ursa Major, the bear. And the North Star, which he figured didn't exactly count as a constellation since it was only one star.

"I believe the stars are brighter and more numerous here," Miss Taylor said, interrupting his reverie. "Orion is spectacular enough to light up the entire sky."

Cade looked back up, uncertain which group of stars made up Orion.

"Right there. Those three make up his belt." She pointed slightly off to the right before taking a bite.

The picture formed in his mind, and Cade smiled. He could picture his brother looking up at the same sky from this very spot. It was oddly comforting instead of sad.

"And Cassiopeia looks lovely tonight as well." Miss Taylor pointed again at a set of stars that made up a sideways letter W.

But Cade found his gaze wandering back to her. "How do you know so much about stars?"

"I find them fascinating," she replied. "And so I've studied them."

Cade furrowed his brow, but she didn't elaborate. Miss Taylor took a last bite of beef before handing the plate and fork to him. Cade made short work of what was left.

As he set the plate down, Miss Taylor had her face turned up to the stars again, and he wondered what she was seeing now.

But there was something more pressing on his mind.

“What will you do now?” he asked.

She tilted her gaze back to him, and a frown tugged at her lips. “I don’t know.”

He waited for more, but she rested her chin on her knees and looked off into the distance.

Cade paused, and then pressed on. After all, he could hardly see her off back to town tomorrow without knowing her circumstances. “Do you have a home to return to?”

Miss Taylor sighed. “I do not. My mother has joined her cousin’s family in New York, and I fear there wouldn’t be room enough for me. Although I suppose I could stay a short while, at least until I found work enough to pay for room and board elsewhere. Of course, none of that matters right now.”

She said nothing for a moment, and Cade finally understood. “You don’t have the funds to return back East.”

Miss Taylor nodded before resting her chin on her knees again. “I can write to Mrs. Crenshaw for help, but I have only enough for a night or two at a boardinghouse.”

“Because you intended to be married and live here.” *With my brother.* Cade found his gaze wandering back to the partially finished house. If Lucas had lived, it would have been finished in time for Miss Taylor’s arrival. In need of finishing touches,

of course, but with solid walls, floor, and roof. A place to begin a life together.

Grief clawed at Cade's heart, and he swallowed it down. Miss Taylor's situation was dire enough. She hardly needed him mourning his brother in plain sight. Instead, he stood and dusted off his trousers.

"I ought to see to the horses," he said.

"And I'll clean the dishes as best I can," she said, the worry falling from her face with a purpose for the moment.

Cade nodded. He took his time with the horses, but Miss Taylor remained on his mind the entire time. How could he send his brother's bride-to-be back to town to fend for herself? But then again, what was he to do with her? He couldn't even offer her a chair or civilized place to lay her head for the night.

But he could offer her safety. And friendly conversation.

He smiled, thinking back on all he'd discovered about her. Miss Taylor was intelligent and sharp, resilient, capable, and beautiful. Lucas would have been a lucky man if he were here. But Cade didn't want to think on that last fact very long.

After ensuring the horses were safe in the corral for the evening, he returned to the little camp they'd created to find that Miss Taylor had laid out the blankets from his bedroll. He eyed them, hoping she wouldn't be too cold overnight. The temperature in this valley between two mountain ranges lowered considerably after dark.

She bid him goodnight, and Cade laid on the opposite side of the fire from her, pistol at arm's length and entirely unable to fall asleep. Miss Taylor's light breathing reassured him that she was warm enough, but what if she awoke shivering?

Enough was enough. Cade stood, removed his blanket, and laid it atop her. Then he sat back down by the fire, feeding it more of the wood he'd scavenged from around the house and barn. Finally, when he could keep his eyes open no longer, he laid down and fell asleep.

And when he awoke, an idea—perhaps the most wild one he'd ever imagined—had formed fully in his mind.



Chapter Five

STREAKS OF PINK, PURPLE, and orange in the sky greeted Jolie when she awoke. She shivered at the sting of the cold air on her face and burrowed deeper into the blankets.

Blankets? She'd had one beneath her and one over her when she went to sleep. She sat up, gasping slightly as the morning air rushed over her.

Mr. Harris was crouched by the fire, coaxing it back to life. Behind him, one blanket lay folded neatly where he'd slept.

He'd given her his second blanket.

Her heart warming despite the frigid air around her, Jolie smiled at him. "Thank you for the blanket."

His head jerked up, as if he'd been so intent on the fire he hadn't noticed she was awake. "You're welcome. I hope you slept well?"

“I did.” She’d been surprised at how quickly she’d fallen asleep, and she’d barely woken throughout the night. Yesterday had taken quite the toll on her nerves and left her exhausted.

Mr. Harris excused himself to fetch more water, and Jolie took the opportunity to explore. She visited the livery horse in the corral, and then walked around the structure she supposed was meant to be the barn. Would Mr. Harris finish these buildings? She’d been so consumed with her own plight last night that she hadn’t asked him about what he planned to do with this land.

The house was further along than the barn, and it was easy to see that the man she’d planned to marry had set out a simple two-room home. Jolie leaned against one of the wooden beams and imagined what it might have looked like if he’d finished it. It would be cozy, but warm, with a crackling fire in the hearth, the lingering scent of baking bread, and comfortable seating. She would have placed her favorite books—the ones that currently sat in a trunk along with her clothing, sketchbook, and other personal items in the depot office back in Crest Stone—on a shelf beside the photograph she’d kept of her parents.

It would have been a nice life. And now that was not meant to be.

Heaviness settled deep within her, and Jolie still had no answers about what to do once she returned to town.

A flutter of wings caught her eye, and she eagerly cast aside those worries to follow the path of a butterfly. The creature had a lovely pattern, one she wasn't familiar with. Perhaps this was a butterfly unique to the area.

Jolie's heart lifted for a moment, and she wished she could stay. She missed Mama fiercely, but the thought of discovering so many new plants and insects and animals she'd never seen before was a captivating motivation to remain in Colorado. Her fingers itched for the sketchbook and watercolors in her trunk.

She was crouched down, studying the butterfly and trying to commit its markings to memory when Cade reappeared with the water.

"Did you lose something?" he asked as he dismounted his horse.

The butterfly floated away, and Jolie rose. "I was studying the most interesting butterfly. It reminded me of the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, but its wings were somewhat narrower and the coloring was slightly different."

He looked at her as if she were quoting Shakespeare. It was the same look she'd received from gentlemen back home after they'd found her intriguing at a social function and had come to call. They rarely returned for a second visit. "I brought water." He held out one of the canteens.

Jolie took it, eager to begin making breakfast. He strode around the partially finished buildings as she had, and she glanced up at him then and again while she attempted to make

the cornmeal into something edible with just the boiled water and the grease from the beef they'd eaten the night before. He was an interesting sort of fellow—and rather handsome with that strong jaw and gold-streaked brown hair.

Jolie's face warmed, and she turned her attention back to the pan on the fire. But she couldn't help wondering if the man she should have married had borne much resemblance to his brother. Her heart ached at her loss—and for Mr. Harris's loss as well. This could have been a good life for her, and now everything was so uncertain. And thinking just of herself made her feel terrible. Mr. Harris had lost his brother, someone it was clear he cared about deeply.

Mr. Harris was quiet when he returned to the campfire. They ate quietly, Jolie filled with anxiety about how she'd make her way in Crest Stone with nothing to her name. When they finished, she reached for the cooled pan, intending to clean it, but Mr. Harris caught her wrist.

“Please wait just a moment,” he said.

Her skin, covered though it was by the sleeve of her dress, warmed under his grip. She swallowed, trying to wrest her attention away from the unfamiliar feeling, and nodded.

Mr. Harris glanced down and let go quickly. He cleared his throat and took a step backward. “I plan to take my brother's place on this land,” he said, his voice oddly stiff and formal. “I want to finish the work Lucas started, purchase some cattle, and turn this into a ranch anyone would be proud to call

theirs.” His voice grew gravelly as he spoke his brother’s name.

Jolie smiled, glad to hear that this beautiful place wouldn’t be abandoned, and that Mr. Harris would call it home. Despite her own worries, it was reassuring to know that he would remain here. Perhaps once she’d arrived in New York, she could close her eyes from time to time and imagine what the ranch looked like as he improved it.

“I am so happy to hear that,” she said.

He smiled then, and some of the formality fell away. “I’m glad you approve. I have a ... Well, there is something I ought to do—to ask you, I mean.”

Jolie waited. Would he offer to pay her fare back East? It was too much, especially for a man trying to build up a ranch. If he offered, she would decline. Surely there was some sort of work she could do in Crest Stone to pay for a boardinghouse room and save for her return journey.

“I won’t take your money,” she said softly when he didn’t continue.

He blinked at her. “Money?”

“For my fare to New York. You need everything you have to build this place up.” She gestured at the half-finished barn. “It will take me time, but I can work, and I can save my own funds.”

He shook his head, even as he smiled. “I like that about you, very much, Miss Taylor. That you’re capable and able to adapt

to your situation.”

“Oh.” Jolie was taken aback by the unexpected compliment.
“Thank you.”

“And that’s why ...” He took off his hat and tapped it against his leg. “Well, I have an obligation to see things through for—for my brother. And that includes you.”

His gaze held her in place, intense brown eyes that seemed to see through to her very soul. Jolie’s mind was a haze of confused thoughts. What did he mean? “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. If you aren’t offering to pay my fare, then—”

“I wish to marry you, Miss Taylor.” He said the words in a rush, his eyes still holding hers.

“Oh!” she breathed out.

A marriage proposal was not at *all* what she’d expected.



Chapter Six

CADE'S HOPE FELL LIKE a boulder from a mountain.

What was he thinking? Of course she wouldn't agree to marry him. She'd been expecting Lucas, his smart, formidable older brother who'd always had a better way with the ladies than Cade ever had. Miss Taylor was far too pretty, too smart herself, too cultured for a man like him.

He was on the verge of taking it back, salvaging some shred of his pride, when she spoke.

"That is a very kind offer, Mr. Harris," she said in that soft voice that was somehow still layered with an inner strength. "And I see how you might think I am your obligation—"

He cringed at her use of the word. "I didn't mean it in that way. Only that ..."

He trailed off, searching for the right word. He owed this to Lucas, to do the right thing by Miss Taylor. He pushed aside the ever-present pain at the mere thought of

his brother's name. He was doing the right thing, offering to marry Miss Taylor in Lucas's stead. He was absolutely certain of that.

“You wouldn't be considering marriage if I hadn't landed at your figurative doorstep, prepared to wed your brother?”

His breath caught at her abrupt description of the situation. But she gave him a little smile, and he relaxed. “Yes,” he admitted. “But please rest assured that I see you as more than an obligation.”

She watched him a moment, her smile dipping as she fell into thought.

“I need help out here,” he went on. “And companionship would be nice. We get along, don't you think?”

“We do,” she said.

Cade pressed his lips together, trying to find some other way to convince her. It wasn't just that he felt he owed this to his brother. He couldn't stand the thought of her living alone in town, finding some sort of drudgery for work only to barely scrape together enough pennies for room and board. Besides, he hadn't much relished the thought of working alone out here. And, truth be told, he was quite taken with her.

“It makes sense, doesn't it?” he asked. Even if he'd never imagined himself taking on a wife in this way.

“It does ... Yet I hardly know you, Mr. Harris.” Miss Taylor twisted her hands together. “I'd at least had correspondence with your brother.”

“I understand,” he said. “Let me set your mind at ease. My middle name is Robert. My mother is called Matilda, and she lives in Denver with her sister, my Aunt Peggy. Lucas was my only sibling. I never knew my father—he passed on when I was a babe. I enjoy fishing and working with wood. To be honest, I’m looking forward to the work involved in finishing these buildings. My only vice is a game of cards now and then. I dislike cigars and turnips. And although I’ve never been to the opera, I suspect it would bore me.”

Miss Taylor was smiling. “I don’t much care for the opera either. I’d prefer to be outside than stuffed into a flouncy dress and made to go sit in a gilded theater for hours.”

“Then I believe we’ll get along very well.” He paused and lowered his voice, knowing he had to address something else that was surely on her mind. “And if you’re worried about other aspects of marriage, please know I’m patient. I won’t push you into anything that makes you uncomfortable.”

Her cheeks tinged pink, and she looked away. Cade kept silent, giving her time to consider. Finally, she drew her eyes back to him and nodded. “All right. I accept.”

Cade thought he’d never heard such glorious words. He grinned at her and reached for her hand. “Then I believe we ought to go to town. We can visit the minister and purchase some supplies while we’re there.”

Miss Taylor rewarded him with a sweet smile.

She doused the fire while he prepared the horses. The ride into Crest Stone wasn’t terribly long on a cool morning, and

they kept the conversation light as they rode, discussing the scenery, the various sorts of animals that called this valley home, and the sorts of items they needed to purchase in town. And thankfully, she didn't once mention Lucas.

While Miss Taylor went to return her borrowed horse to the livery, Cade saw to the minister and retrieved her trunk from the depot. Reverend Canton's wife was kind enough to let them both prepare in her home, and when Miss Taylor emerged in the church dressed in pale yellow with her hair swooped up and falling in tendrils that framed her face, he found it hard to breathe.

"Mr. Harris?" Reverend Canton prompted. "Would you come take Miss Taylor's hands?"

Cade swallowed and did as he was asked. Miss Taylor's hands felt so small in his, and the weight of the responsibility he'd agreed to take on was sobering.

Reverend Canton read through the words of the short ceremony, asking them to repeat the vows of marriage to one another as Mrs. Canton and another older woman who'd been cleaning the church looked on as witnesses.

Miss Taylor's wide blue eyes held his, and it was all Cade could do to remain focused on the reverend's words. Before he knew it, Reverend Canton leaned toward him, and in a kind voice, said, "You may kiss your bride."

It was both the most wonderful and the most terrifying sentence Cade had ever heard. With all eyes on them, he bent

down and placed a chaste kiss on his new bride's soft lips as her eyes fluttered shut.

She gave a slight gasp, and Cade's heart struck a fast rhythm. He hardly dared hope that meant she saw him as more than just a convenient solution.

He stepped back and beamed at her as the minister pronounced them man and wife. She returned his smile without a trace of worry, and Cade knew—without a doubt—that he'd done the right thing.

“I suppose we ought to see to more mundane matters now,” he said after they emerged from the church. “I can inquire about purchasing a wagon if you'd like to visit the general store.”

She nodded, and he took her arm as they walked along the board sidewalk. Cade felt as if he'd been reborn somehow. The sun was brighter, the air more crisp, and the mountain scenery beyond the buildings was even more beautiful with the woman on his arm.

He felt her look up at him now and again as they made the short walk across and down the road to the general store. When they arrived, he turned to face her. “It shouldn't take long to get the wagon, provided they have one available. I'll fetch your trunk from the Cantons' and meet you back here, Miss— I mean ...” It would be ridiculous to call her Mrs. Harris.

“Of course you may call me Jolie,” she said with a soft smile.

“Jolie,” he repeated. He liked the way her name felt to say aloud. “It’s a beautiful name. I can’t say I’ve heard it before.”

“It’s French,” she replied. “It means ... well, *pretty*.” Her face went red, as if she thought she were bragging.

“In that case, it’s also a most appropriate name.”

The flush deepened on her cheeks. “Your name is quite different too. How did your parents decide upon Cade?”

“It’s my mother’s maiden name. My father chose Lucas after his father, and so my mother chose Cade for me.”

She smiled then, as if the story behind his name pleased her, and Cade took the opportunity to admire her again. How had he gotten so lucky? In a way, he felt badly, as if he were profiting off his own brother’s death. But if something had to come from the sorrow of losing Lucas, he was glad to have found it.

“Pardon me, are you going into the store?”

Cade startled, and so did Jolie, as if she were just as lost in thought as he’d been. “I’m sorry,” he said to the waiting lady, leading Jolie out of the way of the door. As soon as the door closed behind her, he turned his attention back to his bride. “I’ll return as soon as I have the wagon.”

“All right. I’ll ensure we have enough in the way of provisions.”

Reluctantly, he let go of her hand. He turned away and began walking toward the livery, glancing behind him after a few

seconds had passed. Jolie held the door open, but had paused to look back at him too.

Cade was certain the large grin on his face made him look half mad as he strode toward the livery, but he didn't care, not when the look was caused by a woman as wonderful as the one he'd just married.



Chapter Seven

JOLIE PAUSED JUST INSIDE the door to the Crest Stone Mercantile and General Store. She took a deep breath and tried to still her hands. It was unexpected, the way she found herself reacting to Cade.

Her husband. Her *husband!* Jolie stifled a shriek of joy with a gloved hand pressed to her lips. She was now Mrs. Cade Harris, and the man she'd married surpassed even her most imaginative musings about his brother on the train journey west. He was remarkably handsome, strong, witty, and kind. He possessed an intelligence that she'd prayed for, and he even seemed to appreciate the abilities she possessed that had caused others back home to raise an eyebrow. Ladies such as Jolie weren't expected to know how to start a fire, or cook an entire meal, much less spend a night sleeping outside on the ground with nary a complaint.

It was as if everything she'd found herself interested in had finally come to fruition out here in Colorado. And—to make it even more wonderful—she'd married a perfectly wonderful man. She could hardly wait to write her mother.

Brushing her hands over her skirts, Jolie tried to corral her thoughts into something sensible. They needed food, additional cooking equipment, another plate, utensils, and cups. A bucket to carry water wouldn't go amiss, and she'd be certain to purchase paper and ink to write.

Jolie set about wandering the store before finding her way to the rear. At the counter stood a lively, slight woman in spectacles, with two bunches of some sort of dried herbs tied with ribbon lying on the wood countertop in front of her. She chatted with the lady behind the counter, a tall woman with blonde hair and a friendly smile. Jolie hovered off to the side, waiting for the two to finish their conversation. She examined the herbs from a distance. Squinting her eyes, she tried to figure out what they were to no avail.

“Let me see if Thomas placed them in our stockroom,” the blonde woman said before disappearing through a door behind the counter.

“Lavender,” the lady with the spectacles said as Jolie stepped forward. “The herbs. I noticed you looking at them. It's good for tea and pleasant for a sachet. I'm Mrs. Wright, but please call me Edie.”

Jolie warmed at her pleasant introduction. “It's good to meet you. I'm Jolie Tay—I mean, Harris. Mrs. Jolie Harris.” The

name felt unfamiliar on her tongue, but she liked the sound of it. It made her feel as if she belonged again, as if she hadn't been entirely uprooted and separated from the only family she had left.

“Recently married, I take it?” Edie asked.

Jolie blushed. “Just this morning. My husband is Cade Harris. He has some land outside of town. A ranch ... or what will be a ranch. It was his brother's but now it's Cade's.” Jolie forced herself to stop speaking. Somehow not having female companionship since she'd left home had made her want to confide everything in this woman she'd just met.

“Congratulations on your marriage! Harris ...” Edie trailed off, seemingly lost in thought. “Is the ranch south of town?”

“Yes, about an hour and half's ride. Do you know Cade?”

Edie shook her head. “No, but I'm fairly certain I remember my husband—he's the town marshal—mentioning that last name in connection with something that happened south of town over the summer. Did you say your husband had a brother?”

“Yes. His name was Lucas. He's passed away.” Jolie opted to keep the awful fact of the cause of Lucas's death to herself, although Edie hardly looked the sort to be shocked.

“I do remember now, and I'm so very sorry for your husband's loss. We were all horrified to hear about what happened to Mr. Harris. James and the sheriff were

particularly frustrated that they were unable to find who was behind the evil deed.”

Jolie swallowed, her empathy for Cade surging at the thought of Lucas’s murderer going about unpunished for what he did. “Thank you. I don’t know much about what happened, but I’m glad your husband looked into it. I know that means a lot to Cade. I’m sure he’d be grateful for any information about the investigation.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t much to relay. But you can tell Mr. Harris that all James and Sheriff Hunt were able to find was evidence of hoofprints, and that a neighbor reported seeing a rider on a white horse galloping past his home on the same day the salesman found your husband’s brother.” Edie frowned, as if she were personally disappointed there was no more evidence. “But nothing ever came of the white horse, as no one in the area seems to own one. And nothing else ever came to light.”

Jolie’s heart contracted. It would have been nice to tell Cade that there was something more than a horse that was likely long gone and that said horse might have left prints on Lucas’s land. “Thank you. I’ll tell Cade all that you’ve told me, in case he doesn’t know it yet.”

Edie nodded. “I’m certain Sheriff Hunt would be happy to meet with him if he’d like.”

The blonde woman peered around the doorway, “I’ve found them! I’m waiting on Thomas to get the crate down from the top shelf.”

“Please tell him thank you,” Edie said. She turned back to Jolie. “That’s Caroline Drexel. She and her husband own this store. She’s wonderful about ordering anything you might need. Such as small jars to store dried herbs.”

“Do you work with herbs often?” Jolie asked eagerly.

“I do. I adore plants and herbs, particularly for their medicinal qualities. I’ve brought this lavender for Caroline. It’s good for encouraging sleep.”

“How fascinating!” Jolie fell into an easy conversation with Edie about the various herbs and plants she grew. Edie’s interests were in medicines and healing, which was something Jolie hadn’t studied much.

“If you like, I can give you some starter plants to keep inside. Some herbs you might find useful. Once you’re settled in, of course,” Edie said as a man Jolie presumed was Mr. Drexel placed a crate filled with several small glass jars on the countertop.

“That’s very kind of you. I look forward to putting in a garden next spring.” Jolie was about to continue with thoughts on the sorts of plants she wanted to grow, but from behind her, a man cleared his throat.

She turned around, expecting to see another customer hoping to get Mr. Drexel’s attention. But instead, Cade stood there, thumbs tucked over his belt and an expression of curiosity on his face.

Jolie made a quick introduction while Edie gathered the crate into her arms.

“Might I carry that for you, Mrs. Wright?” Cade asked, his brow furrowing at the sight of Edie balancing the weight in her hands.

“Oh, thank you, but I’ll be fine, Mr. Harris. Jolie, would you mind giving that lavender to Caroline? I imagine she’ll return in a moment.”

Jolie nodded, and they said their goodbyes. “Did you find a wagon?” she asked Cade.

“I did. Carlisle, the fellow who owns the livery, agreed to monthly payments. And I’ve fetched your trunk. Do you have the goods ready to load?” He glanced past her toward the counter, which was empty save for Edie’s dried lavender.

“Oh!” She’d completely forgotten. “I’m sorry. I was talking with Edie, and I never spoke with Mrs. Drexel.”

Impatience darted across Cade’s face, but he nodded, and Jolie turned back toward the counter, where Caroline had reappeared. Jolie quickly gave her order and the lavender to Caroline, and as they waited, she relayed what she’d learned about local plants to Cade. “Edie said she would bring me some starter plants, hardy ones I could grow inside until spring,” she finished.

Cade nodded as he paid and gathered one of the crates Caroline had brought out. “I suppose some greens and vegetables would be good to have on hand.”

Jolie didn't correct him, even though Edie had specifically mentioned herbs. Cade hadn't looked too interested in her newfound knowledge. It was somewhat disappointing, she thought as she gathered up the sack of flour and followed her new husband outside.

Don't be silly, she told herself. She could hardly expect him to share her every interest. As he took the flour from her, she remembered what Edie had said about Lucas.

"I forgot to tell you about what Edie's husband and the sheriff learned when they investigated your brother's death," she started.

"I'm certain it's nothing that concerns me."

Jolie frowned. Had she misheard him? She let him help her into the wagon, and as he drove them out of town, she relayed all she'd learned from Edie.

"A white horse," Cade repeated when she finished. "That's all?"

"Well, yes. And no one has seen such a horse around here."

Cade adjusted his hat, his eyes on the road before them. "I shouldn't be surprised. The murderers likely hightailed it out of the valley afterward."

His voice sounded hollow, and Jolie's heart ached for him. If only he could see those murderers behind bars. Perhaps that would help ease the ache of losing his only brother.

She reached over, resting a hand on his arm. "Perhaps they'll still be found."

He glanced down at her hand and smiled for a second. “It’s unlikely.”

“Eddie said the sheriff would be happy to meet with you about it.”

Cade shook his head. “It’s best just to forget about it. Besides, I’ve got too much to do if I want these buildings finished before winter.”

Jolie watched him, puzzled. But she didn’t press the issue, and after a minute passed, Cade began talking about hiring men to help with the building.

How odd, she thought, that he wasn’t more interested in seeking out justice for his brother.



Chapter Eight

CADE GAVE THE NAIL one last smack with the hammer before looking up. The sun was lower in the sky, and the two men Sam Mahoney had sent down from town looked as if they were working on their last reserves.

“I suppose we ought to call it done for the day,” Cade said. “You’re both more than welcome to stay for supper.”

“Why, that would suit me just fine,” the older of the two said. “Neil?”

The younger man, Neil, nodded. “I ain’t had a good homecooked meal since I left home.”

“Sit down for a bit. I’ll see how much longer it’ll be.” Cade set the hammer down and went to find Jolie.

They’d been working the entire day on the house. The canvas tent he’d purchased at the hardware store was fine for now, but the night chill would only continue to grow, and they

couldn't go on much longer sleeping outside. If Neil Smith and Horace England continued coming to help, he estimated they could have the place done enough to provide shelter within the week. It would need a lot more work, of course, but at least he and Jolie wouldn't freeze overnight.

He stopped by the campfire, which was cold with the pan and the pot he'd purchased waiting empty nearby. Cade held up a hand against the lowering sun and scanned the landscape around him. Jolie was nowhere in sight.

The bucket they used to haul water from the creek was missing, however. She must have gone to fetch some. Regardless, it would be some time before supper was ready.

He turned back toward the house, admiring the progress they'd made. Neil and Horace were leaning against one of the walls, sipping from canteens and likely eager to eat a meal—one that wasn't yet cooked.

“Sorry,” Cade said as he approached. “Looks like it's going to be some time before supper is prepared. I don't want to keep you.”

“It's all right,” Horace said as he got to his feet. “Maybe we'll take you up on it tomorrow.”

Cade nodded and fished some coins from his pocket to pay the men. “I appreciate your help.”

“See you in the morning. Tell your missus we're looking forward to some lamb chops.” Neil grinned.

Cade laughed. "I'll do that." He watched as the men fetched their horses from the corral and saddled them. And as Neil and Horace rode off back toward town, Cade consulted his pocketwatch.

Where was Jolie? She should have fetched and returned with water some time ago, never mind had supper nearly cooked.

A tinge of fear roiled his stomach. He shoved the watch back into his pocket, cast a glance around him, and then set about saddling Old Brown. He'd lifted his foot to the stirrup when a voice called out his name.

"Cade!" Jolie came walking awkwardly in his direction with the water bucket sloshing at her side, and her other arm crooked and holding ... what *was* she holding?

Relief flooding through his veins, Cade stepped out of the corral and went to take the water from her.

"Where have you been? I was headed out to look for you." *I was worried about you.*

"I only went down to Silver Creek for water. But on the way, you'll never guess what I saw!" Jolie stopped and held out the book that had been tucked under her other arm. She flipped through the pages and landed upon a sketch of a female mule deer. "Isn't she lovely? She was with several other deer near the creek. I stayed as silent as possible while I observed them, and managed to sketch a bit before they heard me and left." Jolie gazed at the drawing while Cade tried to determine if she'd taken leave of her senses.

“You sat down to draw a picture by the creek.” It was a statement rather than a question.

“Well.” She cast a dreamy smile up toward him. “It’s more of a scientific observation than a *picture*, but yes, I suppose that isn’t incorrect. Here’s what fascinates me. She looks much like the deer I’m familiar with, but her tail is different. And look, her ears seem larger, and I believe she *herself* is a larger animal.” Jolie tapped the image of the deer on her page.

Cade blinked at her as his stomach rumbled. “It’s a mule deer.”

“What an apt name.” Jolie tilted her head as she studied her drawing. “Her ears *do* resemble a mule’s.”

Cade set his jaw in an effort to keep his frustration from leaking into his words. It reminded him of when she’d gotten caught up in discussing herbs in the general store instead of placing their order. “I’d invited the men to stay for supper.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Jolie finally looked up from her drawing.

“I sent them home.”

“Oh.” Jolie appeared confused as she closed her book.

“Jolie, have you looked at the sky? It’s nearing dark, and you’ve been off ... drawing pictures.”

She frowned at him. “It’s a scientific sketch to record observations.”

“I’d assumed you had already started cooking—that’s why I asked them to supper. But I couldn’t ask them to remain here for an undetermined amount of time while you light and feed a fire and finally get food started.” He stopped speaking abruptly as her frown turned into something sadder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so harsh.”

“No, you’re right,” she said with a sigh. “I do tend to get carried away when I find something fascinating, like this doe. I feel I have to record my findings right away, or I’ll lose the details from my mind. My parents indulged me, but ... I’ll try to pay more mind to the immediate.”

Cade had the feeling she’d heard similar criticism before. And although he preferred to think of deer more as a source of food than anything else, he hated seeing Jolie look so down on herself. “You must show me more of what’s in your book.”

A smile bloomed on her face again, and she raised the book as if to open it.

“Later,” he said quickly. “Perhaps tomorrow, before the men arrive.”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly.

He delivered the water to the campfire and set about starting the fire for her while she prepared the food. Thankfully, she put together a soup that cooked quickly. The stars flickered overhead and the temperature fell as they filled their stomachs with the hot soup. Jolie made quick work of cleaning the dishes while Cade ensured the horses had their own supper.

When he returned, he found her sitting with her arms wrapped around drawn-up knees and her face tilted toward the sky.

“Searching for more constellations?” he asked as he sat beside her.

She smiled at the stars. “Always. Have you ever thought about how many more stars there might be that we cannot see? How many more constellations might exist that don’t yet have names?”

Cade looked up. Thousands of stars stared back at him. “I can’t say that I have. It’s a rather fascinating thought, though.”

They were quiet for a moment, and Cade again imagined Lucas sitting in this exact same spot, staring up at the sky and counting the stars. Grief wrung through him like a twisted rope, knotted and painful and all too raw. Would there ever come a day he could think of his brother without feeling such an immense sense of loss?

“Do you suppose the sheriff sent word of the white horse to other nearby towns?” Jolie asked. It was as if she’d read his mind and knew he’d been thinking of Lucas.

“I doubt it,” he forced himself to say, although he’d rather speak on any other subject but this one. “It was just as likely the man on that horse was in the area for legitimate purposes, or simply traveling through.”

“That is true.” She went quiet, and just as Cade was finally able to distract himself with thoughts that weren’t of Lucas,

Jolie spoke again.

“And yet it’s strange that the man was in such a hurry, isn’t it? One would think he wouldn’t want to tire his horse if he had far to travel. And if he was simply returning home, why would he be in such a rush?” She looked to him for confirmation.

Her reasoning made sense. But it didn’t matter. Too much time had passed. A resolution to this crime wouldn’t come, and chasing it would do nothing but make it take longer for him to come to terms with Lucas’s death.

“We’ll never know,” he said in a way that he hoped made it clear he didn’t wish to converse about the topic any longer. And then for better measure, he added, “I prefer to leave it be.”

Jolie appeared to understand. She glanced back up at the stars and shivered.

“You’re cold. Here.” Cade reached over and grabbed one of the folded blankets that sat nearby. He wrapped it around her shoulders, and she tugged it close around her.

“Thank you. I’m beginning to fear the chill of winter out here,” she said.

“It does get cold.” Cade opted not to tell her about how early the snow could come. It was best not to scare her too soon. “I’m hoping to have the house built enough that it can provide us shelter within the week.”

The smile she gave him was brighter than all the stars above, and Cade wished his words could cause such a look again and again.

“That soon? It would be wonderful to be inside at night. And here I thought I’d never tire of camping outside in a tent.” She gave a laugh.

“Well, it’s one thing when it’s something you do for fun now and then, and something else entirely when you must live that way,” he replied.

“Thank you for working so hard on it.” Her eyes reflected the firelight when she looked at him. “I know that if I weren’t here, you might have chosen instead to finish the barn so you would have a place to store equipment. Or have started a stable for the horses.”

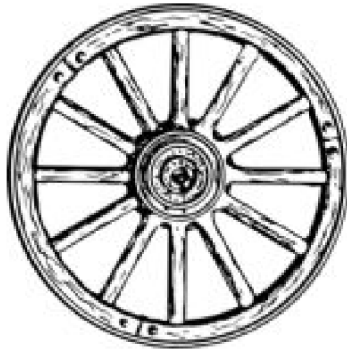
“I don’t regret my decision, if that’s what you’re implying.”

She gave him a light smile. “I should hope not, considering you’re stuck with me now.”

Something about the way she held his gaze stirred something deep within him. Cade couldn’t put a name to it, but it left him with the intense desire to wrap an arm around her shoulders and keep her warm himself.

He held her gaze a half second longer, and when he could stand it no more, he made do with laying his hand on top of hers. She went still, and for one heart-pounding second, he thought she would withdraw her hand. But she didn’t.

Instead, she turned it, palm-up, and laced her fingers between his.



Chapter Nine

DAY BY DAY, THE house began to look more like a house. The men worked hard, and Jolie found herself refilling their canteens every few hours.

Bringing the bucket back from the creek was a heavy chore, but Jolie didn't mind the slow walk. It allowed her to better study the land—and its inhabitants and plants—around her. Everything was fading now as it was fully autumn, but she'd found numerous plants and insects that were new to her, and one exciting evening, she'd even spotted elk. Cade warned her profusely to stay away from the elk, particularly the males, but Jolie hadn't had the opportunity to see any again.

This late afternoon, the sun warmed the cloak she wore and dazzled the golden-green grasses of the valley as she walked toward the creek. After so many cold nights, Jolie decided never to take the sun's heat for granted again.

With the sun warming her face, it was easy to let her mind wander. Having Cade sit so closely to her by the fire each night made it almost impossible to keep her attention on the stars. And when he rested his hand on hers, she gave up all pretense of intelligent thought. It was so easy to simply turn her hand and let their fingers entwine each time. His hand was warm and strong, and the gesture felt intimate, with no one else around. And after she managed to breathe again, she'd found it comforting.

It was just the two of them at night in this wide, dark valley set between two mountain ranges. Only them, facing the entire world. It was a terrifying and yet wonderful thought.

Before she knew it, Jolie had reached the creek bank. She set the bucket down to take a moment to catch her breath. The bright sun illuminated the changing leaves on the aspen trees. Those clumps of trees had intrigued Jolie so much, and she was grateful Cade had been able to put a name to them. She would have to include a small watercolor of the aspens with one of her letters to Mama. Those letters were piling up quickly. Cade had promised her a trip into town to mail them as soon as the house was ready to inhabit.

Humming under her breath, Jolie walked a short way along the edge of the little creek. She imagined the waterway ran quickly in spring and early summer, but now it was shallow and slow. Sunlight danced on the creek, making it sparkle like jewels. She wished Mama could see this place for herself. And Papa too. The grief that closed around her heart when she

thought of him didn't come as often as it once had, but it arrived now and then, usually when she least expected it.

She took a deep breath and rubbed the threatening tears from her eyes. Papa would prefer she observe what was around her, instead of letting tears fall in his memory. And so she blinked and let her gaze wander the creek, the opposite bank, and—

Jolie tilted her head and squinted. No, she hadn't imagined it.

There was a bit of white fluttering in the breeze on the other side of the creek. Curiosity took over. Bucket forgotten, she analyzed Silver Creek. The water flowed at a crawl, and she could see through it to the bottom all the way across. Even in the middle, it wouldn't be any deeper than about halfway up her shins.

She bent over and tested the water with her hand. It was cold, no question about that, but not dangerous. At least so long as she was quick about it. Besides, there were a couple of larger rocks she could use as stepping stones.

Mind made up, Jolie sat down to remove the practical boots she was glad she'd brought with her from home. Glancing around for the sake of propriety and satisfied she was alone, she peeled off her stockings and left them on top of her boots.

The riverbank felt cool but solid beneath her bare feet. Jolie smiled, remembering how often she used to run outside barefoot as a child, before such things were frowned upon. When Mama hadn't been looking, she might have done it again as a grown woman—just every once in a while. After

all, what was the use of living in the country, far from neighbors, if one couldn't feel the earth beneath one's feet now and then?

She made her way to the edge of the water. The scrap of what looked like white fabric still lay on the other side. It looked as if it might have been pinned under a small rock. Carefully, Jolie stepped on the first stone in the creek, and then the next.

Now was the true test of her bravery. She drew in a deep breath, steeled her shoulders, and planted a foot in the water. It lapped at her leg as she sucked in air at the freezing water. She set her other foot down fast, before she could change her mind.

If she'd been tempted at all to take her time in crossing to the other side, she certainly wasn't now. Moving as fast as she could, Jolie reached the other bank. The white fabric was close enough to the bank that all she had to do was lean over and pull it out from under the small rock where it had been caught.

Back at the other bank, shivering at the chill in her legs, Jolie examined her find. It was a handkerchief. Likely one for a man, as the embroidery at the edges was done in a strong, blue pattern that resembled interconnected squares. It was dirty, as was to be expected since it had been outside after being parted from its owner.

Jolie folded it neatly and tucked it into the pocket of the calico skirt she wore. It was an interesting find, but she would have preferred to stumble upon some new creature or some never before seen bit of lichen. She drew on her stockings and

laced up her boots, grateful for their warmth, and made quick work of filling the bucket.

When she returned to where the men were making progress on the house—which now held the skeleton of a roof—she found Cade in conversation with a man on horseback. As soon as she'd set the bucket down, Cade motioned for her to join him.

“Sawyer, I'd like you to meet my wife. Jolie, this is Zachary Sawyer, our closest neighbor to the north.” Cade gestured at the man on horseback.

Mr. Sawyer tipped the brim of his hat to Jolie. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Harris.”

“I feel the same, Mr. Sawyer. I've been longing to meet some of our neighbors. I don't suppose there is a Mrs. Sawyer?” she added hopefully.

He chuckled. “I'm afraid there's not. It's just me and a few men I've kept on for the winter. One of our hands is married, though, and his wife cooks up a fine meal, if you'd be inclined to join us one evening.”

Jolie wanted to answer right away with a resounding *yes*. It would be so nice to have some female company, even if it was only for an evening. But Cade was spending nearly every daylight hour on the house, and she didn't want to pull him away from his work.

“That's very kind of you,” he said. “And if it's all right with my bride, perhaps we could come one night next week, once

I've got a roof on this house.”

Jolie beamed at him, and Mr. Sawyer said he'd expect them the following Friday evening. She excused herself then to begin cooking their own supper, but her mind was alight with thoughts of possibly making a new friend.

And, because she knew Cade would not ask, perhaps she could find out if Mr. Sawyer or anyone else at his ranch was the person who'd spotted the white horse the day Lucas was murdered.

As she prepared the fire, she could hear Cade's voice in her head, telling her to let it be.

She respected his wishes. After all, she was well acquainted with grief and how difficult it was to move along with one's life when a large part of it had been cut out at the loss of someone dear.

But deep down in her heart, she wanted an answer for Cade. Seeing his brother's murderer receive justice felt like the right thing to do. And perhaps that was what he really needed to properly grieve.

She simply had to go about her own investigation quietly.



Chapter Ten

CADE THOUGHT HE HAD never seen anyone so vibrant as Jolie when they drove into town. He'd hammered the last nail into the roof just before the noon meal and sent Neil and Horace off with their pockets and stomachs full. And then to celebrate finishing a few days before he'd planned, he offered to take Jolie into Crest Stone to mail her letters.

She'd emitted an incoherent shriek and then thrown her arms around him. She took him by surprise, but he laughed as she set about cleaning up the dishes as quickly as possible.

Now, as they rolled into town in the wagon, he drew up the horses outside the general store. "Would you like to stop in and take a look? I'm sure there are a few items we could replenish, and a few we might need now that we have a home. I'll go to the livery and then meet you back here and we can post the letters together."

With a sweet smile, Jolie thanked him and before he could climb down to help her out of the wagon, she'd clambered to the road and gave him an enthusiastic wave of her hand.

Laughing to himself as he drove toward the livery, Cade was certain he'd return to find her deep in conversation with some lady about plants or drawings. Her sketch work was certainly something to see, and while he couldn't understand why she felt the need to meticulously record every new insect or flower she saw, it was clear that doing so gave her great joy. And he truly didn't mind, except when it distracted her from the things she *ought* to be doing.

Which happened a little more often than he wanted to admit.

After lodging the wagon and horse at the livery, Cade made his way back toward the general store to collect Jolie. The sun hid behind clouds today, and the air was more crisp than it had been. It wouldn't be long before snow fell, and he hoped that he, Neil, and Horace could have the barn built before then.

But despite the work that lay before him, the ever-present grief over Lucas, and the cloudy day, Cade felt himself walking lighter. He had a home built, a beautiful wife to keep him company, and plans to visit Sawyer's for dinner in a just a couple of days. With any luck, he'd carve out a place for himself here.

He hardly dared hope that things might finally be going well for one of the Harris boys. He only wished Lucas could be here to share it with him. He banished that sobering thought quickly as he approached a building under construction.

Pausing to allow a couple of men carrying a large piece of wood to pass, he wondered what the place might become.

“Appreciate it,” said the man in the back as they set down the wood. He stood and brushed off his hands. The edge of a badge peeked out from under his open coat. “I’m James Wright, town marshal. Don’t think we’ve met before.” He held out a hand and Cade reached out to shake it.

“Cade Harris. I’ve got land south of town.”

“Harris ...” Marshal Wright trailed off, as if he were trying to place Cade’s last name.

And Cade knew exactly why. “Lucas Harris’s brother,” he forced himself to say. “The land I’m building on used to be his. I believe you were the one who rode out there.”

Recognition settled in the marshal’s eyes, quickly replaced by sympathy. “Right. I’m sorry about your brother. Have you spoken with the sheriff yet?”

“I haven’t. Is there a reason I should?” He hated that he sounded defensive. But it would be nice if everyone would let his brother’s death be what it was without constantly pushing it into his face.

Wright shrugged. “Only that he’s the one who might have information about your brother’s murder. I don’t know that he’s found much, but you ought to see him so he can inform you directly.”

“I’ll do that,” Cade said, not meaning a word of it. “Thank you, Marshal. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Wright turned his attention back to the man he’d been assisting with the wood, and Cade continued on.

Thankfully, the general store was close enough that it left little time for his mind to ponder Wright’s words and dredge up all of his memories again. Inside, he found Jolie examining a set of hooks, likely meant for hanging coats and such on the wall.

“Wouldn’t these be nice by the back door?” she asked.

“Nails would work just as well.” And were much less expensive. But she gave him a look of exasperation, and he quickly relented. No use arguing about something as unimportant as coat hooks. “They’d be a good addition.”

She smiled. “But not yet. First we need to set up a kitchen. And find seating. And a place to sleep.”

He hid his own smile at the way she conveniently avoided the word *bed*. “I might be willing to part with some money to purchase additional kitchen items.”

“You just want to eat better.” Jolie pressed a finger to his chest, and he laughed.

“Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Not a thing. Although I can’t do much until we have a stove.”

“I’ll look into it,” he promised. He hadn’t the slightest clue how much a stove might cost, but it was a necessity, particularly as winter set in. He’d carefully saved money for years with no particular purpose other than a lack of desire to

spend it on frivolous pursuits. But that money would run out eventually if he wasn't careful. He needed to save most of it to buy cattle, and it would be several months before the ranch would be operational enough to bring in an income.

“There's a small crate waiting at the counter with sugar, coffee, and a few other small items,” Jolie said.

Cade went to retrieve it, and they made their way to the building by the railroad tracks that served as a depot, post office, and telegraph office. Inside, the place was quiet save for the shuffling of papers behind the counter.

“Name?” A voice carried over the countertop before they'd even approached.

Cade glanced at Jolie, who appeared just as curious as he was. They were both so new to town that neither expected to have mail yet, but perhaps they might be surprised. “Harris,” he finally said. “Cade Harris. Any correspondence for my wife might be addressed to Miss Jolie Taylor.”

There was more shuffling, and then finally an older man's face appeared. “I'm sorry, I don't have any mail for either of you.”

“We do have some to post, though.” Jolie set a small stack of envelopes on the counter.

Cade raised his eyebrows as the postmaster took her envelopes. “I didn't realize you had so many friends waiting for your correspondence.”

Jolie grinned sheepishly. “They’re all for my mother. She enjoys seeing my sketches.”

Cade returned her smile. She must have missed her mother terribly. He remembered that feeling after first leaving home, and he wished there were some way to ease that pain for her. If letters helped, he would post a hundred for her every week if that was what it took.

The door opened behind them, and a well-dressed man stepped inside.

“Be with you in just a moment, Mr. Gilbert,” the postmaster said.

“Take your time, Thomason,” Mr. Gilbert replied. “I’m in no hurry.”

Thomason nodded to the man and sorted through Jolie’s envelopes. “You don’t happen to be related to a fellow named Lucas Harris, do you?”

Coming into this town was like dodging blows at every turn. Cade swallowed the lump in his throat. “He was my brother. He passed on a few months ago.”

Thomason paused and looked up at him with pale blue eyes. “Well now, I’m sorry to hear about that. He was a congenial fellow. And I believe something came for him. Give me just a moment.” He placed Jolie’s letters in a nearby crate and walked slowly to the rear of the space that served as an office.

“I was also sorry to hear of your brother’s passing,” the man behind them said.

Cade turned around to find the man holding his hat and giving him a friendly, yet sympathetic, look.

“Thank you,” he forced himself to say. He was halfway on the verge of never stepping foot into this town again. At least not until Lucas’s memory had faded from their minds and he could move through the town without being accosted by well-meaning folks. He knew they were simply being friendly, but every kind word was like another chink to his barely held together armor. “I’m Cade Harris. This is my wife.”

“Mrs. Harris.” The man gave her a smile and a quick nod. “I’m Jake Gilbert. I run the land office in town.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Gilbert,” Jolie said.

“Please feel free to come around my office any time. I’ll introduce you to my wife,” Gilbert said kindly.

“I would enjoy that,” Jolie replied. “I don’t suppose you sold Cade’s brother his land?”

Cade glanced at her, wishing she hadn’t brought Lucas into the conversation again, even if she was simply being friendly.

“I’m afraid I didn’t. I sold your parcel of land to a fellow called ... Pound. Or perhaps it was Young. Forgive me, I’d have to look at my books to be certain. I do know the man grew desperate for money reasonably soon after the purchase, and quickly turned around and sold it to Harris before leaving the valley.”

That made sense. Lucas had mentioned in his letter that he’d gotten a good deal on the land. It was a lucky find for him,

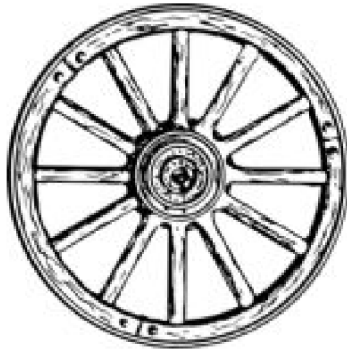
given that both of them started from nothing even approaching wealth. And yet it also made the fact that Lucas never really got to build the place he'd dreamed of even harder to stomach.

Seeing justice done might make it better. Cade dismissed the thought lurking in the back of his mind. Seeing justice done would draw this all out so much longer. Lucas was gone, and the sooner he could hear that without feeling as if the world was shattering around him, the better off he'd be.

"Found it," Thomason said from the counter. He held out an envelope.

Cade took it from him. Lucas's name was neatly typed on the front of the envelope, and the envelope bore a postmark from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Cade took the letter opener Thomason offered and sliced the envelope open.

Inside was a receipt for a kitchen stove. Bought and paid for, and, according to the receipt, due to be delivered within the next couple of weeks.



Chapter Eleven

“YOU DON’T NEED TO do that. Why don’t you go back and sit down?” Hannah Bennett said as Jolie reached for one of the dirty dishes.

“With the gentlemen who are currently in the midst of a riveting conversation about the price of beef?” Jolie replied as she dunked the dish into the water Hannah had heated on the stove. The stove felt like a luxury to Jolie. She could hardly wait for their own—the one Lucas had purchased months ago—to arrive.

Hannah laughed. “I imagine I’d prefer washing dishes to that conversation too.” She picked up a pair of forks and set to work cleaning them.

“How long have you and Mr. Bennett lived here?” Jolie asked as she scrubbed.

“Not very long. We arrived in the area last year. Josiah always wanted a ranch of his own.”

Jolie glanced at the woman she hoped would become a new friend. Hannah’s voice was somewhat wistful. “Well, hopefully that will happen for him soon. For you both.”

“It will,” Hannah said with certainty. “Josiah works hard, and he’s very ambitious.”

“Those are good qualities to have.”

“Now, you must tell me how you and Mr. Harris met. Did you grow up together?” Hannah asked.

Jolie laughed. “That’s an interesting story.” She launched into all that had happened since she’d responded to the letter Mrs. Crenshaw had given her back in Massachusetts. When she finished, Hannah had forgotten all about the dishes.

“What would you have done if Mr. Harris hadn’t proposed marriage?”

“I don’t know,” Jolie said honestly as she rinsed off the last of the plates. “But I suppose I would have found work in town and tried to save enough to return to my mother.”

Hannah picked up the pot of dirty water. “You are far more courageous than I am. I would have never responded to the letter, much less boarded a train to a place where I didn’t know a soul.”

“You might have, if your circumstances were different,” Jolie said kindly. She paused a moment. “I don’t suppose you know whether Mr. Sawyer was the neighbor who told the

marshal he'd seen a man riding a white horse the same day Cade's brother was found murdered?"

Hannah glanced down at the pot in her hands, and then shook her head. "No, not that I know of." She walked out quickly to empty the pot.

Perhaps it had been another neighbor. As she finished drying the clean dishes, Jolie reflected on what Hannah had said about Jolie's decision to come here. Perhaps she *was* courageous. Going to New York would have been the easiest option, even if it had meant living in cramped quarters and finding factory work. But Jolie had considered it only briefly. Mama knew that would have made her unhappy, and she was right. Even if everything hadn't work out as she'd thought, she *was* happy here, in this beautiful place with Cade at her side.

She set about wiping down the wooden countertop for Hannah. When she finished, she folded the rag and set it next to some other linens on a nearby shelf. She was just about to turn away when something caught her eye.

There, next to a set of folded tea towels, sat a single handkerchief—embroidered along the edges with blue squares in a pattern that looked immediately familiar.

Jolie absently patted her empty pocket. If she wasn't mistaken, that was the same style of handkerchief that she'd found alongside Silver Creek earlier in the week.

"It has grown to be so cold outside," Hannah said as she bustled in through the door.

Jolie jumped, her mind still on what she'd found. "I was just admiring the embroidery on this handkerchief. Is this your work?"

Hannah's face lit up. "It is. I made a pair of them for Josiah soon after we came here. I'm glad you like it."

Jolie pretended to admire the workmanship again. She ought to tell Hannah she'd found one of the pair, but her mouth remained firmly closed. It was odd, finding that handkerchief where she had, just at the edge of their property. It had most likely blown away, considering that the Sawyer ranch was their nearest neighbor.

Jolie chatted with Hannah for a while longer, until Cade came searching for her. They said their goodbyes before heading back toward home.

The ride wasn't very far, but the night was clear and cold, and the stars winked overhead.

"Did your brother ever show you Cepheus, the king?" Jolie asked as she pointed at the characteristic square and triangle that made the constellation.

"Yes," Cade said, a note of impatience in his voice.

A half-second passed in which Jolie attempted to puzzle it out, and then Cade spoke again.

"Did you enjoy the evening?" he asked in a much more conversational tone.

"I did, very much. Hannah was a delight, and I'm glad to have her as a neighbor. Did you have a good conversation with

Mr. Sawyer and the other men?”

“Sawyer’s a congenial enough fellow, and Yount would talk the ear off anyone. Bennett was quiet, but all in all, they seem to be a good set of neighbors.”

“I look forward to hosting them at our home once that stove arrives,” Jolie said.

“And once we have a table. And chairs,” Cade added with a grin.

She laughed. “Yes, I suppose they might like to sit while they eat. We’d need to invest in a few more plates and bowls, too.”

“So perhaps next spring?”

“Next spring!” Jolie tried to imagine not having a table or chairs for the next six months.

“I’m exaggerating, but it was worth it to see that appalled look on your face.” Cade grinned at her. He shifted the lines to his left hand and laid his right on her knee.

And although she wore a coat and several layers under that, Jolie thought she could feel the heat of his hand through all them. She hardly dared move, afraid he would realize what he was doing and move it. It was a sweet gesture, one that made her think he was indeed attracted to her.

Her cheeks went warm despite the cold air rushing against them, and she tried to pick up the threads of their conversation again. “Well, I suppose I could learn how to make one myself.”

“A table?” His eyebrows lifted.

“And chairs too.”

“You want to make a table and chairs?”

She turned toward him. “Why shouldn’t I?”

Cade shrugged. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t. I’m simply curious about *when* you’re planning to do that.”

“Well ... after—or between ...” She trailed off. Her days were busy, filled with chores and exploring the land and then more chores. If she was going to take up woodworking, she’d likely have to stop recording new plants and observing the world around her.

“Perhaps we’ll set some money aside and ask someone in town to make them for us,” Cade said.

“That might be best,” Jolie agreed.

They fell silent, and her gaze drifted back up to the stars. That made her think of Lucas again. “Did Mr. Sawyer indicate how well he knew your brother?”

Cade pulled his hand from her knee and stared straight ahead. “He didn’t. I didn’t ask him.”

Jolie chewed her lip. He seemed agitated. She thought back to what she’d said—none of it had related to Lucas’s death. He’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in pursuing anything to do with that. But this was different. “I thought perhaps he would know where the cattle had gone, or whether Lucas—”

“Stop, Jolie. Please.” He didn’t look at her, but his posture was rigid, and he clenched his jaw.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I only thought that if you spoke to Mr. Sawyer about Lucas—”

“*Stop* saying his name.” Cade’s expression had gone stormy. “Over and over again, it’s all I hear. Just leave him be! And quit pestering me about him. It won’t bring him back. Nothing will. He’s dead, and we have to go on.”

Jolie pressed her lips together as tears stung her eyes. They’d reached the ranch, and the second Cade drew the wagon to a halt, she leapt from her seat. Landing hard on the ground, she didn’t look at him as she made her way toward the dark house.

His words stung, whether he meant them to or not. He acted as if no one was ever to speak of Lucas again, but how was that fair to his brother’s memory? Were they to simply pretend he’d never existed? She thought she was helping Cade by talking about his brother, but all she’d gotten for her trouble was a raised voice and criticism.

She grabbed the lantern from where she’d left it just inside the front door. Fumbling for one of the matches they’d bought, fiery thoughts whirled through her head. If Cade wanted silence about Lucas, then he could have silence. In fact, she might never talk to him again! Perhaps she’d pretend he didn’t exist either, and he could see how he liked that.

But there was one thing she certainly *wasn’t* going to allow Cade to do, and that was to speak to her so harshly. She struck the match once, too hard, and broke it. Grabbing another one,

she forced herself to slow down. The fire took this time, and as she lit the lantern, she wondered just how long she'd let him stew out there before going out to tell him precisely what she thought of his angry words.

All night. Yes, that would work just fine. She'd sleep comfortably inside the house tonight, and he could find himself a chilly spot by the barn in that tent.

And then she'd speak to him in the morning.



Chapter Twelve

IT WAS NEARING MIDNIGHT, and sleep was elusive.

Instead, Cade had spent hours sitting by the fire he'd built outside and staring into it as if the flames would somehow burn away his grief and his anger and his self-pity.

They hadn't, of course, but the longer he sat out here, the more irritated with himself he became. Jolie had done nothing wrong. And he had been unnecessarily rude to her.

He stood and put out the fire, hoping he wouldn't need to come back out here and relight it. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he gathered his courage and made his way toward the house. He opened the door quietly so as not to scare her if she was asleep, but he needn't have worried.

Jolie was wide awake, sitting with her back pressed against the wall. In the low light of the lantern, she looked like an angel. Her blonde hair hung in curls over her shoulders and

her skin glowed in the light. He sucked in his breath at the sight of her. He was an idiot for ever making this woman think he was anything except head over heels for her.

He shut the door quietly behind him and stood there for a moment. "I owe you an apology."

"Yes, you do." She remained where she was and crossed her arms.

Part of him wanted to smile at her tough exterior, but she was absolutely right. "I shouldn't have reacted that way. I know you were simply making conversation, and I ..." He ran a hand through his hair, trying to put words to the turmoil that stewed inside whenever he thought of Lucas. "Thinking of Lucas makes me angry, and sad, and ..."

"Helpless?" she suggested.

"I suppose. Yes." He sighed, feeling suddenly exhausted. "I feel like I should have been here to help him, which is ridiculous. He was a grown man with his own life, and I had mine. It would have never crossed my mind to come here unless he'd asked me. There was *nothing* I could do, and now he's not here."

Jolie looked up at him with those beautiful blue eyes. After a moment, she patted the floor next to her.

Grateful for the possibility of forgiveness, Cade went to sit beside her. He rested his head on the wall that Lucas had framed and Cade had finished, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“I understand grief,” Jolie said, her voice soft yet firm. “I know it feels like nothing is the same and yet everything continues on just as it was, as if you’re the only one who’s walking around with a sort of gaping hole inside.”

Her description was eerily accurate. Cade’s throat seemed to close at how well she could put those feelings into words. “It’s easier not to talk about him at all.”

She didn’t respond right away. He turned toward her, and found tears gathering in her eyes. “Jolie?”

“I’m all right.” She blinked quickly, and without thinking, he reached out and wiped away one tear—and then a second—with the pad of his thumb. “Thank you,” she said, her voice ragged at the edges.

“Were you thinking about your father?” He laid a hand on hers.

She nodded. “And my mother too. I know it isn’t the same with her, but sometimes I miss her so much it feels as if I can’t breathe.”

He wanted to gather her into his arms, the way he did that first day they’d met. But she’d been *so* angry with him, and he was honestly surprised she hadn’t pulled her hand away already. “I understand how that feels,” he said quietly.

She looked at him then, her eyes still damp with tears and seeming to see him in a way that made him want to shift and look away. It was as if she were trying to read every thought in his head.

No one had ever looked at him in that way.

Cade took a deep breath, and he didn't look away. After a moment, Jolie spoke. "If this is to work, you can't speak to me the way you did earlier. I understand that you were upset, but I'd done nothing wrong."

He swallowed his embarrassment at that earlier reaction. "I promise that won't happen again. I didn't mean to hurt you."

A moment passed, and she nodded. "I've found that speaking about my papa, telling stories about him, makes it feel as if he's still here. As if his memory is still present, even if he can't be. Does that make sense?"

"It does," Cade said, the words coming slowly. "I imagine I'll feel that way, some day. Right now, it's ... too painful."

She said nothing in return, but she gave him a sympathetic smile, and he knew she understood. Then she turned and leaned her head on his shoulder.

His heart warmed, and he shifted his arm to wrap it around her shoulders. After a while, her breathing evened out, and he knew she'd fallen asleep. He didn't want to move. If he could stay here forever, with Jolie resting against him as if she trusted him fully, he would.

So he tightened his grip around her shoulders and leaned his head against the wall. The wall of the house he'd built for them.

And then he dared to imagine the future.



Chapter Thirteen

WASHING CLOTHING, JOLIE DECIDED, was the most detestable chore.

She stood and stretched her aching back. Never again would she take for granted the help she'd had for most of her younger life. She glanced at the clothing that was now strewn upon various rocks and boulders by the creek to dry for a bit before she attempted to carry it back home to hang. And she couldn't help but laugh.

A year ago, she would have looked helplessly at a washing board and bit of soap without the slightest idea of what to do. And six months ago, while she'd had to learn to wash, she never would have imagined scrubbing dirt and fire ash from a man's trousers.

And yet here she was, doing just that without complaint. Well, perhaps with only a *little* complaining.

Pressing her hands against the small of her back, she contemplated sitting for a while. But if she did that, she feared she would linger too long here, unwilling to stand or, worse, falling asleep. Maybe it was a better idea to take a short stroll while the sun dried the heaviest amount of water from their clothing. She hadn't brought her sketchbook, not with her hands fully occupied by the basket of clothing, but a walk for just the sake of a walk sounded nice.

Jolie picked her way around the small stones that lined the bank of Silver Creek. And without clothing stains to occupy her mind, her thoughts drifted to Cade. Ever since she'd fallen asleep on his shoulder, she'd found him watching her more frequently, often with a light smile creasing his features. Just that morning, he'd sat close to her by the fire as they ate, his leg brushing hers each time one of them moved. It was such a strange feeling to be so very aware of someone else's actions, of every single time they made contact. And yet it was impossible *not* to be so aware, considering that each time his fingers brushed hers or his knee pressed against her leg, her heart beat a frantic rhythm and she nearly forgot how to breathe.

And although she knew it wasn't scientifically possible, he'd somehow grown more handsome each day. She couldn't get enough of the way he'd run a hand over his jaw, or how the corners of his mouth crinkled when he laughed. And she could have drowned in the way his brown eyes darkened each time she caught him looking at her.

She felt restless and happy and optimistic, and most of the time she found herself counting down the minutes until Neil and Horace headed back to town and she had Cade's attention all to herself again.

He'd mysteriously sent them home early today, and then with a mischievous smile, hitched up the wagon and told her he'd be back in a few hours.

As Jolie left the creek and began to wander through the trees, she couldn't imagine where Cade had gone—or what he might be doing. But by the look on his face, it was something good. Something he wanted to surprise her with. It couldn't be the stove, unless it had arrived a few days earlier than expected. Perhaps that was it, though.

But that brought a whole new set of worries. Jolie had only learned her way around the kitchen after Papa's death and they'd needed to dismiss their cook. What if she'd forgotten how much flour to put into bread? Or how much to mix biscuit dough to ensure the biscuits baked fluffy and not as hard as one of the stones by the creek? What if—

The sound of a twig snapping jolted her from her thoughts. Jolie paused and glanced around. Another twig cracked, and she whirled around. No one—not a person nor an animal—was in sight.

Her heart began thumping harder, and snippets of conversation she'd heard about bandits and bears and miners of questionable character flickered through her mind.

Don't lose your head, Jolie Harris. She lifted her chin, clenched her hands into fists, and waited to see if she heard anything else. After a few seconds, a shuffling sound, as if someone were walking through leaves, sounded from somewhere off to her right, where the trees gave way to the empty land that comprised the valley.

Softly, she made her way in that direction, searching all around her as she walked. When she paused, she heard the unmistakable sound of a horse snuffling.

It was a neighbor. That was the explanation that made the most sense. A neighbor out for an afternoon ride or searching for a lost cow. She'd likely emerge from the trees to find Mr. Sawyer or perhaps the folks to the south she hadn't yet met.

Steeling her shoulders, Jolie put one foot in front of the other until she reached the last cottonwoods and pines that bordered the creek. Peering between two of them, she traced the autumn grasses as she searched for a horse and rider.

She saw nothing, but the snuffling came again, more muffled this time, and from somewhere beyond the slight hill rising to her left.

Jolie crept out of the treeline, her heart pounding so hard she was certain she'd scare away any creatures who might be lurking nearby. She stepped softly through the long grass, the ends of it brushing against her skirts as she walked.

She'd just crested the small hill when she saw what she'd been hearing. A gasp flew from her mouth, and she slapped her hand over it.

It was a white horse.

Her eyes wide, she watched as the horse's rider guided it toward the northeast over their land. Toward their home.

She had to know who it was. This person might be the only clue to Lucas's murderer.

He might be the murderer. The thought surfaced in the back of her mind, and she pressed it down. Getting his attention was dangerous.

But letting him get away—with no new clue about who he was—would be letting a terrible man escape justice. Cade might not want to pursue it, but Lucas *deserved* justice.

“Hello!” Jolie yelled before she could think any more on it and stop herself. She was prepared to run back into the trees. To escape across the creek and up into the mountains if she had to. She'd climb a tree and he'd be none the wiser.

The horse stopped immediately, and the rider turned it around.

And Jolie regretted her decision. Fear gripped her heart, and worst of all—he was too far away for her to make out his features. All she could tell from this distance was that he was most certainly male, and he wore a dark colored hat and matching coat. She couldn't tell his age or his hair color or anything else that might help identify him.

All she'd done was call attention to herself.

Seconds dragged like minutes, and just as she was about to dart back into the trees, the man took off—in the opposite

direction.

Air flooded Jolie's lungs, and she nearly fell to the ground in relief. He was no longer headed toward the ranch buildings, but directly east, in the direction of the railroad tracks that traveled the valley and bordered one side of their land.

She'd scared him. Her! A young woman who couldn't stomach the thought of harming an insect, had frightened away a grown man who might very well be a murderer.

And then she couldn't help it. She fell to the ground and laughed until she thought she would cry.



Chapter Fourteen

IT WAS LATE IN the day on Tuesday when Cade arrived back home, wagon in tow, from visiting another neighboring ranch. He'd run into Sawyer after church services in town on Sunday, and while Jolie was conversing with some of the ladies she'd met, Sawyer had mentioned another neighbor who wished to sell some furnishings. Apparently the man's son had married and was relocating from his cabin to a new home in Cañon City.

Cade had sent Horace and Neil home early from working on the barn and made the quick journey to the nearby ranch. And his time had been well worth it. Not only had he purchased a small table and four chairs, but also a quilt, some dishes, and a simple bedframe with a straw mattress. It had all barely fit into the wagon, and it had been slow going returning home with only the one horse to do the work.

“Jolie!” he shouted as he jumped down from the wagon. He set to work unhitching Old Brown.

But after he’d returned the horse to the corral, Jolie still hadn’t made an appearance. He called her name again as he crossed to the house.

There was no response, and she wasn’t inside either.

Hands on his hips, Cade looked around the property. Had she said anything earlier that might indicated where she’d gone? He thought back but came up empty. All he could remember were her endless, curious questions about where he was headed with the wagon.

Most likely, she’d taken her sketchbook and gone out in search of some plant or animal that had caught her fancy.

But it was growing closer to supper time. He would have expected her to return by now. Besides, she was so excited to see what he might be bringing back. She wouldn’t have wanted to miss his return.

What if something had happened to her? He swallowed the lump of fear that rose in his throat. He had to find her.

She couldn’t have gone far, but he’d cover ground faster on horseback.

“Sorry, fella,” he said to Old Brown as he saddled the horse. Old Brown deserved a rest after pulling that wagon, but rest would need to wait until after they’d found Jolie.

The horse seemed to understand, nickering and nudging his nose against Cade’s sleeve. Cade saddled him quickly and

decided to head west, toward the creek first. It was the most likely place Jolie would have gone.

They hadn't gotten very far when he spotted a cloud of dust rising off to the left, near where his property met the railroad tracks. Cade slowed, squinting into the sunlight. He could just barely make out a horse and rider, headed north toward Crest Stone.

He didn't have time to stop and greet a neighbor. Nudging Old Brown forward, he made his way toward the trees that lined Silver Creek.

There was no sign of Jolie, although he looked all around as he rode. *Please let her be by the creek. Please let her be all right.* He repeated the words to himself in time with Old Brown's trot.

The horse picked his way through the twigs and brush that lined the ground until they emerged into the dappled sunlight by the creek.

Clothing lay spread out here and there on rocks, and one of his shirts lay crumpled on the ground.

Alarmed, he slid to the ground, one hand on the pistol at his side. She'd come here to do the washing, and now she wasn't —

“Cade!” Jolie's relieved voice echoed from somewhere in the trees.

“Jolie?” His arms and legs went numb with relief when she emerged. She was here. She wasn't hurt.

Without thinking, he ran to her and gathered her into his arms. “You’re here.” He pressed a hand to either side of her face, drinking in her perfect blue eyes and parted lips.

And then he did the one thing he’d been wanting to do for weeks.

He kissed her.



Chapter Fifteen

JOLIE'S EYES WENT WIDE before some instinct told her to close them. Her startled gasp was lost when his lips claimed hers, and she immediately forgot everything as she fell into his kiss.

His hands were warm on her face, holding her there as if he couldn't bear for her to move away from him. Not that she wanted to do any such thing. Instead, she reached for his arms, holding on to steady herself as her mind spun. She couldn't think of anything except Cade—the warmth of his mouth, the leather and sunlight scent of him, the way his muscles flexed under her touch.

He began to move away, dragging in a breath, but she didn't want to let him go. She didn't want this to end. Her request came out as a whimper, and his mouth was on hers again immediately. It felt as if this was precisely what had been missing between them, and Jolie couldn't get enough.

She held fast to his arms as her head went dizzy. Somewhere—it felt very far away—Old Brown nickered. Cade pulled back then.

“Jolie,” he said, her name barely a whisper. He dropped his hands to her shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t be.” She still held onto him, this wonderful man who was her husband. “I’ve been waiting for that.”

He laughed, low and throaty, as his thumbs made circles on her shoulders. “I couldn’t find you, and I worried ... But you’re here, and you’re all right.”

She nodded. “I meant to be back earlier, and I’m sorry I scared you. But there’s something I must tell you, Cade.”

He raised his eyebrows and reached down to take her hands in his. “What is it?”

She told him about her walk, and about stumbling across the man on the white horse. “But I couldn’t see who it was. He was too far away. All I could make out was a black hat and coat. Or it could have been a darker brown. I wish I’d waited—maybe I could have gotten a better look.”

Cade’s forehead creased. “I’m glad you didn’t. You shouldn’t have said anything at all, Jolie. A stranger riding across our land isn’t someone you want to engage with.”

“I know. I wasn’t thinking clearly. All I could think of was Lucas and how that rancher had seen a man on a white horse.”

Cade shook his head, his mouth set in a determined frown. “There are a hundred white horses between here and Cañon

City. It could have been anyone.”

“But there aren’t, don’t you remember? The marshal said—”

“I remember,” he said shortly, and Jolie bit down on her lip before she said anything else.

He didn’t want to learn more about Lucas’s murder. He’d made that very clear. She should have kept this information to herself, at least until she’d discovered more. But she supposed a small part of her hoped he would take this new development and decide that Lucas deserved justice.

“All right.” She gave him a little smile and squeezed his hands. “I promise not to go running after strangers on horseback again.”

The worry on his face fell away, and he lifted a hand to brush a wayward curl from her cheek. “Thank you. Now, may I help you gather up these clothes so you can see what I’ve brought back with me? I promise it’s worth the wait.”

Forcing herself to shove thoughts of the stranger to the back of her mind, Jolie nodded. And as they gathered up the damp clothing, she made a decision.

The next time she was in town, she would find Edie and ask her to relay what Jolie had seen today to her husband and the sheriff.

With any luck, Lucas’s murderer would be found. He—and Cade—deserved at least that much, even if Cade couldn’t see it yet.



Chapter Sixteen

THE BARN WAS COMING along nicely when the first snowflakes fell.

“Cade!” Jolie’s excited voice found him, hammer in hand, inside the roofless barn. Her face was flushed pink, and she was wrapped in an unbuttoned coat. “It’s snowing!”

A tiny snowflake, barely anything at all, drifted past his nose. “So it is.”

“All the more reason to get this done,” Horace said as he held a piece of wood in place for Neil.

“Indeed.” Cade glanced up to see a few more flurries float by. It wouldn’t be an ideal place for Old Brown to winter, but it would be warm enough at least. A real stable would need to wait until spring.

“I think it’s lovely.” Jolie stepped back outside and spun around as if she’d never seen snow before.

Cade laughed. “Didn’t you get plenty of this back in Massachusetts?”

“Oh, we did! But it’s different here, somehow. Perhaps it’s because of the mountains. Or maybe it’s because everything feels bigger and wide open.” She grinned at him. “I believe I’ll make some coffee. Do you care for coffee, gentlemen?” she asked Neil and Horace.

They couldn’t have agreed to her suggestion any faster, and she scampered off back to the house, where the new stove sat waiting inside.

“She’ll likely ply you with bread and butter too,” Cade said. “She’s enamored with that stove.”

“Can’t say I’d complain about that,” Neil said.

“I don’t suppose she has a cake or a pie in the oven too?” Horace said, the eagerness dancing on his words.

“Not yet, but I imagine those will be next.” Cade rubbed his hands together against the chill before going back to work.

The cold simultaneously made him work harder and yet want to disappear inside until warmth returned to the valley. But Old Brown needed somewhere to be out of the cold, and any equipment he managed to purchase would need shelter too. And so he kept at it, hammering and sawing and hefting wood.

“You don’t suppose that coffee is ready yet, do you?” Neil asked hopefully after some time had passed.

Cade furrowed his brow and retrieved his pocketwatch. Nearly an hour had gone by since Jolie paid them a visit. “Let

me find out.”

As he strode toward the house, he hoped she hadn't been distracted with baking and forgotten the coffee. Although it wouldn't take long to make even if she had.

He shut the door behind him, grateful for the fire that was going in the hearth of the room that served as both parlor and kitchen. Jolie, however, was nowhere in sight.

Cade crossed to the stove. She'd put on the coffeepot, at least. He grabbed a towel and lifted the lid. What liquid was left inside resembled mud. Lines of dried coffee tracked down the sides of the pot, and he could make out where it had burned on the stove. He removed the pot, which would need a serious scrubbing before it could be charged with making coffee again, and made his way to the only other room in the house.

He pressed the door to the bedroom open and found her perched on the bed, poring over a sheet of paper. “Jolie?”

She jerked her head up at the sound of her name and quickly slid the paper into her open sketchbook. “Cade!”

He glanced at the sketchbook. “What are you doing?”

“Studying a sketch I'd made.” Her cheeks went slightly pink as she stood and clutched the book to her side. “Are you finished work for the day?”

“Not yet. I came to see about that coffee you'd promised.”

“Oh, the coffee! I left it on the stove. It must be finished by now.” She moved toward the door, brushing past Cade in a

hurry.

“It’s past finished,” he said as he followed her. “It boiled over and burned.”

“Oh, no!” Jolie set the sketchbook on the table and went to the pot. She lifted the lid and grimaced. “What a mess.”

Impatience unfurled inside him. “It’s freezing outside, and those men are good enough to return day after day although I can’t pay them much. They were looking forward to that coffee.”

“I know. Please tell them how sorry I am. I’ll clean this up and start a new pot right away.” She grabbed the coffeepot and a rag.

“Jolie.” Cade rubbed an exhausted hand over his face, trying to curb his irritation to convey what he needed to say in a way that wouldn’t hurt her. “Perhaps you should set the sketchbook aside when you’re working in the kitchen.”

Her face was unreadable, and he rushed on to explain. “It isn’t just the coffee. When this place is up and running—next year, God willing—I’ll have more men hired on here. It’s hard work, and we’ll have to feed them. That will be your responsibility. If the coffee burns or the roast doesn’t get cooked through, we won’t have anyone willing to stay on. Not when they could go somewhere else and get dependable meals. Do you understand?”

She chewed on her lip a moment, then nodded. “I do. Please tell the men I’ll have their coffee ready as soon as I can.” And

then she dunked the coffeepot into a larger pot filled with water and set about scrubbing it with an intensity that made Cade quietly leave out the front door.

If she was angry at him, so be it. Although she was hardly as flighty as she'd been when she arrived, she still had to understand what kind of work it took to run a ranch. Better to learn now than next year, when they would stand to lose a lot more than a pot of coffee. Deep down, he feared she might not have the same ambition he did. That somehow, all of his work here would fall apart because the woman of the house couldn't keep up with something as simple as watching a coffeepot.

No. That was fear speaking. Jolie was learning, and she wanted the ranch to succeed as much as he did. He felt guilty for even thinking otherwise. When the new pot of coffee was ready, he decided he would do whatever it took to soothe her wounded spirit.

And ideally, he thought with a smile, that would involve a good, long kiss.



Chapter Seventeen

JOLIE'S THOUGHTS SWUNG FROM angry to guilt-ridden as she set the new pot of coffee on to boil. If only Cade would agree that finding Lucas's murderer was important. Then she wouldn't feel the need to hide her own thoughts and actions.

She slipped the sheet of paper Edie had given her from the sketchbook again. It wasn't a drawing, as she'd fibbed to Cade. It was a list of names. Men who owned land south of Crest Stone. Edie had requested the list from her friend, Mrs. Gilbert, whose husband Jolie and Cade had met at the depot the other day. Mr. Gilbert was in charge of the land office and had records of all the land bought and sold in the area. Edie had conveyed the secretive nature of the plan, and Mrs. Gilbert had quietly retrieved the information for Jolie.

What she would do with this list was something she hadn't yet figured out. But having seen that man on the white horse again had made one fact nearly certain in her mind—the

murderer was not someone who had simply been passing through. Whether he owned land or was someone who worked in the area, she didn't know. But she had to start somewhere.

Now if she could only find out whether any of the men named on this list owned a white horse.

She shoved the list back into the sketchbook before she forgot about the coffee again. It wasn't long before it was ready, and Neil and Horace eagerly came inside with Cade to enjoy a few cups each. They were more than grateful for her efforts, and Jolie was happy to give them something in return for everything they'd done on the house and barn.

She caught Cade watching her as she spoke to the men, but she didn't dare look at him. He'd been annoyed with her, but at least he'd told her why in a way that was much more respectful than he had before. She wasn't angry with him—not really—but the guilt over lying about the list and continuing to investigate Lucas's murder against his wishes sat heavy inside.

It was for the best, she told herself more than once. And he would be grateful if she was able to succeed, even if he didn't know that yet.

She prepared a small quiet supper for the two of them while the men finished work. After seeing Neil and Horace off and washing up, Cade sat down at the table.

"This looks delicious," he said as she set the chicken down on the table.

“Thank you.” She took her own seat as he reached over to slice the chicken.

They both began to eat in silence. Each time she glanced up, she caught Cade watching her with something approaching wariness.

Jolie sighed and set down her knife and fork. “I’m not angry with you.”

A smile broke across his face. “You aren’t?”

“No.” The guilt flared again at realizing he’d mistaken her secrecy for anger.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.” He cut his chicken with renewed vigor. “Horace brought a newspaper from town. If you’d like, we can read it together after we eat. I thought I saw an article about some newly discovered species on some island.”

“I would love that.” Jolie hid her smile with a bite of potatoes.

True to his word, Cade pulled out the paper after they finished, and they sat side by side at the table to read. His hand reached for hers, and she was more than happy to let him take it. They’d reached the third page when Jolie found herself staring into his eyes instead of perusing the newsprint.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look by lantern light?” he asked. “It illuminates your hair.” He brushed a curl between his fingers before tucking it behind her ear. The feather light touch of his hand against her skin made Jolie shiver.

His eyes seemed to grow darker as he looked at her, and all Jolie wanted was for him to lean in and kiss her again. She wanted it so badly that if he didn't, she was certain she would reach up, place her hands on his face and pull him to her.

His hand fell to her cheek, and her eyes closed. But instead of the anticipation of what might happen next, all she saw was that list of names.

And how Cade would feel if he knew what she was doing.

Her eyes flew open, and she stood up so fast that she startled him. "I'm sorry, I just realized I haven't tossed out the old water yet. I can't have all that dirty water sitting overnight."

Before Cade could say a word, Jolie had grabbed the pot of water she'd used to clean the dishes and ran out the back door without grabbing a coat.

The cold air bit at her face and her hands and seemed to blast its way in through her clothing. She gritted her teeth against it and walked several feet away from the house to toss the water.

It landed with a splash against the grasses and brush, the moonlight illuminating it as it fell in a wide arc. But as the water trickled away, there was a rustling from somewhere over toward her left.

Jolie sucked in a breath. Her fingers dug into the edges of the pot as she stood perfectly still. The rustling sound came again.

It was an animal. It had to be. It was far too late for a person to be outside their home.

Unless it was someone who shouldn't be there—and knew it.

All she could think of was the man on the white horse. She was several feet away from the door. She could run. Or perhaps the person hadn't seen her.

No, of course he'd seen her. She hadn't exactly been quiet when she'd rushed out the door and tossed the dirty water.

Jolie raised the pot to her chest. If she had to, she could use it as a weapon. It was heavy enough to hurt, and it might give her a few precious seconds to get to the door.

She took a step backward. Nothing happened. One more step, and the rustling started again. It was louder this time. She held the pot up, ready to strike.

The sounds grew louder, and then a shadow emerged.

Jolie drew in a sharp breath. It *was* a man. She couldn't tell how tall he was, or much about him at all. The moon's light just barely made him visible in his dark coat, and he was hunched down, as if he hoped that would make him invisible.

He moved fast, but then he turned. And for just a split second, she caught a shadowed glimpse of a man with tanned skin and a dark beard. But that was all. He turned again just as quickly and ran fast across the open area between the house and barn, toward the road and the railroad tracks.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jolie dropped the pot and ran inside.

“Cade!”

He was still in the kitchen, the newspaper spread out on the table. She pressed herself against the closed door, and the

words spilled out.

“There was a man! Outside. He ran toward the road.”

Cade didn't hesitate. Before Jolie could say anything else, he'd grabbed one of his pistols and was out the front door.



Chapter Eighteen

AFTER A SOLID THIRTY minutes of searching, Cade gave up. There was no sign of the man Jolie had seen, not even a footprint so far as he could tell.

The moon lit up the road that ran past the house. It was unlikely someone could have come here on foot, though not impossible. It was a long walk from here to anywhere.

“He’s gone, isn’t he?” Jolie had slipped out the front door, a coat wrapped around her.

Cade nodded. “Are you certain you ...”

“Yes,” she said sharply, her eyes boring into him.

He sighed, wishing she’d been somewhat less certain. “It was probably a drifter. Hopefully you’ve scared him off for good.” Or someone more dangerous, but considering the man was on foot, that seemed unlikely.

“Do you think so?” Jolie cast her gaze across the dark expanse as she wrapped the coat tighter around herself.

She was frightened. Of course she was. They were out here by themselves, and she’d just seen someone sneaking around their house. He took a few steps until he was behind her. He wrapped his arms around her, and after a few seconds, she relaxed against him.

They stayed like that for a moment, the cold air circling them but unable to enter their embrace. He held tight to her, the weight of her against him something he relished.

“Thank you,” she said after a few minutes had passed. “For making me feel safe.” She turned in his arms and looked up at him.

“Always.” He lifted a hand to her cheek. Her skin was cold beneath his. “You’re freezing. Let’s go inside.”

She nodded, and he dropped his arms to let her open the door. The house was filled with a welcome warmth. Jolie went to get ready for bed while Cade ensured each door was locked. It had been an extra expense to install the locks, but one he was glad he hadn’t spared.

Reassured no one could come inside easily, he returned to the table to fold the newspaper. He frowned at it a moment, thinking of how Jolie had leapt up to toss out the dirty water just as he was about to kiss her again. It had been an odd reaction, and certainly not one she’d had before. He shook his head as he remembered the easy way she’d leaned into his

embrace just a few minutes ago. Perhaps she really was concerned about the water.

He spotted her sketchbook on the crude wooden stand he had quickly cobbled together to serve as a temporary countertop. He reached for the cover, intending to deliver it to the bedroom as soon as Jolie was finished.

The little book fell open, and Cade grabbed it with his other hand—but not before a loose sheet fell from it onto the floor. That must have been the sketch Jolie was so intent on when she'd burned the coffee earlier.

Cade set the book on the table and bent to retrieve the fallen page. But when he picked it up, no gentle feathered strokes depicting a leaf or an insect caught his eye. Instead, it was a paper filled with handwriting.

He squinted at it in the shadowed light of the lantern, carrying it to the table to insert back into her book. But he paused when the light revealed it to be a list of names.

He skimmed the list, his eyes catching Sawyer's name, along with the names of a couple of other neighbors Sawyer had mentioned. The handwriting wasn't Jolie's, either.

“Jolie?”

After a moment, she appeared in the doorway to the bedroom, a dressing robe wrapped around her. She smiled when he caught her eyes.

Cade lifted the sheet of paper. “This fell from your sketchbook.”

Her eyes widened, and she crossed the room to take the list from him. “It’s ... well ...”

If he wasn’t mistaken, her voice had gone to a higher pitch. “It appears to be a list of names that includes our neighbors. Where did you get it?”

“From Edie, the marshal’s wife.” She tucked the paper back into her sketchbook.

“All right.” That didn’t explain *why* she had it. Cade was thoroughly puzzled. “I don’t understand why she would give you a list of names. Are you planning to host a dinner party?”

Jolie laughed, but it was strained. “No. I ...” She looked down at her book, clasped it to her, and then straightened. “Please don’t be upset with me. I thought the man with the white horse might be someone who lives nearby.”

The man with the white horse. The one who might have something to do with Lucas’s murder. The one she claimed to have seen not very long ago.

“Right,” he said, his voice as steady as he could make it even though it felt as if a knife was piercing his heart as he thought of Lucas again. “And so this is a list of ... men who own white horses?”

She shook her head. “Landowners. And according to the sheriff, no one nearby owns a white horse.”

Irritation licked a flame inside of Cade. He ran a hand through his hair and let out a frustrated breath. “Why did you

ask for this list? I thought I told you I had no interest in pursuing this.”

“I thought ... Since he came back—”

“You don’t know that!” The words burst out of him like an animal that had been caged for too long. “That person you saw could have been anyone. Who knows how many men on white horses pass through this valley over the course of a year? The sheriff made his investigation, he found nothing, and we need to *let it go*.”

She took a tiny step backward, and somewhere in all the anger and sadness, a bloom of guilt burst inside Cade.

“You’re the only one who’s saying that,” she said quietly. “The sheriff wants to meet with you, but you—”

“I’m not going to waste the man’s time.” His words were harsh, but he couldn’t stop them. It was like everything he’d kept carefully contained was boiling up, and he couldn’t stop it. “It won’t bring Lucas back. *Nothing* will. All I can do is build up this ranch the way he wanted it, and so that’s what I’ll do.”

“But it *isn’t* all you can do! Don’t you believe Lucas deserves justice? Do you want this man to remain free to do this to someone else?” Her voice was plaintive, but all he heard was how much she’d positioned herself against him.

Cade pressed his lips together as the full extent of what she’d done clarified itself. “It doesn’t matter,” he said flatly. “But what does matter is that you went behind my back. You got

that list and what—are you planning to visit each person and ask if they own a white horse? All without me knowing?”

“I hadn’t yet decided,” she said in a small voice.

“So, you were going to continue to lie to me until you figured it out?”

Her face pinched. His words were harsh, and he knew it, but he’d never felt so betrayed by anyone.

“That isn’t fair,” Jolie said. “I didn’t lie—”

“You *told* me that paper was a sketch when I asked! I don’t know how you were raised, but that’s a lie where I’m concerned.”

She frowned at him, a line forming on her forehead. He’d made her angry, and he was glad for it. It felt like everyone should be angry—not just him.

“That was unnecessary,” she said, her words thick with emotion. “I am sorry I wasn’t truthful with you about the paper, or about asking for it from Edie. But I won’t apologize for doing the work that *you* should be doing.” And with that, she turned and disappeared back into the bedroom.

She left Cade fuming alone in the kitchen. He had so much more he wanted to say, so much anger that was coursing through him.

But it was good she’d left. He knew that, somewhere in the recesses of his mind where he could still think straight. She didn’t deserve most of what was going through his head, but that didn’t mean what she’d done was all right. It wasn’t, at

all. He'd made his thoughts clear about putting Lucas's death in the past where it belonged, and she'd gone directly against that, doing whatever she saw fit to do without a single thought for him.

The bedroom door flew back open, and Jolie dropped the blankets he'd set up for himself on the floor. It was a not-so-subtle indication that he ought to sleep out here.

Well, that was just fine by him.



Chapter Nineteen

THE WALK TO THE creek for water didn't feel the same.

Between her argument with Cade and the lingering fear that someone might be lurking behind the trees or just over the nearest hill, Jolie's thoughts were on edge.

A bird flew up from the grasses, and she jumped in response, her heart beating wildly. Somehow she made it to the creek and filled the bucket, despite constantly looking around and startling at every brush of wind against a leaf.

She walked back slowly, the weight of the water forcing her to resist the urge to run. Despite the wild fear that *anyone* could be hiding out here and waiting for her, she also dreaded going back to the house.

Cade was already outside when she'd woken up that morning. She'd made breakfast, but he didn't come in to eat, and when she peeked out the door, she found him already hard

at work with Neil and Horace. She set out a lunch before she left, just some cold meat and cheese with bread, in case they grew hungry before she returned.

But she didn't want to go back and find it untouched. And she wasn't certain she could handle Cade's silence for the rest of the day. Perhaps that was preferable, though, to his angry words.

He'd made *her* angry too. Just thinking about it now made her want to scream. Yes, she hadn't been truthful with him when he first asked her what she was looking at when she'd held Mrs. Gilbert's list. That was wrong, and she'd apologized for it.

And maybe he was right when he extended that to her investigation. She hadn't been truthful about that either, but then again, he hadn't asked. It wasn't a lie, but more like a carefully omitted truth.

Of course he's upset, she thought. She knew he would be, which was why she hadn't told him. But she wouldn't apologize for doing it. It was the right course of action, even if he couldn't see that.

He would, though, once the murderer was caught. Of that, Jolie was absolutely certain.

Thinking of the murderer made her glance around her again, but only the brown grasses waved in the wind, and a few yellow leaves floated by, cut loose from a single, nearly bare tree.

What if the man sneaking around the house last night *was* the murderer? It was more likely that Cade was right, and the fellow was a drifter, since he didn't have a horse. But after seeing that horse and rider a while back, Jolie wasn't entirely certain.

She forced herself to move more quickly, and she reached the house out of breath.

Inside, the lunch she'd left out had been eaten, and she smiled in gratitude. He wasn't so angry that he was willing to avoid anything she did for him. She set to work sweeping the entire house and then started a hearty stew for supper. In the middle of the afternoon, she made coffee and brought cups of the steaming brew out to the men.

"Thank you, Mrs. Harris," Neil said as he took his cup. "It's a cold one out here today."

Horace breathed in the scent of his coffee and smiled before taking a sip. "This is good. Thank you, ma'am."

Cade took his with a curt, "Thanks."

Well, that was better than nothing at all. Jolie chatted with Horace and Neil while they drank their coffee. They attempted to include Cade, but all he did was nod and avoid looking at her.

That evening, when he finally came in for supper, he ate it standing, and then excused himself to see to Old Brown. Jolie sighed in frustration as she cleaned up the dishes. He couldn't be like this forever, and that was her only consolation. And

perhaps, when he did forgive her, he'd also realize that what she'd been doing was right.

The minutes ticked by. She tried to read the newspaper, but found her attention wandering. Finally, just as she was about to get ready to go to sleep, Cade came back inside. She waited expectantly for something—*anything*—while he hung up his hat and coat. She swallowed as she realized he'd been wearing his pistol on his hip. The stranger lurking on their property had shaken him too.

Finally, he turned around. "Sawyer came by earlier. He asked us to dinner again on Friday."

It was the most he'd spoken to her all day. "That's very nice of him. I'd love to visit again."

He gave her a curt nod. "Good night, then."

She wanted to sigh and scream and throw up her hands in frustration. But instead she gave him a courtesy *good night* in return and went to the bedroom.

"It can't be like this forever," she whispered to the ceiling as she pulled the quilt up to her neck to keep out the chill.

It couldn't. Or else she might lose her mind.



Chapter Twenty

THE NEXT TWO DAYS dragged on, and Cade's only consolation was that the barn was nearly finished. His heart ached every time Jolie was nearby, and he'd have the urge to reach for her hand and apologize for acting the way he did.

Except that desire was quickly replaced each time by a burning indignation. Lucas had been his brother—what gave Jolie the right to pursue an investigation behind his back? It wasn't her decision to make.

And so, he said nothing to her. Every night, he lay on his pallet in their parlor—where he hoped that one day they'd have a settee or a pair of armchairs—and stared at the ceiling as a hundred different emotions swirled inside.

They couldn't go on like this. He would have to forgive her, or she'd have to apologize, or ... He didn't want to consider the alternative.

She looked particularly lovely when he helped her into the wagon for their ride to Sawyer's place on Friday. The blue dress she wore beneath her coat made her eyes seem even brighter than usual, and her blonde hair was caught up in a soft style that begged for him to catch a tendril in his hand.

But he didn't. He helped her in without a word, and then climbed into his own seat and took up the lines. They were quiet as he drove them to Sawyer's. He wanted to remark on so many things—the brilliant hues of the aspens glowing on the mountainsides, the warmth of the sun, how he planned to have the barn finished next week. But his mouth remained stubbornly closed.

He had a reprieve during dinner. Sawyer and Lawrence Yount carried the conversation, and it was easy to fall into talk about cattle and weather. He kept his attention on them, yet he was acutely aware of Jolie sitting beside him.

After they'd finished dessert, Jolie jumped up to assist Hannah Bennett, leaving Cade, Sawyer, Yount, and Josiah Bennett to continue their conversation.

“Are you planning to purchase cattle in the spring?” Sawyer asked as he sat back in his chair.

“I'll have to. I wish there was some way to track down the missing cattle from Lucas's herd,” Cade said, ignoring the pinch in his heart when he spoke his brother's name. He could grudgingly admit that Jolie had been right about that. He needed to ask about the cattle.

“I imagine if they ended up in the wrong hands, they’ve been rebranded by now,” Yount said. He rested his hands on his round stomach.

Cade nodded. The man was most likely right. He’d be starting from scratch, and he’d better get used to the idea.

“How do you plan to keep that from happening again?” Bennett asked.

His question caught Cade by surprise—both the nature of it and the fact that Bennett asked it. The dark-haired man was a quiet one, rarely speaking unless someone asked him something directly. “Well,” Cade began. “I hope it wouldn’t just because I’ll be there to prevent it. I plan to hire on help too.”

“The more men, the better,” Sawyer added in an uncharacteristically serious tone. But his usually jovial nature returned quickly. “I can help you find some men to hire on when the time comes.”

“I’d appreciate that, thank you,” Cade replied.

Sawyer waved away the gratitude. “Neighbors need to look out for each other.”

They moved on to topics from nearby Crest Stone, with Yount reporting that the daily train from Cañon City was bringing in approximately twenty new men each day. Sawyer insisted that couldn’t be true, and Cade enjoyed the back and forth between the two men as they discussed the number in a

lively debate. Bennett said nothing, choosing instead to sit back in his chair with his arms crossed.

But the debate was interrupted by Mrs. Bennett, who swept into the room looking a bit frantic. “I’m sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but I can’t find Mrs. Harris anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” her husband asked, standing before Cade had even processed her words.

“She couldn’t have gone too far,” Sawyer added. “Did you look outside?”

“That’s the problem,” Hannah replied, wringing her hands against her dress. “I was outside, retrieving more water. I didn’t see her at all, and when I came back in, she was gone. I’ve looked all over!”

Fear tingled across Cade’s arms. Was it possible that the prowler from a few nights ago was still in the vicinity? *No*, he told himself. There were a hundred more likely possibilities. Still, he wasn’t about to waste time when he could be looking for her. “I’ll check the outbuildings.”

“I’ll come with you,” Bennett volunteered.

The other two men and Hannah dashed off in different directions as Cade and Bennett moved quickly toward the barn, lanterns in hand.

“She’s not in here,” Cade shouted after he’d made quick work of looking throughout Sawyer’s barn.

Bennett followed him like a shadow to the nearby stable, where Old Brown was currently enjoying a guest’s dinner just

as his human owner had. Bennett immediately went toward to the rear of the stable while Cade raised his lantern to see into the nooks and crannies.

“Hello?” a woman’s voice called out. “Who’s there?”



Chapter Twenty-one

“FOUND HER!” HANNAH’S HUSBAND, Mr. Bennett, held his lantern aloft. The soft light illuminated his dark hair and tanned face, which showed a nick or two from a razor. He must have recently shaved to be presentable for their dinner.

Or for other reasons she didn’t wish to contemplate.

“I wasn’t lost,” Jolie said as she emerged from the rear of the stable where several horses were cozy in their stalls, including one she almost wished she hadn’t seen.

“Weren’t you,” Bennett said. It wasn’t a question, and the way his dark eyes traced her made Jolie wish she’d hidden behind one of the horses and let them keep searching.

Cade came into view, and she slipped past Mr. Bennett to Cade’s side.

“What are you doing out here?” Cade’s face was a mess of worry and relief, and despite the fact that they’d barely spoken

to one another in days, he looked as if he wanted to embrace her.

She swallowed, her heart warming. She needed to tell him. Away from Mr. Bennett, Mr. Sawyer, or any of them. They needed to be alone.

“Oh, I grew bored and wished to visit the horses.” She gave him a dazzling smile that she hoped Mr. Bennett also caught.

“You did?” Cade didn’t believe her, that much was very evident. But she needed Mr. Bennett to believe her.

She slid her gaze his direction. He was watching her skeptically. “I do so love horses. I took a particular liking to that chestnut mare in the back. She’s a lovely horse.”

Bennett watched her a moment before nodding in assent. He said nothing, and his face was unreadable. She couldn’t tell if he believed her or not.

No matter what, they needed to leave.

“I’m not feeling particularly well. Cade, could we say our goodbyes?” She batted her eyelashes rather poorly at her husband.

He eyed her curiously. “All right. I need to inform the others that you’ve been found anyway.”

After several minutes of everyone expressing their relief at her return and then saying good evening, Jolie and Cade were on their way home.

She didn't miss Mr. Bennett eying them from the stable door as they left, or Hannah coming to his side and taking his hand. Surely Hannah wouldn't be ... *No*. Jolie shook her head. The entire thing was so preposterous she almost didn't believe it herself.

But the evidence said otherwise.

"Are you going to tell me what all of those theatrics were about?" Cade said as soon as they'd put some distance between themselves and the Sawyer ranch.

Jolie cringed at his description even as she reveled in the fact that he'd not only worried about her when she couldn't be found, but that he'd also decided to speak to her again.

She turned until she was facing him. His dark hair, trapped by his hat, brushed against his temples when the wind blew, and he held his strong jaw tightly closed. He was so unabashedly handsome that just looking at him made her mouth go dry.

But she had to set those thoughts aside for now, along with the ones that feared he might never forgive her. There was something of the utmost importance that she had to tell him.

"I need you to listen to all that I have to say," she started.

He sliced a gaze toward her before turning his attention back to the dark road. "When do I not?"

"Rather frequently, I think. You have a terrible habit of interrupting me when I speak if it's something you prefer not to hear."

His jaw went tighter at that, but he didn't deny it. Instead, he nodded quickly and said, "Go ahead."

"The last time we visited Mr. Sawyer's ranch, I found a handkerchief on a shelf in the kitchen." Jolie gripped the edges of the bench seat, trying to convey the seriousness of her findings through the tone of her voice. "I didn't tell you this, because I thought it meant nothing at the time, but I found a man's handkerchief by the creek behind our property. It had the same pattern embroidered as the one at Mr. Sawyer's. I mentioned the fine work of the embroidery to Mrs. Bennett, and she said she'd made it herself for her husband." Jolie paused and took a breath before continuing.

"I figured one of the men had lost it while working one day, and it had blown down to the creek. But then tonight, I saw a long black coat hanging by the back door. The man I saw the other night—and the one who was on horseback a while ago—both wore a black coat."

Cade fixed her with a look of steel. "Are you accusing Sawyer of sneaking about our property?"

"I'm not, and if you'll let me continue, I'll reveal the rest of my thoughts," she said with a sharp edge.

"All right. Continue." The irritation hadn't disappeared from his voice, but she refused to be cowed. Not this time. He would hear this whether he wanted to or not.

"When I saw that coat, I knew I needed to go to the stable. And that's where you found me. But not before I discovered

one very important fact.” She paused to ensure he was listening. “There is a white horse in Mr. Sawyer’s stable.”

“No,” Cade said immediately, shaking his head. “I refuse to believe that you’re saying Sawyer—a neighbor who has been nothing but kind to us—is behind Lucas’s death. Because that *is* what you’re saying, right?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But if he is, I don’t think he was the one who was responsible for the act.”

“Then who are you accusing?” Cade caught her eyes with his, demanding an answer.

“Mr. Bennett.”

The name hung in the air, and then Cade laughed.

Jolie frowned. “I don’t understand what’s so funny.”

“Bennett? The man barely speaks, and you’re thinking he killed my brother in cold blood?”

Jolie pressed her lips together, her annoyance building inside. “Yes, I am. I didn’t know for certain until I saw his face tonight. The man I saw the other evening had a dark beard. Mr. Bennett has nearly black hair, and he’d recently shaved. I could tell from the cuts on his chin. He’s the one who’s been lurking around our home. It was his handkerchief, his white horse, and he killed Lucas.”

She spoke with such certainty that she knew there was no way Cade could deny her reasoning.

He was quiet for a moment, and she thought that perhaps she'd finally convinced him. He would agree, get the sheriff, and Mr. Bennett would be arrested and tried for Lucas's murder. Cade's brother would finally receive justice, and that would help Cade move through his grief.

But instead of agreeing with her or suggesting they go for the sheriff immediately, he stopped the horse right in front of their house. "Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"*Why* would Bennett kill my brother? He must have had a reason, right?"

Jolie dug her fingers into her coat. That was the one question she couldn't answer. "I don't know."

Cade watched her a moment, then made a scoffing sound under his breath. He led Old Brown into a slow walk until the horse had pulled them alongside the nearly finished barn. Then he let the lines go slack in his hand.

"I asked you to leave this alone," he said, his voice dull on the edges. "But you couldn't."

"Of course I couldn't. The murder was—"

"Lucas was *my* brother, and I asked you to please leave it be." He looked at her now, his dark eyes lit with a fire that seemed to burn inside.

"You're letting a man get away with murder!" Jolie couldn't contain her irritation with him. "How is that fair to—"

“Why don’t you just listen to me?” He threw the lines down to the floor of the wagon.

“And why do you continue to interrupt me?” Jolie stood, the anger getting the best of her.

“Sit down. You’re going to fall.”

“I am *not*. I’m not entirely helpless, Cade Harris. And despite what you think, my mind is quite sharp. And I’m telling you that Mr. Bennett is the one who murdered your brother!” Old Brown shifted, causing the wagon to move just slightly. Before she could let Cade’s words be proven true, she helped herself down.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” He climbed down too. “If you haven’t noticed, it’s just me and you out here. And when I tell you something, I expect you to listen. There’s a reason I wanted you to leave that investigation alone.”

“Because you’re afraid to spend too much time thinking about your brother. Because you’re afraid that if you let the sheriff do his job and find the murderer, you’d have to be in the company of your own grief for too long.” She spat the words at him. It was unkind, but it was true. And he knew it.

Cade flinched just slightly. Then he straightened. “You ought to go inside.”

“I’m *not* going anywhere until you admit it to me. You didn’t want me looking into Lucas’s death because you’re afraid.”

“Jolie.” His words were fire, and if she pressed on, she knew she’d be burned.

But it didn't matter. Because if he didn't acknowledge it now, he never would. And she couldn't live with a man who wouldn't be honest with her—or himself.

“*No.*”

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. Jolie crossed her arms.

“I won't be bossed around,” she said, more calmly this time. “And I won't stand aside while you lie to yourself and let justice for your brother escape. It isn't right.”

He clenched and unclenched his hands. “Perhaps this isn't working.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She was expecting fire. But she wasn't sure that she expected *this*.

“We might have made a mistake.” His voice was so cool that she could almost feel the ice coming from it.

She drew in a shaky breath. He wouldn't admit to anything. He'd rather send her away than push through the pain to pursue what was right. She was so disappointed that any fight she had left in herself faded into the cold night air.

“I suppose you're right.” And with that, she turned on her heel and went inside.



Chapter Twenty-two

JOLIE'S DEMEANOR HAD CHANGED entirely the next morning.

The friendly, cheerful woman he'd known had gone from fire to ice in the matter of one night. And it was his fault.

"What did you do?" Horace asked after Jolie had delivered coffee without a word. She hadn't even cast a glance in Cade's direction.

Nothing, he almost said. But he had done something. He'd drawn a line, she'd crossed it, and that was it. "Things aren't going well between us," was all he said to Horace.

"Ah." The older man took a sip of his coffee. "Did I tell you I was married once?"

Cade raised his eyebrows. He hadn't thought of Horace as the sort to be tied down.

The man chuckled. “That surprises you, but I was. Not for long, mind you, and that was my fault. I’m a pig-headed man who refuses to see any way but my own. And that doesn’t work so well when you’re trying to make a life with someone else.” He looked away, out across the land to the north. “Sometimes I think back on that and regret it.”

Cade swallowed a gulp of hot coffee, the liquid burning the inside of his mouth. It was just as well, as the sting took away any reflection on Horace’s words.

“Don’t you do anything you’ll regret, you hear me?” Horace eyed him, more serious than Cade had ever seen him.

“I do,” he said. It was too late, but Horace didn’t know that. Cade wouldn’t be surprised to walk into the house later and see Jolie packing her things.

It was just as well, he told himself as they got back to work. He’d never be able to truly bury Lucas if she kept bringing him up. He could move on with this ranch, building it up in a way that would have made his brother proud.

Alone.

He shook that thought from his head and concentrated on holding a piece of wood steady for Neil.

About an hour later, he caught sight of Jolie walking toward the creek, water bucket in hand. She had probably set out bread and cheese for them again, in case they were hungry. He would miss that thoughtfulness. The meals, the coffee, the companionship. His heart ached, and he buried the feelings by

slamming a hammer down again and again on an unsuspecting nail.

“Mr. Harris!” A woman’s voice called for him from somewhere near the road.

“Who is that?” Neil asked as Cade stepped outside.

“It doesn’t sound like Jolie,” he said. And it wasn’t.

Hannah Bennett sat astride a horse, her skirts disheveled and her hair falling from its pins. She wore no hat or gloves and her coat hung wide open.

Something was wrong. That much Cade could tell before she even spoke. “Mrs. Bennett, what is it?”

“You must come. *Please*. It’s Mr. Sawyer. I’m afraid he’s hurt, and the other men aren’t— Please come!” Her eyes were wide as she spoke, and the horse danced as if agitated.

For half a second, Cade hesitated. He would never pause to help a woman in need, and he certainly would do anything for Sawyer. But Jolie’s theory about Mrs. Bennett’s husband being responsible for Lucas’s murder played through his mind.

It was ridiculous, of course. She had no real evidence, only a strong desire to find the responsible party and to make Cade agree that she’d been right in doing so.

Besides, Mrs. Bennett was nearly frantic with worry. He couldn’t send her off like that.

“We can come too,” Horace said. “In the event this fellow needs more help.”

Mrs. Bennett glanced at him a moment, as if she were surprised by his words, and then nodded. “Yes, that would be good. I don’t know what he’s done, but it’s bad, and oh—I’m so worried!”

“I’ll be just a moment. You go on, and I’ll catch up,” Cade said over his shoulder as he ran for the house. Despite the urgency of the matter, he couldn’t take off without letting Jolie know of his whereabouts.

In the bedroom, he nearly tripped over Jolie’s open trunk. Its presence in the middle of the floor, with a few of her bits of clothing in it, nearly ripped him apart. But he couldn’t worry about that right now. He found what he was looking for—Jolie’s sketchbook and the nub of a pencil. He ripped a page from it and brought it back out to the table to scribble a note.

And then he left to saddle Old Brown, praying Sawyer wasn’t too hurt.



Chapter Twenty-three

JOLIE STARED AT THE note in dismay.

Sawyer's hurt. Gone with the men to help.

That was it. She shrugged off the brevity and general coldness of the note. It was far more worrisome that he'd gone to Mr. Sawyer's ranch. At least he wasn't alone if he'd brought Neil and Horace with him.

And how he'd known to go was a mystery too. But if Mr. Sawyer was supposedly hurt, it wouldn't have been him who had notified Cade and asked for help. Which meant someone else had come. She glanced up at what was supposed to be the parlor. Cade's coat, hat, and gun belt were missing from their hooks, and she sighed in relief. At least he was armed if he ran into trouble.

But she couldn't sit around here and wait, especially when he might be walking right into danger.

Jolie threw her coat back on and left the water she'd gone to fetch. She paused a moment outside, considering her options. There were no horses—the men had taken them all to ride to the Sawyer ranch. She had no other means of getting there than to walk.

And so walking it would have to be. She started off at a fast clip, but as her imagination grew more and more wild with its thoughts, she began to run.

If only she knew who had come to get Cade. If it were Mr. Yount, she'd be more inclined to believe Mr. Sawyer really did need Cade's help. But she couldn't be certain. She really had no way of knowing whether they were all part of Lucas's murder, or if it had been Mr. Bennett alone.

A cloud of dust up ahead made her slow down. Maybe it was Cade and the other men returning home. Jolie sent up a prayer that this might be the case, but as she grew closer, it became more clear that it was just a single rider.

Jolie paused, glancing around her. She had no idea who could be on that horse. It could be Mr. Bennett, or some other man bent on causing her harm. Why hadn't she thought to bring some kind of weapon? A kitchen knife, perhaps. Anything would be better than nothing at all.

The dust cleared some, and she was able to make out the shape of a figure on the horse. The rider appeared to wear a skirt.

It was a woman.

Relieved, Jolie let out a held breath. She stood at the side of the road as the lady approached. And just before the woman halted her horse, Jolie made out her features.

“Edie!” She was so happy she clapped her hands together. “I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in my life!”

“Well, that’s quite a greeting.” Edie laughed. “I was coming to visit you. What are you doing all the way out here?” She flung out a hand as if to indicate Jolie had traveled miles upon miles away from her home.

“I need your help.” Jolie told Edie the story as quickly as she possibly could.

“Of course,” Edie said when she was finished. “I should find James, or Sheriff Hunt. If I go now, it shouldn’t take me too long.”

“Thank you.” Jolie was so grateful that a lump rose in her throat. Edie believed her. Without even a second guess or a question, she was ready to help. Why couldn’t Cade have done the same? And because he was so stubborn, he might be facing down the worst right now.

“Do you want to ride the rest of the way?” Edie asked. “It’ll be faster.”

“But more noticeable.” Mr. Bennett might hear the horse come by. If it stopped, he’d grow suspicious. “It’s better if I arrive quietly. Besides, it isn’t much farther.”

Edie nodded, and with a quick wave, she was gone. Jolie began running again, her mind focusing on the hope that Cade

was all right. She'd much rather show up and find Mr. Sawyer was truly injured and she'd sent Edie for help for nothing at all.

Cade would still be angry with her—and perhaps even angrier—but he'd still be alive. And she'd rather him dislike her and want to end their marriage than be hurt or killed.

Please keep him safe, she repeated in a sort of prayer as she ran. Over and over again until she reached the Sawyer ranch.

She paused by the edge of an outbuilding and listened. She couldn't hear a thing beyond the lowing of nearby cattle. Slowly, she crept out and began looking.

There wasn't a soul around outside. It was odd, really. Goosepimples crept up her arms as she passed the closed-up barn. When she got to the house, she paused by the back door.

Voices floated through, indistinct but definitely male.

She pressed her ear to the door and closed her eyes.

One of the voices was Cade's.

Pressing her hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp, Jolie leaned over ever so slightly to peer into the window that was cut into the door. There didn't appear to be anyone in the kitchen.

She laid a hand on the doorknob and drew in a breath. She thought she might be sick as she carefully and silently turned the knob. When she'd turned it all the way, she gently pulled the door open.

The hinges made a tiny squeak and she stopped, ready for someone to come bounding out to discover her sneaking in. But no one came, and the voices didn't pause.

Heart hammering in her ears, she stepped inside and closed the door behind her. She stood there a moment, straining to listen while she tried to steady her breathing.

“Sign it, and this will all be over.” That was a man's voice. It sounded familiar, but Jolie couldn't place it.

“And leave with what? I've sunk everything I have into this ranch.” That was Cade. He sounded bitter. Jolie wanted to run to him, but she didn't dare. Clearly the injury had been a ruse, just as she'd suspected. But right now, she was the only one in a position to help. She could only assume that Horace and Neil were with Cade, but she didn't know who else—if anyone—was with the man speaking.

She needed to find out.

Creeping across the kitchen, more words filtered out of wherever the men were.

“Fair enough,” another man said, this one with a kinder voice that also sounded familiar. “We'll give you funds to get elsewhere. Where'd you come from? Denver?”

“I don't want funds to go elsewhere.” Cade's voice was a low growl.

“I don't care what *you* want. I want my land.” That was the man with the kinder voice, sounding much less congenial now.

Jolie swallowed and pressed herself against the wall beside the doorframe. Ever so carefully, she peered around it.

And there, just beyond the door in the dining room where she'd sat and enjoyed dinner not that long ago, she spotted Cade. She moved just a fraction of an inch farther. On the other side of the table, Mr. Yount sat with his arms crossed. His usual smile was gone, replaced by an ugly glare. And behind him stood Hannah and—just as she'd suspected—Mr. Bennett. Sawyer, Neil, and Horace were nowhere to be seen.

“You're out of luck. I'm not signing a thing.” Cade punctuated the sentence by shoving a sheet of paper back across the table.

Mr. Yount stood suddenly, and Jolie whipped back around the doorframe, pressing herself as close to the wall as she could get without becoming part of it.

“Did you know,” Mr. Yount began. “I gave your brother this same proposal. He turned me down too. That didn't end well for him. But perhaps you should ask Bennett about that.”

Jolie bit down on her lip. She'd been right! Mr. Bennett was the murderer. But, if she understood what was happening, it sounded as if he'd done it for the benefit of Mr. Yount.

“Are you threatening me?” Cade asked.

“What do you think?” Mr. Yount replied.

Jolie pressed a hand to her stomach. She felt sick and scared and useless. If only the sheriff would arrive now!

But he wouldn't, not for a while yet.

There was a loud *thunk* that came from the dining room. Unable to stop herself, Jolie peered around the corner again. Mr. Bennett had moved, and now he stood next to Mr. Yount, a pistol laying on the table in front of him. Hannah had moved to the corner, a hand over her mouth and her eyes wide.

She had to *do* something. There was no one else. She didn't know where Neil or Horace were. Or Mr. Sawyer—and for all she knew, he might be involved too.

The only person who could do anything was Jolie.

And she had an idea that just might work.



Chapter Twenty-four

CADE REFUSED TO LOOK at the pistol that Bennett had slammed onto the table. Instead, he held Yount's gaze. "You can't intimidate me."

"That's what your brother said." Yount gave a laugh, as if that were funny. "Come on, Harris. It's my land. You know that. Your brother knew that. Surely you've got the brains he was lacking."

"You keep saying that. It's not your land."

"It *was* mine." Yount's voice was bitter. "Bought and paid for. Till my loan got called in, and I had to sell. I was desperate and Lucas Harris knew it. He took me for pennies on the dollar." He sat up straighter and took a breath. And when he spoke again, his face held a pretend sort of friendly. "But you aren't like that, are you? You're good people. And good

people want to make right on the bad things their family's done."

Cade furrowed his brow. Lucas had seen a legitimate opportunity and taken it. Of that much, Cade was certain. "He didn't take advantage of you. You agreed to sell."

"*Pennies on the dollar*. How is that fair?" Yount was angry again.

"It's business." Cade was walking on the edge, but he wouldn't back down. Not to this man, not the one he was fairly certain had ordered Bennett to kill Lucas. Jolie had been right, although she hadn't suspected that Yount was behind it all.

He wanted to wince when he thought of her. Heaven help him, he'd ignored everything while danger stared them in the face. But she hadn't. She'd been right about the murderer, the need to find him, and about the fact that Cade was acting like a coward.

That last part hurt the most.

But not more than knowing he'd shoved it all back into her face while he stubbornly clung to the tenuous grip he had over grief.

Now he'd not only put himself into danger, but Neil and Horace. And Jolie too. He wanted to bury his head in his hands, but he'd done enough of that lately.

Instead, he let the rage funnel through him, and he clenched his fists under the table. He had to get Yount away from the

topic of the sale to Lucas. Steer him to something else that made him less angry.

“If you shoot me, what about my men?” He had to think of something. Some way out of this mess.

Yount was looking at Bennett, as if they needed to have a silent conversation in order to answer Cade’s question. Finally, Bennett nodded, and his wife in the corner let go of a little sob.

“You can consider that done too,” Yount said. “And that sweet little wife.”

Bennett turned and glared at Yount then. “You didn’t say anything about that.”

Yount ignored him as Cade’s blood boiled. “Leave her out of this,” he said, his hands gripping the edge of the table.

“I can. I can leave you all out of it, provided you sign.” When Cade didn’t move, Yount sat back again. “You might want to hurry. I’m about to change my mind on one of you. Not sure which one it will be though ...” He placed a finger to the side of his head and tapped as if he were thinking hard about the subject.

Suddenly, Mrs. Bennett gasped. “Smoke!” She lifted a hand to point out the window behind the men. “There’s a fire!”

Yount jumped up to join Bennett at the window. “Go see what that’s about,” he ordered Bennett.

Bennett didn’t hesitate. Grabbing his pistol from the table, he ran for the back door. Yount continued to look out the window, and Cade forced his mind to work. Now was the chance to do

something. But what? He was unarmed—Bennett saw to that the moment he arrived—and Yount was the larger man.

Before he could assemble anything approaching a plan, Mrs. Bennett ran forward, directly at Yount. Just as he turned to say something to her, she raised a pistol—one of Cade’s that she must have picked up without anyone seeing—and brought it down against Yount’s temple.

The man went down in a crumpled heap.

Cade jumped up, and Mrs. Bennett whirled around and pointed the gun at him. He raised his hands. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “I just want to get my men and leave.”

She watched him a moment, as if she didn’t believe him.

Footsteps sounded from behind Cade. He assumed it was Bennett, except Mrs. Bennett’s eyes widened, and she lifted the gun to aim at whoever was behind Cade. He turned slightly only to find Jolie in the doorway to the hall.

She stopped, her eyes round. What was she *doing* here? She must have gotten his note ... Everything fell together as he caught her eyes. She’d gotten the note and come directly here, even though she knew there would be danger.

Because she knew *he* would be in danger.

Devotion coursed through him. If anyone hurt her, so help him, he wouldn’t be stopped until he ended them in return. He held out a hand to her, uncertain if she’d take it.

She hesitated, looked into his eyes, then cast a glance at Mrs. Bennett and stepped toward him. Her hand slipped into his,

and Cade knew that if he were to go, this was the only way he wanted to meet God.

Mrs. Bennett let the gun lower just slightly, her eyes on their clasped hands. “I don’t care about any of this. I only want to keep my husband from having more blood on his hands.”

“I can stop him,” Cade said.

“How?” She threw the word at him. “Mr. Yount has promised him acres of his own. It’s what Josiah wants more than anything. And you’re the one Mr. Yount wants dead.”

“I don’t know yet, but I’ll find a way if you let us go,” he said.

“I’d rather he live out his life in prison than take another life.” She was crying now, the tears streaking down her cheeks.

Jolie squeezed Cade’s hand and let go, taking a step forward. “Cade can help him.” She reached out a tentative hand and laid it on Mrs. Bennett’s shoulder. “If you stay here in case Mr. Yount wakes up, Cade and I will find your husband.”

Mrs. Bennett looked up at her for a moment, and then nodded. “Go. Please.”

Cade didn’t hesitate. He bent down and grabbed Yount’s pistol before taking Jolie’s hand and leading her to the back door. “You set the fire?”

“It was the only thing I could think of. I found a lantern and matches in the kitchen and lit some brush behind one of the outbuildings.”

“They closed Neil and Horace into the barn. That wasn’t where you ...”

“Not the barn,” she said quickly as he opened the door. “I’ll go let them out if you can find Bennett.”

“No need to find me,” a voice drawled. “I’m right here.”

Cade whipped around to find Bennett standing just to the left of the door, gun pointed right at them. He shoved Jolie behind him, and with just a second to think, he acted on the first thought that came to mind.

He pulled the trigger at the same time Bennett fired.



Chapter Twenty-five

SOMEONE SCREAMED.

It was her. Jolie realized that as Cade fell in front of her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bennett fall too. But she only had eyes for Cade.

She knelt beside him. “Cade! Answer me. Cade!” She ran a hand down his arm and then rolled him onto his back.

He raised a hand. “I’m all right.”

“You’re not bleeding,” she said as she traced the outline of his chest, and then his other arm. “You aren’t hurt?”

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. “I’m fine.”

“He missed.” Jolie breathed the words out, and then she rose up on her knees and did the only thing she could think to do.

She wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and kissed him as hard as she could.

“No!” An anguished cry made her pull away. Cade’s hands were on her arms as she turned to see Mrs. Bennett stumble out of the house to where her husband lay crumpled on the ground.

“I thought you said you would help him!” Mrs. Bennett shouted. She knelt next to Mr. Bennett, and despite all they’d done, Jolie’s heart ached for her, and she prayed Mr. Bennett was alive.

“Harris!”

Jolie turned with Cade to another shout behind them. A man Jolie didn’t recognize led a group of other men on horseback, all of whom halted nearby.

Cade got to his feet, and Jolie stood with him, not ready to let go of him yet.

“You must be the sheriff.” Cade held out a hand and the man in front shook it.

“Caius Hunt. Ma’am.” The sheriff nodded a greeting at Jolie. He didn’t wait for an introduction, but instead scanned the scene before him as he waved at the men behind him to fan out. “Mrs. Wright gave me the basic details, but perhaps you can fill me in later.”

“I’d be glad to. They locked a couple of my men in the barn, along with the fellow who owns this place. And I left another man unconscious inside.” He took a deep breath. “He was the one who ordered my brother killed.”

The sheriff nodded. He dispatched a man to the barn, and then withdrew his pistol to enter the house with another man.

Jolie watched all of this, thinking how glad she was that Mr. Sawyer didn't appear to be involved in any of it, but her attention quickly returned to the Bennetts. By some miracle, Mr. Bennett was awake and clutching his arm while one of the sheriff's men attempted to wrap it in a piece of discarded cloth.

"He's alive," she said under her breath to Cade.

"He is." His voice was a tangled knot of emotion, and she looked up at him. "It's all right," he said. "I'm glad for it. Despite what he did to Lucas, I didn't want to take his life."

Jolie nodded, relief rising in her chest. She held fast to his arm, simply grateful to have him at her side. And she supposed Hannah felt that way too, although Mr. Bennett would need to answer for his crime.

"Jolie." Cade was looking at her now, those brown eyes taking her in as he lifted his other hand to take hers. "I'm sorry," he said at the exact same time she said the same thing.

He laughed a little as she smiled. "I shouldn't have pressed you," she said. "I did everything you asked me not to do."

"I'm glad you did." He pulled one hand away and rubbed the side of his face. "You were right. I was being stubborn and I wasn't ready to face life without my brother, so I refused to talk about any of it. I wanted it hidden. But if I'd gotten my

way, I'd probably be dead too. And Neil and Horace, and you." His voice broke.

Jolie flung her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. He was alive and he was here, with her. And she never wanted to let him go again. Unless ...

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "Please don't leave me."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she lifted her head to see him. "Are you certain you want me to stay? I can't promise I'll change."

"I've never wanted anything more. And I hope you don't change."

She gave him a little smile. "Even if that means I burn coffee and forget to start supper?"

Cade laughed. "Let's not go that far." He grew serious again. "I want you here with me. Through the winter, building this ranch, keeping me facing the truth. Always."

Tears stung the corners of Jolie's eyes. "There's nothing I want more." And then she stood on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips.

He smiled against her mouth, and then reached his arms around her to pull her closer.

Jolie could have stayed like that forever, but the sound of a throat clearing interrupted them. Her head spinning, she took a tiny step away from Cade.

Sheriff Hunt stood nearby, a patient smile on his face. “I don’t suppose you folks are ready to tell me about what happened?”

Cade took Jolie’s hand in hers and began to relay the events of the day. And she stood by his side. As she would, forever and always.



Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER . . .

The baby scrunched up his tiny face and let out a wail that was more shrill than a barn owl.

“I think this little one is hungry.” Cade scooped up his infant son and cooed to him.

Jolie bit back a smile. If there was anything she would never get enough of, it was Cade as a father. Ever since baby Lucas had been born late that summer, Cade found every excuse to hold him, talk to him, and play with him. Jolie sometimes wondered if he was making up for the father he’d never really had. No matter the reason, he was a wonderful father to their son.

Little Lucas quieted down quickly once Cade cuddled him.

“I don’t think he’s hungry at all. I think he wanted his father to hold him,” she said from where she sat on the settee near

the fire.

“Hmm ... I am awfully good at holding babies.” Cade sat next to her and laid Lucas in his lap. The baby was already closing his perfect blue eyes.

“And apparently, good at putting them to sleep too.”

Cade rested a hand on her knee as he watched Lucas. “Mrs. Bennett told me she was knitting a blanket for him. She said she hoped you liked blue and white.”

Jolie smiled. “That sounds perfectly fine to me. I hope she comes to visit soon.”

“She’d like to, but all those new men Sawyer hired on are keeping her busy in the kitchen.”

“I can imagine.” Jolie was glad the woman had not only a home but work too, now that her husband was serving years at the Territorial Prison in Cañon City. Despite the fact that Hannah had known what her husband had done, and what Mr. Yount had planned, the judge had given her leniency once Mr. Sawyer had spoken up for her. She’d told them that Mr. Bennett had been dispatched a number of times to their ranch to ensure he’d left no clue to his part in Lucas’s murder. Mrs. Bennett now worked as a housekeeper and cook for the Sawyer ranch. She and Jolie had slowly resumed a friendship, and although it had taken time for Cade to come around, he had eventually forgiven her.

Jolie laid her head on Cade’s shoulder. “I’m glad the busy summer is over and we can look forward to winter.”

He laughed quietly so as not to wake Lucas. "I imagine you're the only one looking forward to winter."

"I like that it gets dark earlier, so that you're forced to come inside and spend more time with me."

Cade wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "I can't say I mind that much myself." He pressed a kiss against her head. "How about we put Lucas down to sleep, and then we can curl up here for the rest of the evening?"

"That *would* be nice, but I promised Mama I'd send her regular letters so she can keep up with Lucas."

"You're giving up time with your husband to write a letter?" He sounded incredulous, and she laughed.

"All right. Perhaps I can write her in the morning, after breakfast. Although I almost have to start cooking again right away. Those men eat more than I ever thought was possible." Cade had kept on a core group of ranch hands through the winter, and although Jolie was grateful they were hard workers, she never could seem to cook enough for them.

"This ranch is growing fast," Cade said. "I'm looking forward to what next year brings."

"So am I," she said. "You've made something out of nothing but a couple of half-constructed buildings."

"We've *made* something," he corrected her. "And the best part is this little person in my lap."

"I agree with that." She leaned against him again, and he tightened his grip around her shoulders.

Jolie closed her eyes, trying to remember every bit of this moment. Just her, Cade, and baby Lucas, together and happy in their own little home with the future just waiting for them.

It was better than she ever could have imagined.



Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Jolie and Cade's story. Don't miss the next Westward Home and Hearts Mail-Order Brides book, [Rebecca's Reward](#) by Joi Copeland.

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About the Author, Cat Cahill

A SUNSET. SNOW ON the mountains. A roaring river in the spring. A man and a woman who can't fight the love that pulls them together. The danger and uncertainty of life in the Old West. This is what inspires me to write. I hope you find an escape in my books!

I live with my family and a houseful of dogs and cats in Kentucky. When I'm not writing, I'm losing myself in a good book, planning my next travel adventure, doing a puzzle, attempting to garden, or wrangling my kids.